

PUT PLAY FIRST

Purposeful play and soft starts (extended version)

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Curriculum comprises everything that occurs from the start of school, when children arrive, to their dismissal, with classroom learning in between. “Soft start” began at the K–1 level of Virginia Chance School as an intention to be mindful of this encompassing view of curriculum. Our four-teacher team wanted all parts of the day to be purposeful, meaningful, and based on both individual student and group needs.

From the beginning of carpool to our morning meeting, the day was not working for us teachers or for classes for a couple of reasons. That initial half hour had been designated for free-writing. The children came in, sorted their belongings, signed in, and then quietly found their writing journals. We noticed that the students’ natural desire to greet one another often affected their enjoyment of this early morning writing. We wanted writing to be a powerful tool for reflection, expression, and communication, not a dull task.

We also noticed that our schedule did not always allow for unstructured yet purposeful play or discovery time for the children, and we believed it was very important to provide this for our age group. We wanted our students to cultivate relationships and be a strong learning community.

We collaboratively brainstormed, discussing our pedagogical wishes for our classrooms and possible solutions for using the morning time purposefully, as well as how to incorporate play and self-directed inquiry into the day. We concluded that transitioning into the school day with an open-ended, playful, exploratory time would provide for both relationships and child-centered learning. We believed that this time would also benefit the children by priming their brains for the rest of the school day, as research has taught us how play allows children to practice prosocial behaviors, ignite their imagination and creativity, explore the world around them, and engage in reasoning.

We decided to call this time “soft start,” after one of our teachers, a native of Scotland, described how the Scottish schools use this term for how they ease their kindergartners into the academic school year. Their “soft start” begins in September by introducing one academic area into the daily schedule and building expectations until the children are fully immersed in their academic work by winter break. We decided as a team that we would use the name for our ease into the *daily* academic work in our K–1 curriculum.

Planning and implementing our soft start began with us asking a few questions:

- How can we invite children into open-ended play and inquiry?
- What kinds of materials do we want to offer each week?
- Where will we store the materials so that the children can easily access them daily?
- What will the flow of our soft start time look like?
- How will we signal that soft start is over?
- What will each teacher’s role be during soft start?

Combining our collective training in early childhood education, the Reggio Emilia philosophy, and Montessori methods, we decided to first change our classroom environments to be more conducive for exploration, investigation, and creation. We moved furniture around until we had distinct learning areas: a studio space for writing and art, a construction area for building, a Peace Corner for times to be alone, a sensory table for tactile exploration and imagination, and shelves for “invitations,” materials purposefully chosen that invite the children in to apply or extend their knowledge, abilities, or imagination in some way.

After our rooms were rearranged, we began choosing materials to place in each area. We agreed that the materials in each learning area needed to be unrestricting. We wanted the children to be able to use them creatively and for various purposes. For example, in the block area, we placed two sets of high-quality wooden blocks and a sundry supply of accessories, such as blue and green glass stones, creek rocks, sticks, animal and insect figurines, and clipboards for drawing block designs. In the studio space, we put in an abundance of art supplies, including oil pastels, watercolor

paints, high-quality black felt-tip pens, crayons, markers, tape, glue, scissors, colored pencils, an assortment of paper, and envelopes. We also added in other types of materials for open-ended use, such as flowers, raffia, yarn, popsicle sticks, corks, and beads. We included a big tub full of recyclables for the children to create with, as well, which overflowed with paper towel tubes, bottle caps, tissue boxes, and clean cottage cheese containers and another large tub full of fabric scraps.

Our intention was for children to have creative freedom where they could explore different materials and use them in new ways as their imaginations inspired them. And they have! Children are natural creators. Those learning areas have been teeming with imagination and transformation since we began soft start.

In the photo below, a small group of children brought materials to the large area rug so they could work in a bigger space. After a few minutes, they had an imaginative story taking shape around their work. They explored these open-ended materials by independently and collaboratively building and then creating a story together.



The learning areas are open and available to the students every morning during the 30-plus minutes of soft start.

We also set out teacher-created “invitations” each day, selecting and setting out materials to provoke deeper examination of a topic related to an emerging interest among a small group of children, a subject we are studying as a whole class, or a seasonal event. For example, after we’d done an in-depth study of raptors as part of our dedicated science time, we planned invitations for a soft start over the following weeks that would prompt the children to look more closely at different species of birds. One of the invitations was used to examine the shape, colors, lines, and features of birds’ bodies. We offered four bird figurines as models, a supply of colored clay, magnifying glasses, and wooden shaping tools for the children to achieve this goal. The children had to really notice where eyes were located, how many toes the birds had, the shapes of the tails, and the types of feather patterns and colors. This activity not only allowed the children to begin to find out about different types of birds and their distinguishing characteristics but they also had to slow down, keenly observe, and relook in order to accurately shape their clay into birds. We asked all children to visit this work one time so we could guide them through the process of looking and forming. Then, we offered the work for independent use the rest of the week.

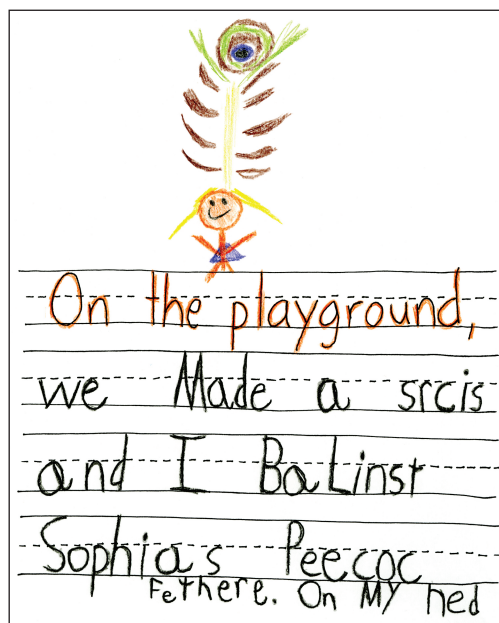
Another invitation’s objective was for the students to look closely at the distinct feathers of various bird species. We set out copies of photographs of real feathers, magnifying glasses, colored pencils, white drawing paper, the children’s drawing journals, and the book *Feathers: Not Just for Flying* by Melissa Stewart (2014). Again, we invited each child to visit the materials with a teacher first to practice the looking and drawing process, and then the invitation was set on a table during the soft start for the remainder of the week as an independent choice.

We documented our learning with a display board that included the children’s questions (which guided our work), photographs of the children interacting with these materials, and samples of their work.

As teachers, we are the facilitators of the students’ open-ended play and inquiry during soft start: We provide the time, space, and materials. We are also the instigators of their learning: We provide avenues for deeper investigation. But often, we are also observers and responders. We track the current of interest and energy in the classroom. If we pause and take notice, we can see child-initiated

inquiry in action and reflect on how to support it. A story from one of our classroom newsletters illustrates this:

The week started off with a student bringing in a real peacock feather to share with the class. We were all naturally very interested due to our study of birds. In addition, she had learned to do some fancy tricks with it: Balancing it on her nose, her palm, and her forehead! She generously shared the feather with peers during soft start on Tuesday, and the number of friends desiring to know how to do the tricks grew so much that at Morning Meeting, she raised her hand and said, “Well, as you have noticed, many people are wanting to perform with my peacock feather. I am hoping we can continue this outside and put on a circus for Ms. Isham to make her feel better.” (Ms. Isham, our colleague, was very sick this week and out for three days!) To organize the circus, she created a list of performers and took it out to the playground. For the duration of our recess, the children practiced six very specific balancing tricks with the feather, along with a magic show by two students, and one cartwheeling routine. We videotaped each part and, at the end, the children wanted to make one more clip all together, saying in unison, “Feel better soon, Ms. Isham!” Looking closely at this Tuesday morning, you will notice so many necessary and amazing skills being practiced: *organization, writing, social cooperation, collaboration, negotiation* (there were some disagreements while they put the circus together, but they settled it all without teacher assistance), *performance*, and *empathy*! The children were noticeably proud of what they had accomplished, so we changed the writing assignment for our writer’s workshop time to allow for journal writing so they could reflect on what they had done and then represent it through writing and drawing.



K-1 student's journal about her experiences in the class circus

This story shows how soft starts have reenergized our classroom: A child had a special interest she wanted to share with her friends, which then led to a group of ten children using the soft start time, space, and materials to interact collaboratively and creatively. They engaged higher-level thinking to organize themselves both logistically and socially to put on their circus. Furthermore, they naturally incorporated writing as a powerful tool to maintain order as well as to then reflect on their triumph afterward. *This* is the type of meaningful, purposeful, child-centered play and inquiry we dreamed of when we set out to make our changes.

Further Reading

Bruehl, Mariah. 2011. *Playful Learning: Develop Your Child's Sense of Joy and Wonder*. Boston: Roost.

Daly, Lisa, and Miriam Beloglovsky. 2015. *Loose Parts: Inspiring Play in Young Children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.

Pelo, Ann. 2007. *The Language of Art: Inquiry-Based Studio Practices in Early Childhood Settings*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.

Works Cited

Stewart, Melissa. 2014. *Feathers: Not Just for Flying*. Illustrated by Sarah S. Brannen. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.