Beginnings Workshop

Building Literacy Curriculum Using the Project Approach

Think about a time when you were especially interested in something — planning a special outing, developing a hobby. Remember how absorbed you were in the process? Children, too, become absorbed in what they are doing when something has high personal interest to them. The project approach is a wonderful way to help children become more absorbed in learning. It is an especially useful tool for literacy curriculum.

The Project Approach

The project approach focuses on topics, places, people, events, phenomena, animals, and objects that *are of particular interest to children.* Children learn about these things through projects. Projects are in-depth investigations that can last from two weeks to one year (Allison, 1997a; Hartman & Eckerty, 1995; Katz & Chard, 1989). The average time frame for a project is four weeks. Projects:

- are driven by what children want to know.
- center on direct contact with environments.
- result in something children make that represents what they learn.

Projects and Very Young Children

Projects seem to be more developmentally appropriate for children four years old or older due to the *in-depth* nature of project work. Very young children appear to be interested in pieces of project work that offer immediate success — mixing paint, painting objects, playing with something they made. If three year olds participate in projects, enlist the support of older peers and family members. Practice with *table top* projects that are small, self-directing, and of high interest. Children love turning small milk cartons and tissue boxes into objects that represent real things.

Literacy-Project Connections

Reading experts recommend that teachers "start with the known" (Clay, 1993). This means that teachers base curriculum on what children already know. Children also work from their strengths as they learn about reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Projects offer friendly environments for children to try out their developing literacy skills in familiar situations. During projects, children build literacy skills as they:

- use oral language during high interest tasks (e.g., asking questions about a puppeteer that visited the class).
- experiment with written language as they seek answers to these questions (e.g., journals, books, posters, pamphlets, songs).
- use oral and written language together as they create artifacts that represent what they know (e.g., discuss what to call their homemade village and then create signs for it).

The Phases of Projects

Projects usually go through three main phases. Some children will be involved throughout the entire project; others will dabble in the project at different times.

by Jeanette Allison

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Project Topics

Choose topics that require children to explore their surroundings directly and repeatedly. The best topics allow children to generate more topics as they work. Here are some examples:

1. **The children:** Houses/homes, shelters, school bus, popular businesses that cater to children (e.g., toy factory).

2. **Immediate surroundings:** School buildings and places such as the cafeteria, the neighborhood.

3. **Places of special interest or concern:** Hospital, police station, post office, zoo, grocery store, city dump, special landmarks, puddles and ponds.

4. **Things of special interest:** Musical instruments, appliances/mechanical devices, shoes, toys, silly songs and things, lemonade stand.

5. **Animals and insects of special interest:** Dogs, cats, birds, snakes, spiders, dog houses, bird houses, cat condos (check local wildlife habitats also).

6. **People of special interest:** Puppeteer, fire fighter, dentist, veterinarian, mascot.

Offer activities that are both related (e.g., building houses with blocks in the block corner for a house project) and unrelated to the project (e.g., standard center choices such as dramatic play or puzzles). Projects can be initiated at home also.

Getting Started

The first phase of a project is the most time consuming. It involves deciding on a topic, assessing children's skills and knowledge, brainstorming plans, gathering resources, identifying literacy resources, and assigning responsibilities. The teacher continually writes down children's ideas in order to model connections between oral and written language.

Before creating larger projects, it is a good idea for children to experiment with smaller projects. Children need to learn the process of the project approach — from conceptualizing ideas to making concrete artifacts from those ideas. Many teachers find that table-top projects help children learn the process of the project approach.

Table-top projects are small constructions to fit on top of tables, with three children working on individual or small-group projects. Making animals and animal homes from milk cartons and recylables are popular table-top projects. Children can think of favorite animals and habitats — birds and nests, for example — decide on and gather necessary construction materials, and make their creations.

Meanwhile, the teacher guides children through planning, preparing, constructing, and sharing these projects in the same manner she would for large projects. The construction phase can occur in various locations — on the floor, on the sidewalk outside the room, as well as on tables. When most children understand how to create a project, the teacher can solicit from them topic ideas for larger projects. Pieces of the smaller projects often lead to larger projects.

Choosing a topic. The best topics stem from what children want to know. For in-depth topic advice, please see Allison (1997b) and Katz and Chard (1989).

When project work is new to the teacher, she can decide on the topic. Soon thereafter topics need to be driven by children's curiosities. Try these interest-targeting strategies:

- Observe a recurring interest in children's play. Ask, "Would you like to know more about that?"

- Wait for children to tell you that they want to know about something (e.g., after watching a construction site next to the center, three children ask, "Can we go see what the big people are doing?").

- Hold a general interest-probing session to ask what children want to know more about. With multiple responses, vote for one topic and follow up on others later.

- Initiate a specific, short-term investigation (e.g., as children look through the book *Cactus Hotel* (Guiberson, 1991), ask, "Do you know how that book was made? There is a place we can visit that will show us how books are put together."). An author study could complement this investigation.

Gathering resources. (Do ahead of time if possible.) Collect all types of odds and ends: toilet paper and paper towel rolls; all sizes of boxes; craft items such as ribbons, buttons, fabric, and glitter; plastic containers; empty cardboard egg cartons and milk cartons (paint adheres to these better than plastic); masking tape;

glue; etc. Contact potential community resources such as the local science center, a nearby park, and the zoo. Encourage parents and caregivers to share their own talents and artifacts.

During resource-gathering times, children will encounter a lot of oral and written information. Designate small and large discussions to record their findings. Dedicate special places for children to deposit information they glean for the project (e.g., wildlife zoo pamphlets displayed in a class photo album).

Building background knowledge. Be sure children have a common understanding of words and information. For instance, common words for a "Shelters" project are protection, habitats, structures, homes, caves, burrows, and nests. Common information can be found in posters and children's books (see list at the end of this article). Prominently display words and information around the room. Take field trips and involve guests. Solicit children's questions about the project (e.g., How do birds make nests? How do birds make holes in the cactus when there are needles that could hurt them?) Encourage them to record (draw, write) their findings in daily journals.

Project in Full Action

By the second phase, the project gains momentum. Most children will have begun to experiment with project words during reading, singing, drawing, and writing. Children will have completed simple investigations and will know a lot more by now. Phase Two is the *messiest* and *noisiest* part of the project. Do not panic. For children, this stage is the most invigorating, motivating, and productive time. They put action to wonderments, plans, and literacy skills. They create artifacts that represent what they are learning. For example, children will:

- make an object (small or large).
- draw or paint what they learned.
- act out project events.
- write about project experiences (from scribbling to conventional writing).
- talk about their investigations and discoveries.
- sing about their investigations and discoveries.
- seek out more information about the project.

Child Journaling

WHAT: Child journaling is a wonderful focal point of a literacy program. Journaling involves children recording their thoughts and experimenting with written communication. Children draw, illustrate, scribble, and write in blank journals made by the teacher or purchased commercially. A highlight of the journaling process is when children share and read their journals to themselves and others.

WHO: Journaling can be introduced at any age, even with infants. The goal is to familiarize children with writing tools. Toddlers can experiment with non-toxic crayons and markers. Preschoolers and kindergartners begin to understand that ideas are expressed in symbols, both illustrated and written. Preschoolers typically focus on drawing and are fascinated by unusual writing tools such as smelly markers. Kindergartners will use journaling to transition into writing. They begin to include letters and words with their drawings. First graders continue to be fascinated with drawing but will include much more invented and conventional writing.

WHY: Often children draw before they write or read, and usually they write before they read. Journaling provides teachers and children with a non-threatening way to help children transition from drawing to writing to reading. Journaling also is personal for children; it affords them open-ended moments to record their thoughts and feelings.

WHEN: Offer journaling every day at a consistent time — possibly each morning as children come to school. Journaling is a useful activity to supplement key experiences such as reflecting on a recent field trip. If some children do not want to journal, do not force them to. Instead, make journaling a very special time of interaction and sharing as a way to motivate involvement.

HOW: The journaling process can be open ended or guided by the teacher. Open-ended journaling allows children the greatest flexibility in their journal entries; they can draw and write about anything they choose. It is especially advantageous for younger children and reluctant writers who need simply to experiment with language and ideas. Sometimes children's reluctance stems from a need for involvement with the teacher. Other times a teacher may want children to journal about certain topics such as "my favorite place" and the zoo. In both cases, guided journaling is appropriate *if* the teacher remains encouraging and non-judgmental about all children's entries. A handy technique to use with guided journaling is "draw and talk" — as a topic is discussed, the teacher draws the topic or event on large paper, white board, chalkboard, and so on.

Building upon children's wonderments. Encourage children to find answers to their questions. Their discoveries add additional direction to the project. For instance, kindergarten teacher Richard Radtke started a project on "Shelters" with his children. During their investigations, children constructed structures from tissue boxes and milk cartons. Radtke noticed a lot of children making miniature-size houses. He followed up on this interest by bringing in large boxes, placing them in front of children, and asking, "What could we do with these boxes?" Children immediately replied, "Make houses!"

Making detailed plans. Next, Radtke solicited simple plans from the children by asking, "How do these boxes become houses? What should we do first (second, third, etc.)? What do you need to do these things? How will we decide who gets to make the houses? How will we use the houses when we are finished making them?" These questions led to question-answer lists to which children referred during discussions.

Project in Transition

Phase Three is an important part of a project's life. The project will go through natural changes that present more literacy learning opportunities. The project could:

- splinter focus — children continue to investigate the original topic (houses) and add related investigations to it (kitchens and bedrooms).
- shift focus (from animal shelters to people shelters because children become more interested in the *people* part).
- dramatically shift topics (from animal shelters to studying about ladybugs because children became intrigued by ladybugs' shelters).
- be used for other activities (using a *house* children created as a hospital or library).
- end with a culminating event (displaying project artifacts in the hallway or hosting a project fair for parents or peers).
- fizzle out (children are ready to start a different project altogether or are needing to have a break from project work).

Literacy-Project Tips

Literacy learning occurs throughout projects, not as separate activities. Literacy must be naturally occurring extensions of project activities (e.g., vocabulary words come from books and pamphlets children read, not from commercial, predetermined vocabulary lists). Include these literacy events throughout the entire project:

The children . . .

- share questions and responses in groupings — partners, small, and whole groups.
- sing about what they are learning.
- document answers and information (writing, drawing, videotape, audio tape, drama).
- draw what they learn (with blank journals, construction paper, water colors, various writing instruments).
- write about what they learn (scribbling and drawing are forms of writing).
- read (pictures and print) about what they learn via numerous print sources.
- present what they learned using oral and written language and illustrations.

The teacher . . .

- supports all children's literacy attempts even though they will vary.
- holds many discussions with children to talk about the project.
- solicits children's ideas and writes their responses on flip-chart paper.
- displays children's words, ideas, and work equally.
- models connections between oral and written language.
- uses comprehension strategies such as K-W-L (Ogle, 1986), daily journals, discussions, and word walls.

Conclusion

Often adults are overly concerned about phonics in literacy programs (decoding and breaking down words into letters). Yes, reading involves phonics, but it is so much more than that. It involves a complex combina-

tion of skills, knowledge, and events that extend beyond looking at symbols on a page. Children need to *live* literacy in different ways, starting with oral language and drawing, *reading* pictures, and turning their ideas into tangible products (such as with project work). Projects provide children with endless opportunities to use their literacy.

Selected Children's Books

Gibbons, G. (1990). *How a house is built.* New York: Holiday House.

Guiberson, B. Z. (1991). *Cactus hotel.* New York: Henry Holt.

Hoban, T. (1983). *I read signs.* New York: Greenwillow Books.

Morris, A. (1992). *Houses and homes.* New York: Mulberry.

Pfeffer, W. (1997). *A log's life.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Ringgold, F. (1991). *Tar beach.* New York: Scholastic.

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Allison, J. (1997b). Topics. In P. Rillero & J. Allison (Eds.), *Creative early childhood experiences in mathematics and science: Projects, activity series, and centers for early childhood* (pp. 3-9). Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse for Science, Mathematics, and Environmental Education.

Clay, M. M. (1993). *Reading recovery. A guidebook for teachers in training.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hartman, J. A., & Eckerty, C. (1995). Projects in the early years. *Childhood Education, 71,* 141-148.

Katz, L. G., & Chard, S. C. (1989). *Engaging children's minds: The project approach.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Ogle, D. (1986). K-W-L: A teaching model that develops active reading of expository text. *The Reading Teacher, 39,* 564-570.

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