

Seton offers unique program

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

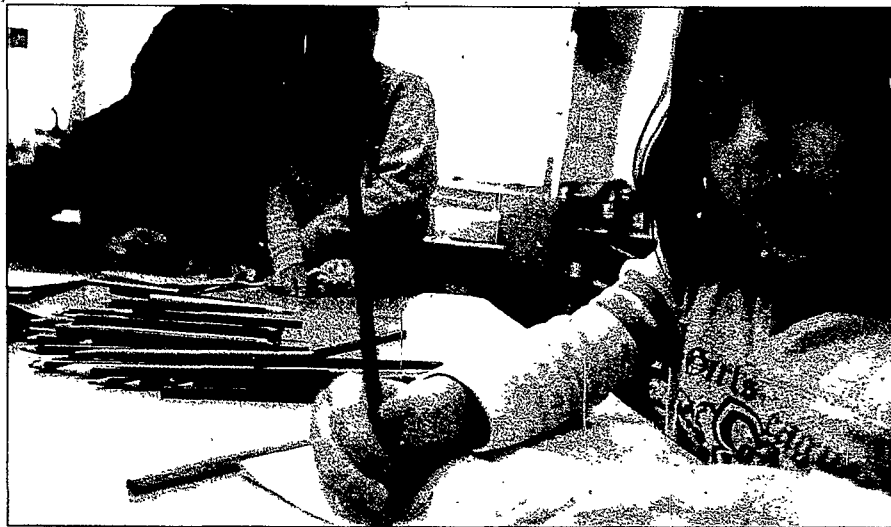
On Jan. 23, a line of preschoolers — most of them wearing Winnie the Pooh shirts or carrying small stuffed Pooh Bears — crossed a hallway filled with homemade Pooh paintings drying on the floor.

No, it's not Pooh Corner — it's Winnie the Pooh day for the preschoolers at Brighton's Seton Catholic School.

Evidence of past projects lines the hallway. Photographs on a long strip of paper document the day students examined a car on the playground. A construction-paper quilt also hangs on the wall, created after reading *The Quiltmaker's Gift* by Jeff Brumbeau.

The children have looked at Winnie the Pooh, cars and *The Quiltmaker's Gift* thanks to the preschool program's unique curriculum based on the Reggio Emilia Approach and the project-based curriculum approach.

With the Reggio Emilia Approach, teachers decide what the class will study by listening to the students and determining what they're interested in. Parent participation is essential to this approach, as is documentation of the students' projects.



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

During a Jan. 26 preschool class at Brighton's Seton Catholic School, 4-year-old Fiona Nelson (right) works on a book of penguin illustrations as teacher Renee Smith gives drawing tips to 4-year-old Nicholas DiMarco.

The project-based curriculum uses planning, fieldwork and a culminating event to teach children. Teachers and children will often "web" a topic by writing its name in the middle of a piece of paper, then listing around it everything they think they know about it. Using the resulting web, students and teachers decide what questions they have and what they want to know more about.

Once a web is started for a particular topic, it often branches out, leading students to discover other topics they want to learn about, said Kathy Burton, director of Seton Catholic Preschool. For example, preschoolers recently webbed the broad topic of animals, which revealed that they had a specific interest in penguins. Their teacher read them a book about penguins, taught them about

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the animal's habitat and gave them the opportunity to make their own penguins and nests out of clay and stones.

Seton's approach uses everything in the preschool to teach children, Burton said. Baskets holding tape, crayons and scissors are labeled with both a picture of the item and the word, so that children will begin to learn their letters and associate words with the appropriate objects.

Burton stresses the importance of letting children use their imaginations. For example, children are not told what colors to use when painting penguins or Winnie the Pooh.

"I don't want them to be all the same. When you walk in a school and everybody's pictures are all the same, that's not art," she said.

Burton said Seton's preschoolers learn everything that children learn at more traditional preschools while they experience the excitement of discovering something on their own. Teachers will also work traditional curriculum — such as numbers, shapes, colors and letters — into the projects in a way that makes them interesting and fun.



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