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Using the Project Approach with Toddlers*

Debbie LeeKeenan and Carolyn P. Edwards

“From the very beginning, curiosity and learning refuse simple and isolated things: they love to find the dimensions and relations of complex situations...” (Malaguzzi, 1987, p.19)

While working with children at a university laboratory school, we have pondered the question of how to develop curriculum for very young children in a meaningful way that emphasizes content as well as process. In general, curriculum for toddlers (ages one through three) involves activity centers that change from day to day. Because toddlers tend to be immersed in the immediate moment and in the process rather than the product of their activity, teachers, when developing curriculum, tend to put little emphasis on long-range planning and on developing extensive connections between different activities.

Yet thematic units and long-term projects are becoming recognized as an important way to promote preschool and young school-age children’s learning. In Engaging Children’s Minds: The Project Approach (1989), Katz and Chard describe project work as an innovative way to meet a wide spectrum of educational goals. Recently, we have also been strongly influenced by the project approach as developed in a public preschool system for children ages one through six in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, in press; New, 1990). In Reggio Emilia, projects for children involve spiraling experiences of exploration and group discussion followed by representation and expression and then the use of many symbolic media, whether words, movement, songs, drawings, building blocks, shadow play, or face-making in front of a mirror. Art is not viewed as a separate part of the curriculum but as part of the whole cognitive symbolic learning of the developing child. Children’s work is not casually created but is the result of a guided exploration of themes and events that are relevant to the lives of children and of the community (Gandini, 1984; Gandini & Edwards, 1988).

Are these methods relevant for children younger than age three? On one hand, we worried that a project approach would be too abstract for toddlers and more relevant to the teacher’s planning book than to the children’s interests. We definitely did not want to create another type of “pushed-down” curriculum. On the other hand, we believed that with certain important modifications, in-depth study projects might well be made appropriate for toddlers. They could be a valuable way to help the children find answers to their own deepest questions and make meaning and connections between actions, events, objects, and ideas in their world (Forman, 1989).

What is an “in-depth study project”?

The project approach is an emergent approach to developing and implementing curriculum in the classroom. From an initial idea, what we define as an in-depth study project evolves over two to four months into an extensive, complex study. This organic model of curriculum begins with careful observation of the children’s interests, questions, and ideas; it then develops those ideas into a concrete learning experience. After reflection on the experience, new ideas are

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generated and new activities are designed (Edwards, Shallcross, & Maloney. 1991).

Choosing a project topic is the first step. The topic should be something concrete, close to toddlers’ personal experiences, interesting and important to children, and dense in potential meanings (emotional and intellectual)—so that it is rich in possibilities for varied activity during different parts of the day and for sustaining long-term interest. Once a project topic has been selected, four basic stages can be repeated during the study.

Exploration. The project is introduced with a provocation—a stimulating event or activity that gets children thinking about the topic. Teachers should carefully note children’s reactions, questions, comments, and ideas.

Organization. Children’s ideas and questions are developed into learning activities for further exploration. Their ideas are documented through drawings, construction, photographs, writing, and videotapes. Through reflection and repetition, children are guided into deeper experiences on the same topic (Dyson, 1990; Thompson, 1990).

Discussion/representation. Throughout the project, children share their solutions, answers, and feelings about activities, which are noted by the teachers. The children’s current ideas are compared and contrasted to their initial ideas and the ideas of their teachers. Each day’s activities build on the previous day’s events.

Summary experience. Finally, a culminating experience takes place, after which teachers conduct an evaluation with the children and with other staff. The teachers consider what children learned and accomplished as well as what they themselves learned and accomplished.

Examples of projects with toddlers and twos

Over the past two years we have conducted in-depth study projects in classrooms for our toddlers (12 to 30 months) and twos (24 to 40 months). For example, in the Twos’ Program we conducted a water project one spring when the weather was getting warmer. We began by having the staff brainstorm about what children might want to know about water. Staff responses included ideas such as how water feels; how it flows; and properties of water, such as sinking or floating. We soon discovered, however, that children were much more interested in the color of water. (They said, “Water is white” when trying to describe its clearness.) Some of the activities we did in our water project included collecting pond water from a local duck pond and bringing it back to the classroom to compare to tap water; mixing water with other materials, such as flour or cornstarch, to make “goop”; painting with water, using spray bottles, brushes, and rollers; transporting water with hoses, buckets, pulleys, and gutters; making rain (real and pre-
Debbie LeeKeenan and Carolyn P. Edwards

...tend); and washing dolls, animals, and dishes with water. The culminating activity was an outdoor Water Day in which water was involved in every choice of activity from tricycle washing to transporting water down the slide. By the end of this three-month project, the two-year-old children were using new vocabulary in their everyday play: *soak, clear, absorb, flow, and evaporate.*

“Looking at Each Other,” another project used in the Twos’ Program, developed from the children’s growing interest in peer relations. This project was also intended to integrate elements of antibias curriculum into our work (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989). As before, the project began with the staff brainstorming about what interested us as adults, about each other, and then thinking about what the children were interested in about each other. The provocative event that introduced the project to the children involved face masks prepared from a five-by-seven-inch color photograph of each child’s face, cut out, laminated, and mounted on a stick. These face puppets were exciting to the children and allowed them to compare one another indirectly and interact in nonthreatening ways. On this and subsequent days, they traded face masks with each other, drew on them, and used them as props in dramatic play. Unusual and unexpected uses of photography provided a central means to carry this project theme forward. Laminated photographs of the children were on different occasions hidden in the sand table and in the play dough, frozen in ice cubes, taped on the bottom of blocks, and taped to doll heads. We used photographs to make books about each other. Photographs of the children were photocopied, and the copies were given to the children to use in different coloring and collage activities over several weeks. By the end of the project, the children had not only become much more aware of each other but were more able to accurately articulate their similarities and differences. They were particularly interested in languages other than English that were spoken in our classroom. When one child, Andy, became aware that he spoke English while some of his peers spoke Chinese or Korean, he started to invent his own (make-believe) language!

The one- to-two-year-olds in the Toddler Program took part in a project on babies over a two-month period. This topic was selected because of its curriculum possibilities as well as its special interest to this group (two had new baby siblings, and all had attended the Infant Program down the hall). Before beginning, the staff reflected on what might be the toddlers’ own questions and concerns about infants (Was I like that? What can I do with a baby? What is okay to do to a baby?). Then one morning, to initiate the project with a dramatic, engaging event, the head teacher greeted them in the role of Baby. Dressed in a nightgown and clutching a bottle, she remained in-role for half an hour. We videotaped this event, including the children’s responses, and replayed the tape on two later occasions at the edge of the housekeeping area, which is furnished with baby toys and equipment. Many children came over to view the video, even those
Debbie LeeKeenan and Carolyn P. Edwards

who had been most wary of their teacher acting as an infant, and much pretend play ensued. On subsequent days and weeks, we did weighings, measureings, and body tracings of the children and of baby dolls, and teachers talked about the concepts of big and little. Parents contributed baby pictures of the children, which we mounted in an album. Children visited a farm to see young animals. They made collages. The baby siblings of two children came in for formal visits—one to be nursed, one to be bathed by his mother. We videotaped many activities for later viewing; for example, the tape of Peter’s brother being bathed by his mother was played near an area where children could wash dolls. (One child, Meaghan, made her doll cry, exactly as Peter’s brother cried; then she calmed and soothed her doll.) The culminating event was making a baby quilt to leave in the classroom. By the end of the two-month period, all of the toddlers used more words about size and growing than before, and when meeting infants at school or at home, they were excited and aware of what to do—getting down to the infant’s level, touching gently, and talking about her face and size.

Guidelines for doing projects with toddlers

On the basis of our experience, several elements that are key to conducting projects with very young children became evident.

Documentation

Following the practice in Reggio Emilia, we used much more photographic documentation in our projects than is usual in pre-schools. It served to validate the children’s self-esteem and, more importantly, provided a systematic way for children to revisit their experiences (with attendant thoughts and feelings) and then reconstruct and re-interpret them in a deeper way. Given the young age of our children, such a concrete boost to memory was essential to sustain the momentum of the project over time. Types of documentation included children’s drawings, paintings, constructions, stories, poems, and writings that were made into classroom displays or books and posted around the room. They also included photographs, videotapes, and slides made by teachers and shown to the children. Documentation also benefited the adults in the classrooms. We used anecdotal records and notes made by teachers to prepare short written quotations of things children did or said that pertained to the project; the quotations were then hung on the walls to remind teachers of the children’s insights. These methods of documentation not only let the project theme permeate the classroom, but also preserved and communicated ideas and curricula to parents and other staff members.
Emergent element

This style of designing curriculum is not prescribed in advance. It requires careful observation and evaluation by teachers on what the children in the group are interested in and curious about. Then, through planning and creative thinking, teachers turn these observations into concrete learning activities. In the Water Project our teachers initially had certain expectations about what the children would find interesting about water, such as its fluid quality and its transformation from one state to another; but after observation and analysis of the children’s responses, we discovered—unexpectedly—that the children were interested in how water was absorbed by different matter. They wanted to know where the water disappeared to when it rained. “The ground ate it up,” they would say. From this, the teachers developed activities centering on the absorption of water, such as experimenting with sponges and wood, washing clothes in the water table, and transporting water from one bin to another with objects that had different absorption rates.

Spiraling curriculum

Rather than conducting our project in a linear way, with new activities marching one after the next, we took a hint from the Italians. We tried to slow down, enter child time, and cycle through alternating experiences of first observing, then doing or representing, then re-observing, then redoing or re-representing. Although we accomplished less in terms of new experiences, the toddlers seemed to appreciate the opportunity to reconstruct their feelings, actions, and products on successive occasions. For example, in the Toddler Program one day, children painted on black-on-white and white-on-black silhouettes of a human figure that had been cut out of construction paper. These “paintings” were hung on the wall for study and discussion; then, a week later, the cut-out people were taken down so children could manipulate them using cut-out clothing and instant photos of their own faces as they played. The dressed silhouettes were hung up for another week; then children played with all the materials once more, except this time their photos had been glued onto the paper dolls.

Parent involvement

Parent involvement in the classroom is a vital component of any high-quality early childhood classroom. Particularly when working with toddlers, we found parent input essential to help provide insights into what the children were thinking and how they were responding to our project themes. At the start, parents were asked to provide initial input through a questionnaire format. (For example, in the Looking at Each Other project, parents were asked “What do you feel your child is most interested in about others? Who are they interested in? What about other people interests them? How do they show it? List any specific comments or questions your child has made about others.”) We used these data to help shape the direction of the project. Weekly letters about the project were then sent to parents, with information about the types of activities being done in the classroom, observations on children’s responses to activities, and suggestions for follow-up activities to be done at home. We encouraged parents to contribute information, pictures, books, objects, and other materials to the class project, and we encouraged them to talk with the child at home about the project. Documentation (e.g., booklets, photos, drawings) were passed from school to home and home to school. We invited parents to participate in special project activities at school.

Benefits

In sum, the project approach provides a new way of designing curriculum for very young children. It gives teachers a way to integrate and focus their curriculum across areas of the classroom and to emphasize content as well as process for the young child. As teachers take their lead from the children’s interests and questions, they can make contact with the highest level of children’s thinking. Systematic...
uses of documentation boost children’s reflectiveness and their ability to make connections over time. Group experiences encourage cooperation and collaboration as adults and children listen to one another and undertake work together. Most important, the approach serves to bring children, parents, and teachers into a true meeting of minds where learning and the enjoyment of learning are sustained at a high pitch for an extended period of time.

### Critical for Ensuring Success

1. Staff must observe toddlers’ response, take into account the children’s real interests, and flexibly reorganize the “curriculum” in keeping with this feedback. (We do not mean “covering” a curriculum.)
2. Staff must actively seek parents’ input and integrate it into the plan. Parents should always be integrated into a program for toddlers.
3. Process is more important than product. Projects can fit into this formula and be educationally enriching if they are age appropriate and personally challenging—to each child.

### References


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