

Foreword: Literacy and Project Work

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Introduction

The focus of this project catalog, the fourth in a series of project catalogs, is on the ways that project work can help children move toward literacy. Helping children learn to read is one of the most important tasks that early childhood teachers (pre-kindergarten through third grade) face in our country. Today, unlike in the past or in other societies, we want and expect all of our children to learn to read well. Citizens in many communities have justifiable concerns about literacy. Learning to read has become a struggle for some of our children. Many citizens, like many teachers and administrators, have concerns about reading failure and how it leads to alienation from school and, eventually, dropping out of school. The development of reading skills in the early childhood years (pre-kindergarten through third grade) is important:

Academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of grade 3.... A person who is not at least a modestly skilled reader by the end of third grade is quite unlikely to graduate from high school. (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998, p. 21)

Large numbers of school-age children, including children from all social classes, have significant difficulties in learning to read. Failure to learn to read adequately for continued school success is much more likely among poor children, among nonwhite children, and among non-native speakers of English (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). According to the *National Report Card 2000*, although the national average scale score has remained relatively stable for reading achievement, significant changes have occurred at the lower end

of the performance distribution (Donahue, Finnegan, Lutkus, Allen, & Campbell, 2000). Scores at the 10th percentile in 2000 were significantly lower than in 1992. Thirty-seven percent of fourth-graders failed to score at even the basic level (able to understand the overall meaning of what they read, to make relatively obvious connections between the text and their own experiences, and to extend the ideas in the text by making simple inferences). The National Assessment Governing Board has set a goal that all students be able to perform at the proficient level of reading, or beyond the basic level.

The question, then, is "What is the most effective way to move children toward literacy?" A variety of achievements are needed for successful reading. According to the National Research Council (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), when children begin to learn to read, they need reading instruction that focuses on using reading to obtain meaning from print, awareness of sounds and groups of letters, and an understanding of the writing system, particularly letters and sequences in words. They also need frequent opportunities to read and write. Then to make adequate progress in reading and writing, children need to develop a working understanding of how sounds are represented alphabetically and many opportunities to use reading for meaning so that they can monitor their understanding and repair misunderstandings. The challenge to the teacher is to move young children toward the literacy goal by being sure that each and every child receives these experiences and instruction, yet do it in such a way that interest and motivation to master the skill are preserved. Being able to break the code, to get meaning from print, is probably not enough.

An expanded definition of literacy goes beyond skills to include people's willingness to use literacy, the connections between reading and writing, the dynamic process of constructing meaning (including the role of cultural schemata), and the importance of printed text. Social context is a particularly important concept for teachers to consider, both in terms of understanding literacy and understanding how typical school literacy lessons might need to be adjusted to be more beneficial for students of diverse backgrounds. (Au, 1993, p. 33)

Another part of the challenge of literacy instruction comes from the integral relationship between reading and culture. There is clearly a cultural component to the process of learning to read. According to Jerome Bruner (1996), learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources. It is important to teach literacy in such a way that it affirms the cultural identities of students of diverse backgrounds.

The Project Approach

As can be seen in the projects in this catalog, growth in literacy skills does occur in project work. The real contribution of project work to literacy may be in the motivation of children to read and write and the understanding that they develop of the tremendous value of reading and writing skills. When children are involved in an in-depth investigation of a topic of extreme interest to them, they want to record their thoughts; to learn the words; and to read the signs, brochures, and other literacy artifacts associated with the topic. This motivation is especially evident when the project topic is relevant to the culture of the child. An in-depth study of something in the child's neighborhood or immediate environment (such as the local grocery store) is most likely to be culturally relevant to not only the child but also the child's family.

The introduction of projects into the early childhood classroom by no means replaces shared reading and writing experiences in the pre-kindergarten years and more formal instruction in the primary years. However, project work provides a context for application and practice of literacy

skills in addition to a powerful motivation to master literacy during these important early years.

Projects do not make up the entire early childhood curriculum. Projects are only one kind of learning experience that children need. Teachers who use the Project Approach often also teach single concepts (individually and in groups), and they utilize units, themes, and directed inquiry. Teachers doing projects also provide direct instruction regarding academic skills such as how to count or write a letter. Teachers and children assemble books, photographs, and other materials related to the project. Experiences are planned and documented with writing. Children make webs of what they know and want to know. Children think of questions, which they write down so they can remember to ask experts and field site hosts. Answers are written and displayed. Books are made of project experiences, and thank-you notes are written. Project information and artifacts bring to life the learning centers in the classroom. Themes, units, learning centers, and direct instruction all have important places in the early childhood curriculum and in literacy instruction. However, we believe that there are unique experiences that occur when children ask their own questions, conduct their own investigations, and make decisions about their activities. Projects provide contexts in which children's curiosity can be expressed purposefully, and which enable them to experience the joy of self-motivated learning.

Project Catalog Contents

In Section 1: Literacy and Project Work, six articles connect project work with literacy. Well-developed projects engage children's minds and emotions and become adventures that teachers and children embark upon together. Lilian Katz in her article "The Dispositions to Write and Read" presents the importance of engagement of children's minds and emotions on long-term literacy goals. In the three articles that follow, teachers Sallee Beneke, Mary Ann Gottlieb, and Dot Schuler share how they maximize literacy experiences at each age level—pre-kindergarten through primary grades. In her article, Rebecca Wilson shows how project work can be especially meaningful for second-language learners. The last

article in this section, "Look! See How They Are Learning" (Judy Helm), provides ideas for documentation and sharing of children's literacy work.

In Section 2, articles focus on implementation issues of project work. Tom Myler shares his experience doing a first project and the challenges he faced. An article on leading discussions and questioning strategies provides ideas for teachers to advance their skill in facilitating project work (Nancy Hertzog and Marjorie Klein). Stacie DeVries shares how children's IEP goals were achieved in project work in "Meeting Individual Educational Plans Using the Project Approach."

In Section 3, teachers share their project work through project summaries. The project summaries were prepared to accompany project displays at An Evening of Sharing, Midwest Association for the Education of Young Children Conference, April 11, 2003, in Peoria, Illinois. These projects represent project work in diverse settings: private preschools, lab schools, early childhood programs for children at risk, child care centers, elementary schools, Head Start, and church preschools. Children involved in these projects come from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds: African American, Hispanic, Latino, Chinese, Asian American, and European American. Several of these classrooms have children from many nations. The classrooms where this project work occurred were located in inner cities, in rural small towns, and on college campuses. The economic levels of the children and families in these programs vary from children and families facing the challenges of living in poverty to children and families who are very affluent. The educational backgrounds of parents range from no high school education to graduate-level education and professions such as surgeons, lawyers, and professors.

Conclusion

As with all project catalogs, it is hoped that this catalog will both support and inspire teachers to do project work with children. In addition, the authors in this fourth edition hope to empower and inspire teachers to maximize the literacy opportunities that occur naturally in project work so that children might experience the value of literacy in their lives.

References

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