# ED368509 1994-04-00 The Project Approach. ERIC Digest.

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# The Project Approach. ERIC Digest.



Although project work is not new to early and elementary education (Sharan & Sharan,

1992), interest in involving children in group projects has been growing for several years. This renewed interest is based on recent research on children's learning (Kandel & Hawkins, 1992), a trend toward integrating the curriculum, and the impressive reports of group projects conducted by children in the pre-primary schools of Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al., 1993).

# WHAT IS A PROJECT?

A project is an in-depth investigation of a topic worth learning more about. The investigation is usually undertaken by a small group of children within a class, sometimes by a whole class, and occasionally by an individual child. The key feature of a project is that it is a research effort deliberately focused on finding answers to questions about a topic posed either by the children, the teacher, or the teacher working with the children. The goal of a project is to learn more about the topic rather than to seek right answers to questions posed by the teacher.

# THE PLACE OF PROJECT WORK IN THE CURRICULUM

Advocates of the project approach do not suggest that project work should constitute the whole curriculum. Rather, they suggest that it is best seen as complementary to the more formal, systematic parts of the curriculum in the elementary grades, and to the more informal parts of the curriculum for younger children. Project work is not a separate subject, like mathematics; it provides a context for applying mathematical concepts and skills. Nor is project work an "add on" to the basics; it should be treated as integral to all the other work included in the curriculum. SYSTEMATIC INSTRUCTION: (1) helps children ACQUIRE skills; (2) addresses DEFICIENCIES in children's learning; (3) stresses EXTRINSIC motivation; and (4) allows teachers to direct the children's work, use their expertise, and specify the tasks that the children perform. PROJECT WORK, in contrast: (1) provides children with opportunities to APPLY skills; (2) addresses children's PROFICIENCIES; (3) stresses INTRINSIC motivation; and (4) encourages children to determine what to work on and accepts them as experts about their needs. Both systematic instruction and project work have an important place in the curriculum.

For older children able to read and write independently, project work provides a context for taking initiative and assuming responsibility, making decisions and choices, and pursuing interests. For younger children, project work usually requires teacher guidance and consultation.

# THEMES, UNITS, PROJECTS: SOME IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS

Related to project work are themes and units. A theme is usually a broad concept or

topic like "seasons," or "animals." Teachers assemble books, photographs, and other materials related to the theme through which children can gain new awareness. However, in theme work children are rarely involved in posing questions to be answered or taking initiative for investigation on the topic. Nevertheless, theme topics can provide good subtopics for project work.
Units usually consist of preplanned lessons and activities on particular topics the teacher considers important for the children to know more about. When providing information in units, the teacher typically has a clear plan about what concepts and knowledge the children are to acquire. As with themes, children usually have little role in specifying the questions to be answered as the work proceeds.

Both themes and units have an important place in the early childhood and elementary curriculum. However, they are not substitutes for projects, in which children ask questions that guide the investigation and make decisions about the activities to be undertaken. Unlike themes and units, the topic of a project is a real phenomenon that children can investigate directly rather than mainly through library research. Project topics draw children's attention to questions such as: How do things work? What do people do? and What tools do people use?

# ACTIVITIES INCLUDED IN PROJECT WORK

Depending on the ages and skills of the children, activities
engaged in during project work include drawing, writing, reading, recording observations, and interviewing experts. The information gathered is summarized and represented in the form of graphs, charts, diagrams, paintings and drawings, murals, models and other constructions, and reports to peers and parents. In the early years, an important component of a project is dramatic play, in which new understanding is expressed and new vocabulary is used.

Project work in the early childhood and elementary curriculum provides children with contexts for applying the skills they learn in the more formal parts of the curriculum, and for group cooperation. It also supports children's natural impulse to investigate things around them.

# THE PHASES OF A PROJECT

In PHASE 1 of a project, called GETTING STARTED by Katz and Chard (1989), the children and teacher devote several discussion periods to selecting and refining the topic to be investigated. The topic may be proposed by a child or by the teacher. Several criteria can be considered for selecting topics. First, the topic should be closely related to the children's everyday experience. At least a few of the children should have enough familiarity with the topic to be able to raise relevant questions about it. Second, in addition to basic literacy and numeracy skills, the topic should allow for integrating a

range of subjects such as science, social studies, and language arts. A third consideration is that the topic should be rich enough so that it can be explored for at least a week. Fourth, the topic should be one that is more suitable for examination in school than at home; for example, an examination of local insects, rather than a study of local festivals.

Once the topic has been selected, teachers usually begin by making a web, or concept map, on the basis of "brain-storming" with the children. Displaying a web of the topic and associated subtopics can be used for continuous de-briefing discussions as the project work proceeds. During preliminary discussions the teacher and children propose the questions they will seek to answer through the investigation. During the first phase of the project, the children also recall their own past experiences related to the topic.

PHASE 2, FIELD WORK, consists of the direct investigation, which often includes field trips to investigate sites, objects, or events. In Phase 2, which is the heart of project work, children are investigating, drawing from observation, constructing models, observing closely and recording findings, exploring, predicting, and discussing and dramatizing their new understandings (Chard, 1992).

PHASE 3, CULMINATING AND DEBRIEFING EVENTS, includes preparing and presenting reports of results in the form of displays of findings and artifacts, talks, dramatic presentations, or guided tours of their constructions.

# PROJECTS ON EVERYDAY OBJECTS

One example of an investigation of an everyday object in the children's environments is a project called "All About Balls." A kindergarten teacher asked the children to collect from home, friends, relatives, and others as many old balls as they could. She developed a web by asking what the children might like to know about the balls. The children collected 31 different kinds of balls, including a gumball, a cotton ball, a globe of the earth, and an American football (which led to a discussion of the concepts of sphere, hemisphere, and cone). The children then formed subgroups to examine specific questions. One group studied the surface texture of each ball, and made rubbings to represent their findings; another measured the circumference of each ball with pieces of string; and a third tried to determine what each ball was made of. After each group displayed and reported its findings to the others, the class made and tested predictions about the balls. The children and the teacher asked which balls would be the heaviest and which the lightest, how the weight of the balls was related to their circumference, which balls would roll the farthest on grass and gravel surfaces after rolling down an inclined plane, and which balls would bounce the highest. While the children tested their predictions, the teacher helped them explore such concepts as weight, circumference, and resistance. Following this direct investigation, the children engaged in a discussion about ball games. They discussed which balls were struck by bats, clubs, mallets, hands and feet, racquets, and so forth.

# CONCLUSION

A project on a topic of real interest to children, such as the "All About Balls" project described here, involves children in a wide variety of tasks: drawing, measuring, writing, reading, listening, and discussing. From working on such a project, children learn a rich new vocabulary as their knowledge of a familiar object deepens and expands.

# FOR MORE INFORMATION

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