Beginning the Journey: The Project Approach with Toddlers

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Abstract

Some features of project work are of value for toddlers, while others are best left until children are older. This article shares the process through which teachers and administrators at a private school in Mexico City gained awareness of the importance of listening, observing, and documenting children's activities to determine how to adapt features of the Project Approach to meet the needs and interests of toddlers. This adaptation of project work, called *project practice,* engaged toddlers in developmentally appropriate activities that involved exploration, representation, and the search for understanding.

Introduction

The experiences presented in this article take place at Eton School in Mexico City, Mexico. Eton is a private, coed, multicultural, bilingual (Spanish and English) institution for children ages 2 to 18 (prekindergarten to grade 12).

As principal and assistant principal at Eton School's Early Childhood Center, we have spent many years working with the Project Approach with children ages 2 to 6. We would receive comments from teachers that ranged from it being a wonderful experience to it being frustrating and not very meaningful for the children. It was the teachers of the 2-year-olds who repeatedly expressed their concern and discomfort with project work. We felt puzzled that teachers of older children found project work so engaging for themselves and the children, while the teachers of our very young children did not. At first we thought that the latter lacked knowledge about the Project Approach, its framework, and its features. We decided to give them further training and to work in closer collaboration with them. It was after we spent time in their classrooms, observing and accompanying them in the development of several projects, that we were able to determine the cause for their feelings. We could see that we needed to work with 2-year-old children in a different way than we were working with our older children. It was then that we began looking for ways of adapting features of the Project Approach to the needs and interests of our youngest learners.

Initiating Toddlers in the Project Approach

Our first step was to work at becoming more proficient listeners and better observers of young children to improve our understanding of how these young learners explore their environment and build their knowledge about things that are close to them. We spent long periods of time watching how they interacted with different provocations, how they explored materials, and how they made sense of the world. We became more aware of nonverbal cues, and we attained a better understanding of their interests than we had previously. After several periods of discussing our observations with teachers, we decided to experiment with and analyze specific features of each phase of the Project Approach as a separate entity before taking on a full project. This process, which we call *project practice*, introduces toddlers to specific elements of project work to help prepare them for participating in formal projects when they are older.

Preliminary Planning

To select topics for projects, teachers and principals engage in discussion sessions; we choose topics that are very close to the children's lives but that are particularly meaningful for them in daily experiences. We think of projects that involve sensory exploration, taking advantage of their interest in the colors of things around them, their fascination with water, or their perceptions of their bodies. Once the general topic has been chosen, teachers have freedom to follow different lines of research depending on their children's interests. For example, from the broad topic of plants, one teacher might choose to study trees, while another teacher might decide to study flowering plants.

Phase 1

A project usually begins with the teachers making a point of learning about the children's prior knowledge and experiences before arranging opportunities to take the children's understanding further. But because the vocabularies and the experience of toddlers with the world around them are so limited, it is very difficult for them to share stories about their previous knowledge related to a topic. Instead, the teachers plan provocations in relation to the topic they set out to explore, and then they observe and listen to the children's comments and conversations. A provocation is an experience organized by an adult that will invite children's curiosity and will make children's interests and wonderings visible. There is always a clear intent behind a provocation. Material is arranged in such a way that it will prompt children's exploration.

Example of an initial experience that reveals a misconception:

On a sunny day, we filled up different large colored tubs with water and set them out on the playground. We invited the children to explore and then sat back and watched. All of the children started exploring without needing directions.

"This water is yellow," said one of the children who was experimenting with water in a yellow tub.

We could clearly identify the child's misconception; she was not able to separate the characteristics of the tub and the water it contained. We then turned the child's comment into a question to be explored: What is the color of water?

Figure 1. "This water is yellow."

As teachers of young learners observe the children's interactions with a provocation, they may be able to turn comments, wonderings, and misconceptions into questions for research. Older children will be able to tell personal stories through discussions, drawings, or models. Toddlers will more likely express their previous knowledge through interactions with objects, through dramatic play, by voicing comments through short phrases, or by reproducing sounds.

Example:
As a child moves a crayon round and round over the paper, he makes the sound of a car's engine. His movements and the sound that accompanies them cue us to his thinking; he has the motion of tires on his mind.

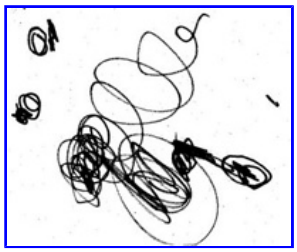

Figure 2. Drawing that represents the motion of tires.

Usually, teachers plan several provocations in relation to the topic before they can determine whether the investigation will be worthwhile. After looking at photographs of the interactions that took place during the provocations and analyzing the children's comments and conversations, teachers come up with questions for research that will lead the children to gain further understanding about the topic.

Phase 2

During the second phase of a project, children try to find answers to their questions. Older children may be able to get information from primary and secondary sources; however, toddlers get most of their information through direct exploration that involves their senses. Teachers plan an initial group experience during which they observe and document the children's activities. Based on their analysis, they decide on which experiences to provide next. These experiences will be different for practically every child, because at this age they are still primarily focused on their own individual interests. Teachers may decide to plan new experiences or to revisit a previous one.

Field Visits

One of the ways that children find information is by going on field visits. For the toddlers in our school, these take place within the campus. The topics that teachers select lend themselves to firsthand exploration in the context of our school. Teachers may conduct a field visit to the bathroom or arrange a trip to water the plants in the playground.

Figure 3. Gathering information and taking notes on a field visit to the bathroom.

During field visits, the class is divided into small groups, and visits are conducted at different times. Each small group is accompanied by two adults, one to lead the visit and one to document the experience. Children usually record field experiences that catch their attention. When toddlers record their field visits, their sketches usually don't accurately reflect aspects of their experiences at the site, but we encourage the activity so that they can practice skills that will help them in future note taking. These include the handling of a clipboard and the ability to connect what they are looking at with what they are attempting to record.

Class discussions with the children follow the field visit, but teachers of toddlers need to be especially attentive during the visit to identify things that children were drawn to. Notes and photographs taken by the teacher are helpful to analyze the experiences that took place.

It is worthwhile to mention that class discussions at this age usually consist of open-ended questions by the teacher. Some children can answer these questions, even offering additional comments; other children simply listen because they lack the language skills needed to hold conversations.

Figure 4. A class discussion about our faces.

Representation

For older children in Phase 2 of a project, the story of the project unfolds in their representations of their new understandings after they have conducted research. For toddlers, the process of representation takes on a whole new meaning. These youngsters need ample time to simply explore materials and tools, such as clay, paint, paintbrushes, glue, and pencils, before learning representational strategies. The children's first products that reflect knowledge about the topic of study happen after some months of exploration. We help the children practice skills that will lead them into being able to show their understanding in different ways. Some of the representational skills that teachers practice

with toddlers include (1) observational drawing and painting, (2) making models, (3) collages, (4) block building, and (5) dramatic play.

Figure 5. Exploring materials.

Observational Drawing and Painting. At first, youngsters are basically testing materials, tools, and their own skills; or they might be representing a movement, a sensation, or a sound. We have observed that children's initial attempts at representation through drawing and painting do not necessarily reflect a connection with the object they are observing.

Figures 6-7. Although this child's representation does not reflect a clear connection with the original model, he was obviously very proud of his drawing; here he is sharing it with the cat he had drawn.

Once children feel comfortable with tools and materials, teachers invite them to observe an object set out for them. Working with a few children at a time, the teacher guides the observation by pointing out features of the object. For example, she may draw attention to flowers in a bouquet, emphasizing their color or the way they are arranged. After some months of practice, the children attempt to represent the objects, and we are able to see the connection to what they observed. These representations will usually include striking features of the object, such as its shape or the combination of colors it presents.

Figure 8. Observational painting of flowers.

Making Models. Most children are intrigued by the properties of clay and the sensation this material produces. Many sessions are dedicated to exploration without the expectation of having children produce a representation. Clay is offered in subsequent sessions, always with a specific purpose. During one session, clay may be presented in thick slabs; at another session, it may be offered in coils and balls. Sometimes the teachers provide tools; sometimes they do not. Some children are able to make things with intention, reflecting understanding.

Figure 9. Free exploration of clay.


Figures 10-11. Representation in clay: "My mother and I."

Collages. Teachers provide photographs or materials that are connected to the topic. Toddlers like to combine different materials in their representations, and they achieve interesting compositions.

Figure 12. Collage for a project on mouths made with magazine clippings, children's representations, paint, and colored sawdust to add a different texture.

Block Building. Young children use blocks and other building materials very naturally. Not much guidance or modeling is necessary for this type of representation. They seem to take to these materials spontaneously.

Figure 13. "This is the house for my horse."

Dramatic Play. When exploring a topic, the teachers set up a dramatic play area with items that relate to what children are learning about. The children use the props and add words to their play. It is in this area that we often see some of the first interactions children have with one another. It is also here that we can more easily see understandings of the topic. In some instances, dramatic play can take the place of class discussions.

Figure 14. Role playing during a project on cats.

Other Strategies. Children can also represent their experiences by making timelines that consist of three steps. In order to make timelines, the children need to go through the process of what will be represented. After the experience, and with the use of photographs, children are able to sequence an event.

> *Example:*
> *The teacher accompanies a small group of children to water the plants. She demonstrates and verbalizes the process in three steps. Then the children go through the steps. The teacher documents the experience with photographs of each step. Finally, she revisits the experience by reminding the children of what they did, and the children make their understanding visible by placing the photographs of the process in the correct order: "First, you fill the watering can with water. Then you water the plants. Finally, you place the watering can on the table."*


Figures 15-16. Watering the plants, then organizing the pictures in the correct order.

Another way to represent their experiences is through drawings, paintings, or models that encourage comparisons of very obvious attributes. These representational strategies will be meaningful to toddlers only if they are very concrete, and they will be even more meaningful if they involve action.

> *Example:*
> *"This is a fish/this is me." At the beginning of a project on fish, we noticed that children's first representations included human features. As we concluded the project, we asked the children to draw themselves and a fish. This drawing allowed us to assess their understanding—most of the drawings of the fish that children drew were different from the drawings that they drew of themselves.*

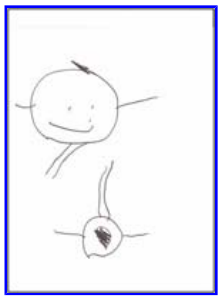

Figure 17. First representation: both the boy and fish have arms.

Figure 18. Drawing from memory showing clear understanding of differences between a fish and a child.

During project work, we often see older children working collaboratively on a representation. They plan together, negotiate, combine their skills, and problem solve. In *project practice*, individual work is put together into a group product. For example, in a mural, each child concentrates on an area of what will ultimately become a group representation. The teachers then help children become aware of how their personal contributions became part of a whole.

Toddlers may lack the skills to faithfully represent an object. A drawing of a fish may not look like a fish. However, if a child's representation is accompanied by a transcript of her comments as she worked, her understanding would be visible.

It is important for teachers to realize that when working with toddlers, products of representation may not clearly indicate the children's understanding, so that they don't feel frustrated by mistaken expectations. Emphasis should be placed on the children's *process* of learning how to represent their experiences rather than on the product.

Phase 3

In this culminating phase of the project, teachers revisit their documentation to assess individual learning. The progress of each child then becomes a story to be shared with the learning community, which comprises peers, parents, and teachers. Toddlers are as eager and enthusiastic as older learners to share their work and celebrate their achievements. They demonstrate ownership as they show their representations to their parents or other adults. They point at what they made, and they talk about what is on display.

Figure 19. Vera showing her parents her drawing of fire inside an oven, which she did after baking cookies: "Look, yellow fire is hot!"

Concluding Comments

As administrators, we have been asked by parents and teachers why we start using features of project work with such young learners. Why not let them explore freely, without finished representations in mind, without aiming for depth in any particular topic? Our experience has given us several answers. First, because we have seen that using features of project work makes a difference in the way even the youngest children approach exploration. Their minds are open to new possibilities, and their eyes light up whenever the familiar setting of the classroom has changed to harbor a new provocation, an invitation to use their skills and strengths in an organized way. Also, children who have been invited early on in their learning journey to represent what they see or even what an object or experience awakens in them tend more naturally to seek opportunities to represent new information.

Teachers of 3-year-olds at our school comment that when the children who have been in our program arrive in their classrooms, they can see how much more purposeful their exploration is when faced with open and less directed experiences. The teachers of our 3-year-olds also comment that our toddlers are familiar with a wider variety of representational media than children who are new to project work. Because the children have explored many materials for several months, they seem to be interested in using them to make things. In contrast, children who have never been in school or who come from other programs are eager to explore rather than to represent.

When children are engaged in experiences that involve self-directed exploration, teachers can see their emerging interests, as opposed to when they conduct more guided activities where there is not much room for children to do different things. Just as it happens with older children, learning is more meaningful when toddlers use their developing skills with a purpose in the context of a topic.

It has been enriching for both teachers and administrators to hear what parents say about how their young children learn at our school. They often mention that their toddlers talk about what they are learning and that they want to bring objects related to the topic of study to school. As a consequence, parents become involved and interested in the children's work, and they actively participate in our classrooms.

Along the way, we have learned that some features of project work are of value for toddlers, while others are best left until the activities are more developmentally appropriate. That is why we coined the term *project practice*. What began as an adaptation of project work in an effort to unify the teaching methods of our school has now become standard practice for us. It goes without saying that we are constantly tweaking our practice, looking for ways that will make learning more meaningful for our toddlers and their understanding more easily visible to us. We lead our young learners down a path of exploration, observation, representation, and understanding, reaching further depths every step of the way. Our role has expanded; we are helping them reach their own conclusions on a topic and build their knowledge through carefully planned experiences and provocations. Documentation is displayed at a height that allows them to observe photographs and work at leisure, and guided discussions help them think back on experiences and commence what will hopefully be a lifelong adventure of reflection on their own understanding.

All the changes and adaptations we describe in this article came about from trial and error, from discussions among ourselves, and more importantly from the reflection upon our own practice. We have learned to listen to our toddlers and to be responsive to their feedback. In many ways, our students have become our teachers.

Acknowledgments

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