

Strategies to Incorporate Literacy into Kindergarten Project Work

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Introduction

When reflecting on my years of facilitating projects with kindergartners, I keep coming back to the importance of literacy and how it permeates almost all the projects that I have facilitated with children. When I was asked to write a chapter for *The Power of Projects* on my experiences moving children toward literacy through project work, I identified 14 practical strategies that foster literacy development and are found within project work (Helm & Beneke, 2003):

1. Emphasize building vocabulary as a foundation for further learning.
2. Encourage children to play around with letter and word recognition.
3. Provide opportunities for publishing and reading child-made books.
4. Provide events that encourage writing.
5. Help children develop email relationships.
6. Help children create pamphlets and brochures.
7. Encourage children to use and create references.
8. Plan for language-rich play.
9. Encourage peer coaching.
10. Help children learn how to ask questions.
11. Tap the potential of culminating experiences.
12. Provide opportunities to listen to experts.
13. Provide opportunities to listen to peers.
14. Read topic-related informational books to children.

Let me address each of these strategies as you might find them in a classroom where child-initiated learning can be found.

Emphasize Building Vocabulary as a Foundation for Further Learning

We are all aware of the need for building vocabulary, especially for those children who come to us with limited experiences. As young children show interest in a possible project, I read many books about the subject. By doing so, I begin to build vocabulary about the topic for the possible project. At times, I have used a word wall to display these words so that the children can see them and use them in daily writing or play. I think a more meaningful way to display those new words is to place them in an area reserved for project words. If a photograph illustrating each word is placed above the word, I believe that the visual image helps to reinforce the concept, as well as to help the child quickly identify the word that he may be seeking.

When we begin a new project, we take the time to web our current knowledge about the topic. The first web may be thin, with few contributions and perhaps some inaccuracies. However, this web represents the children's knowledge at the time. Sometimes, a child knows what he wants to say but simply does not have the words to do so. Visiting a field site early in the project may help to provide some of the basic words connected with that project.

Webbing at the end of the project allows the children to commit to paper new concepts and vocabulary. This web will be more detailed and probably will contain numerous new words. I find myself smiling when I think back to one farm project when we compared the beginning and ending webs. The boys and girls seemed genuinely surprised—and then proud—of what they had

learned throughout the project as evidenced by what was placed on the final web.

Don't forget the artifacts that you may be collecting as the project gets under way. Putting a label next to each tool, construction, or representation helps reinforce the idea that an illustration or construction has a written symbol, which may be a new vocabulary word.

Field site visits early in a project may be the means of connecting words to objects or artifacts that the children are familiar with but just cannot articulate. Field site visits answer questions the children have voiced concerning the project. Children may have inaccurate concepts about a topic that are clarified during the field site visit. These inaccuracies may become apparent through the questions they pose as they prepare to make the field site visit. By allowing the children to discover the answers at the field site, the teacher is actually allowing the children to take charge of their learning.

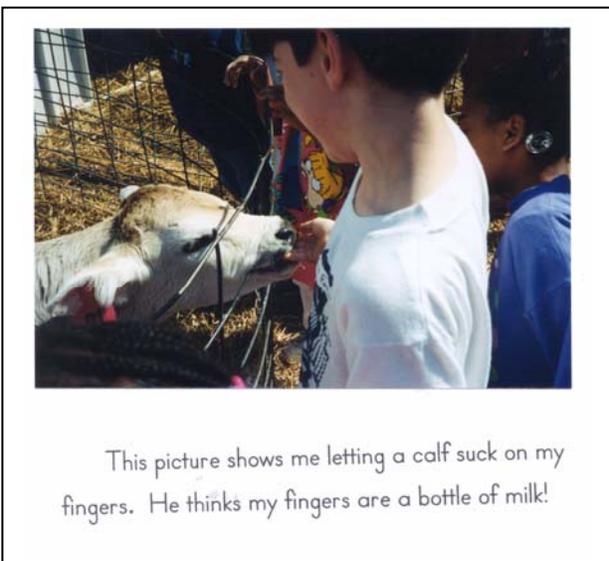
Photographs from the field experience can reinforce new words. Encouraging the children to describe what they see in the photo as you write down their words helps them make the connection from speaking to writing to reading. I have put together these word books and sent them home so that parents can understand more about the project and, one hopes, incorporate some of those words in daily conversation with their children. Figure 1 is a page from the word book from the Farm Project. These word books become a valuable resource as the children continue to work on

projects. For example, pictures taken at Kroger's became the valued reference we used when constructing the hallway flower shop as part of the Grocery Store Project.

Encourage Children to Play Around with Letter and Word Recognition

Word games using project words allow the teacher to meet district goals while doing project work. In our kindergarten classroom, we made rhyming words using farm animals: cow how bow; horse force course; and pig wig big. We also used animal words when learning about descriptors: pink pig; red rat; and blue bunny. For alphabet recognition, we listed all the farm words we could recall in alphabetical order. Sometimes, we had more than one word for a specific letter; sometimes, we had no word for a letter. We even illustrated alphabet books using project words such as those from the Grocery Store Project or the Tracks in the Winter Project. Nursery rhymes and songs relating to a specific project are another resource for phonological awareness. Figure 2 is an illustrated page from the song "Miss Molly Had a Dolly." During the Health Center Project, we learned the song, "Miss Molly Had a Dolly," and the rhyme, "Doctor, Doctor, I Am Ill." You might want to put songs or rhymes from all your projects into a book so that the children can take turns taking the book home. This strategy would encourage parents to read the books, modeling the reading process for their children.

Figure 1. A page from the Farm Project word book.



Provide Opportunities for Publishing and Reading Child-Made Books

Books about a project become classroom references. Some can represent the combined effort of all students, such as the *Grocery Store*, *ABC Book*, or the *Farm Project Photo Book*. These books are comparable to picture dictionaries for students who are not yet reading. Figure 3 is one page of a book containing hospital words. I used pictures from a hospital handout to make a dictionary of hospital words. Another meaningful book might contain a time line of photos showing the development of the project from “messing around” to the culminating activity.



Figure 3. A page from a book with hospital words.
Figure 2. A page from “Miss Molly Had a Dolly.”

During our small group time, we often made books relating to the project. We made *Jack and Jill* during the Water Project or *Pat a Cake, Pat a Cake* during the Bakery Project. Math counting books such as 1,2,3, a snowflake counting book, or a book containing pictures of pairs of mittens for counting by two’s were made during the Tracks in the Winter Project.

Provide Events That Encourage Writing

Writing events permeate most projects if you recognize and capitalize upon them. Some of these events will be conducted by the teacher, who will be modeling the writing process. Some will be conducted by the students and will be valued by all if, from day one, you accept each kindergartner’s level of writing as natural and valuable.

Kindergartners can add to project webs if they use the sounds they hear and know. You can add a small picture to each addition to help clarify it. Questions that the children want to investigate should be written and displayed prominently. These questions will be referred to frequently and answers added as they become apparent. Further investigation may pose more questions, which can then be investigated.

Children can write in pairs or small groups with the more fluent writer modeling for his peer. For example, children in one classroom wrote to another classroom about the construction of the Hinton Health Center. Every child can contribute something to the writing—an idea, a sound, or the period at the end of the sentence. Sometimes, I write with a child, putting in sounds that he does not know. We have written to other classrooms seeking information or guidance. All of the children who contributed to the letter will sign it.

Many small books are made in the classroom during small group time for a variety of purposes. As we made illustrations of the farm animals, the children used resource books to spell the names correctly. In Figure 4, a child is using the farm book as a resource. We made another small book using words that rhymed with cat. Once the children saw the correct spelling of the first word, most of them were able to make additional words.

More mature children helped their friends who had not yet mastered the concept of rhyming words.



Figure 4. A child uses the farm book as a resource.

During the Hospital Project, I made a dictionary of hospital words, using simple pictures from a coloring book. The children kept this book in the writing area so that they could refer to it when writing during center time.

Help Children Develop Email Relationships

Many children come to kindergarten already having computer experience. Some have computers in their bedrooms. Computers are a part of their world, and as teachers, we need to help everyone become computer literate. The Internet is a source of information for any project, and the teacher can share that information with the class. However, I think a more appropriate use of the computer during project work is to help the kindergartners develop email relationships with experts or with other students. We corresponded with a farm wife when we had further questions about the field site visit. We also corresponded with children in another classroom in a different city. Both classes were working on a farm project. Pam Scranton's class had hatched eggs, and we wrote asking about their experience.

Now that many schools are online in every classroom, corresponding with children in other classrooms is much easier. In fact, today it is possible for a kindergarten class to summarize each day's project activities and email them to parents at the end of the day.

Help Children Create Pamphlets and Brochures

Kindergartners seem to enjoy writing for a specific purpose—for example, making pamphlets explaining how the health center operated as part of the Hinton Health Center Project. We had to first decide what to write. Then it was important that all words were spelled conventionally because the pamphlet would be “published” and distributed to all classrooms. We also created a brochure to announce the opening of the health center. The words in the brochure, too, had to be spelled conventionally. The children learned about first drafts, the need to limit what was said because the paper was only so big, and how to fold and distribute the finished product. Just think of the possibilities: directions for mailing packages (Mail Project), how to care for a pet (Fish Project), recipe for brownies (Bakery Project), ways to save water (Water Project)...

Encourage Children to Create and Use References

I have already mentioned several references my children created during project work. The photo album and the farm animal book were references during the Farm Project. A word wall, an illustrated word wall, or a word wall set on a time line allow all children to see the project words all the time.

Using a pictictionary for conventional spelling, especially when writing a letter, is a skill that kindergartners can begin to learn. I worked with my children to help them learn to think about each letter's position in the alphabet—beginning, middle, or end. When we wanted to spell zebra during the Zoo Project, we knew to look at the end of the alphabet for the word.

If you are fortunate enough to have access to a video camera to take on a field experience with you, consider asking a parent, grandparent, aide, or other adult to film the experience. Dr. Judy Helm has trained senior citizens to film by focusing on the event, not the children. She helped one grandfather film a horse, zooming in on the eyes, nose, and mouth. Wouldn't that footage aid our

kindergartners as they try to re-create the horse by sketching, modeling, or painting?

Plan for Language-Rich Play

As my kindergartners became involved in the Water Project, they created a Laundromat in our family living area. The children used words directly from the project in their play: water, laundry soap, fabric softener, bleach, washer, washing machine, dryer, change, and vending machine. We built mailboxes during the Mail Project, and used a real cash register to make change for stamps. Five classrooms created a hospital in the hallway where a few children from each room played every day. Teacher associates took turns supervising the play. The Bakery Project culminated when we set up a bakery, where the children “played” being employees of the bakery and sold bakery goods to other classes. Project work enriched the vocabularies of the children who then used the new words in their play.

Encourage Peer Coaching

In my multi-age classroom, peer coaching was taking place all the time. You can have it happen during project work with any group of children. The kindergartners helped their younger or less mature peers. I remember when Andrew was coached about how to paint the bat cave. He was a good painter and wanted to help. He was able to take direction and worked tirelessly painting the gray outside of the bat cave. In another project, the Water Project, one of the boys directed his project group in the construction of the plumbing in the cardboard house we were making. He tore off the tape and assisted in the taping, but verbally directed another friend who was actually laying the “pipe.”

Help Children Learn How to Ask Questions

Kindergartners think they know how to ask questions, but often what they are really doing is making statements. Asking questions is a skill that needs to be taught. Five-year-olds are capable of learning that questions often begin with one of these words: who, what, where, when, why, can,

do, could, or should. I do not hesitate to rephrase a child’s comment, turning it into a question. For example, if we were talking about what we wanted to find out when we went to the hospital to visit, and a child said, “You gots to take your own clothes.” I might say, “Are you asking if the hospital has any pajamas for you to wear when you are sick?” We could ask, “Do you have pajamas for kids to wear when they come to the hospital?” Or perhaps I might say, “You want to ask, Are there clothes _____?” and wait for the child to finish the question. This strategy allows him to complete the thought and take it along on the field experience. Putting the question (with illustrations if appropriate) on an index card that the child can carry with him gives him a visual reminder of his question.

Do not forget to write those questions in front of the children. Your modeling is so important. You can later cut the questions into strips and allow the children to respond to them. The questions can then go home where, one hopes, parents will also ask about them.

Tap the Potential of Culminating Experiences

Every project needs a culminating experience. Children need to bring closure to the project as well as to have an opportunity to share their learning with others. You can conclude a project by inviting others to observe it. Let your children practice talking about different parts of the project. We tried this strategy with the Zoo Project, which we relocated in the hallway. We invited other classes to come and listen to the project members tell about the zoo construction. Figure 5 shows children sharing the construction of the zoo with the students in a pre-kindergarten classroom.

Another way to share a project is to invite parents and other adults to view the project. We held an open house when we worked with Judy Cagle’s 3- and 4-year-olds to make the Hinton Health Center in the center court of our school. Our Open House coincided with an important meeting being held in the building. Many of the attendees stopped to visit the Health Center. Some of those we invited assumed roles of ill students. We were able to show the community what we had learned,

practice using new vocabulary, and talk to an unfamiliar audience.

On two occasions, we constructed a hospital and a grocery store in the hallway. In both cases, the culminating experience was the actual play with older and younger children. After corresponding with children from two other districts, we invited them to join us for a morning of shared farm experiences. This culminating experience involved 80 children and 20 adults, all talking, reading, and drawing about their farm experiences. We shared snacks and farm songs before our visitors left.



Figure 5. Children sharing the construction of the zoo project.

Provide Opportunities to Listen to Experts

During every project, it is important to find an expert whom the children can interview. The expert may be a parent, a professional, or someone else who knows more than the children do about the topic. Sometimes, we invited experts to come to school. The water meter reader came into our classroom with his tools and several water meters. A mother decorated cakes while we watched. Not only were the children able to ask questions, but they were also able to use project words that we had already learned. We were building more experiences upon which the children could scaffold further learning. Then when we went to the grocery store, we already knew a little about cake decorating.

Sometimes, our experts are at the field site. The farmer's wife addressed each of our questions. She and I had talked prior to our visit so she knew what was important to the children. In each of these instances, the children practiced listening etiquette—look at the speaker, raise your hand if you want to ask a question, listen quietly, etc.

Provide Opportunities to Listen to Peers

The project group may not include all members of the class. Not every child is deeply interested in all projects, so daily reports about the projects keep everyone else informed. During meeting time, problems may be discussed, and other students may be helpful in providing solutions. At the end of the day, another reporter can tell about tomorrow's plans. Each of these times provides opportunities to listen and opportunities to answer questions.

Read Topic-Related Informational Books to Children

As we begin to talk about a new project, I head for the library where I look for informational books with good illustrations. I read these books as we are "messaging around" with a possible topic. They help to build vocabulary. They provide clear pictures or illustrations of these new words. They can be used later as references for drawing and sketching should a project develop. Even if the written text is too complex for my kindergartners, I still borrow the book if the photos are of good quality. I might paraphrase what has been written, or I might just talk about the pictures. Sometimes, the books are selected for their illustrations and are never read to the boys and girls. Taking the time to explore the topic in this manner allows us to build some vocabulary and vicarious experiences before narrowing the focus of the project.

Conclusion

I believe strongly in project work for kindergarten children. I have seen firsthand how the four components of literacy—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—are embedded in the projects we have investigated. I believe that the practical strategies I have mentioned, if used in conjunction with project work, will produce literate learners.

Reference

Helm, J. H., & Beneke, S. (2003). *The power of projects: Meeting contemporary challenges in early childhood classrooms—strategies and solutions*. New York: Teachers College Press.