



Identical Ladybugs

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What are your first thoughts when you enter an early childhood program and you are confronted with a display of identical home made paper plate lady bugs...each with their own little red and black wings, their own little red mouth and their own little black, glued-on eyes? At first glance you might think... "Oh, how cute" and you would probably think about the work that went into teaching the children exactly what to do to make this little craft." But let's think about this a little bit more. Let's think about what goals the adults had in mind when doing this craft activity with the children and let's also think about how the activity actually unfolded. In my experience, it would have gone something like this:

Adult (to a group of 3-5 year olds): *"OK children, today we are going to make little Lucy Ladybug. She's going to look just like this. (She holds up the model lady bug to show the children). OK – let's begin."*

At this point, the children would have each been given a paper plate, two pre-cut red wings two tiny black pom poms to glue on as eyes, two black pipe cleaner antennae, a red paper mouth and some black dots to stick on the red wings of the lady bug. So let's take a peek at what happens next...

Child #1: *"I don't know how..."*

Adult: *"Here let me show you....you glue the wings on right here."*

Child #2: *"Look teacher, I put the wings on like this...(wings are glued together and are on the back of the paper plate)"*

Adult: *“Oh, no, not like that....here – let’s start over....let’s glue them on like this (she give child #2 new wings and a new paper plate and then shows her where the wings are supposed to be)*

Child #1: *“I don’t know what to do with these (holds up the pom-poms)*

Adult: *“Just a second...here, let me show you.” (In the meantime, child #3, child #4, and child #5 have spread the glue over their hands and are taking delight in peeling the drying glue off their hands.)*

Child #2: *“Look teacher, my lady bug is going to have lots of eyes!” (Child has taken the remainder of the black pom-poms and has spread them all over the paper plate)*

Adult (to children 3-5): *“Children – you have to go and wash the glue off your hands now and then come back and make your ladybugs” and then to Child #2 “Oh dear, that’s too many eyes, let’s try to take them off and start again with two...” (She tries to salvage the pom poms.)*

Child #1 (close to tears): *“I don’t know how...”*

And so on and so on and so on. What eventually happens is that some children lose interest and drift off, leaving their craft for the adult to finish; some children get frustrated at their inability to duplicate the lady bug so that it looks as good as the adult’s lady bug; some children sit back and let the adult totally do it for them; some children do it quickly just to get it over with so that they can go and play; some children try to put their own creative spin on the craft and end up having to do it over and over again until they finally conform to what the adult wants and some children (and this is possibly the most distressing) simply watch what the adult does and then replicates it exactly, seeking approval from the adult for doing it “right” (*“Look teacher, look at mine...mine’s right, eh?”*).

So, what have each of these children learned? Well, some children have learned that it is not good to come up with your own ideas...it is better to do what other people tell you to do. Some children have learned that they are not good at “art” and that art is not very much fun. Some children have learned that they shouldn’t try out different ways of doing things and that there is only one way to complete a task. Some children have learned that “art” is “work” and it is better to get it over with quickly so that they can go on to other more enjoyable activities. Some children have learned to rely on adult praise, rather than self satisfaction when getting a task done. Were these the intentional goals of the adult when she presented this activity? Probably not, but these are the goals that were realized. Without intending to, this adult has undermined the creative potential of the children because she did not see them as the competent, creative, intelligent beings that they truly are. What would happen if the adult, instead, trusted and respected the children’s ability to explore, problem-solve, dream, experiment, think and create? What if she did away with her pre-cut crafts that, let’s face it, were a lot of work for her to begin with, and

instead spent her time collecting and presenting interesting materials for the children to explore? Let's take a look....

Adult (to a group of 3-5 year olds): *"Have a look at the art area today – I put out some new materials that you might like to explore. I found some pom-poms of all different sizes, some pipe cleaners, some paper plates, some sticky dots and all different shapes of construction paper. I added some more glue there as well."*

Child #1: *"Look at all these sticky dots! There are lots of colours."* (Child then arranges a pattern of dots on the edge of a paper plate, carefully repeating a pattern of green, red, blue...green, red, blue)

Adult: *"You are making a pattern...you're repeating the same colours over and over again."* (She makes a note to herself that this is an important mathematical skill which is an essential prerequisite to such things as understanding addition and multiplication. She thinks of possible ways to extend this interest in patterning exhibited by Child #1. Later in the day she will draw his attention to patterns that she notices on their neighbourhood walk.)

Child #2: (spends 15-20 minutes twisting the light green pipe cleaners together to make a 3-D structure, gluing pom-poms as "eyes" to the top of what looks like an elaborate insect) *"I saw a picture of a praying mantis in our insect book – this looks like a praying mantis."* Adult goes to the book area, gets the insect book and brings it back to the table. *"Here's the praying mantis ...you're right – you put little arms on it, just like in the book. What do you think it uses these little arms for?"* (Adult and child talk about the praying mantis, hypothesizing on why a praying mantis is built the way it is...this leads to a larger discussion on insects. Adult makes a note to follow up on this later in the day by looking for various insects outside.)

Meanwhile, children 3,4,5 spread glue on their hands and take delight in peeling the drying glue off their hands. Adult: *"Look at your hands...that glue dries really quickly, doesn't it? That reminds me...we haven't played with goop for awhile. Should we go and mix some up now?"* (Adult leaves with children 3-5 to mix up goop). Children 1 and 2 stay at the art table and continue to experiment with the materials.

So – how does this second scenario contrast with the first? The most obvious contrast is the tone set by the activity. The second scenario is much more relaxed, more respectful and more constructive. In the second scenario, the adult is able to take her lead from the children. She can build on their ideas, take note of the learning that is happening and use this understanding to expand on the individual needs, skills and interests of the children. By providing materials and responding to how the children interact with the materials, she can develop a dynamic, responsive program that maximizes the potential of the children within it. And what are the children learning? Besides the obvious skill development (e.g., patterning, creating a representation of an object, problem solving, hypothesizing), the children are learning to trust their own ability to try new things, explore and experiment, construct and create. They are also learning how it feels to be

encouraged and nurtured by an adult that trusts them, who feels they are competent and who respects their ideas. They will internalize this in a way that will promote their self confidence and self esteem.

All of this begs the question...what are our goals for children? Is our goal to create children who conform, who wait to be told what to do, who feel that they need an adult (or someone else) to show them how to do things; who are not confident in their own innate abilities? Or is it to promote in children a sense of competence, confidence, curiosity and critical thinking skills? We, as early childhood educators can get too caught up with the feeling that we must provide children with pre-determined, pre-planned, pre-cut and pre-drawn activities that will "teach" the children such skills as counting, number and letter recognition, matching, hand-eye coordination, etc. We forget how smart children really are. We forget that when we provide children with the materials, the time, the space, and the freedom, they will construct activities and ideas that are much more sophisticated and more elaborate than anything that we could have pre-planned for them. What we must remember is that our role is to create a wonder-filled, intriguing environment that encourages exploration and discovery and then we must remember to be ready to respond to the ideas and concepts being presented by the children in a thoughtful way that provokes further discovery and promotes learning.

So, the next time you are confronted with a horde of identical lady bugs, ask yourself...what was gained by this activity...and what was lost?

