

# Picturing the Project Approach

Creative Explorations in Early Learning

Sylvia Chard, Yvonne Kogan, Carmen Castillo



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# Dedications

To my husband, David Miall, and all my wonderful family.

—*Sylvia C. Chard*

To Sammy, who continues to fill my days with love; to my children, the driving force in my life; and to my grandchildren, who are certainly “the cherry on the cake.”

—*Yvonne Kogan*

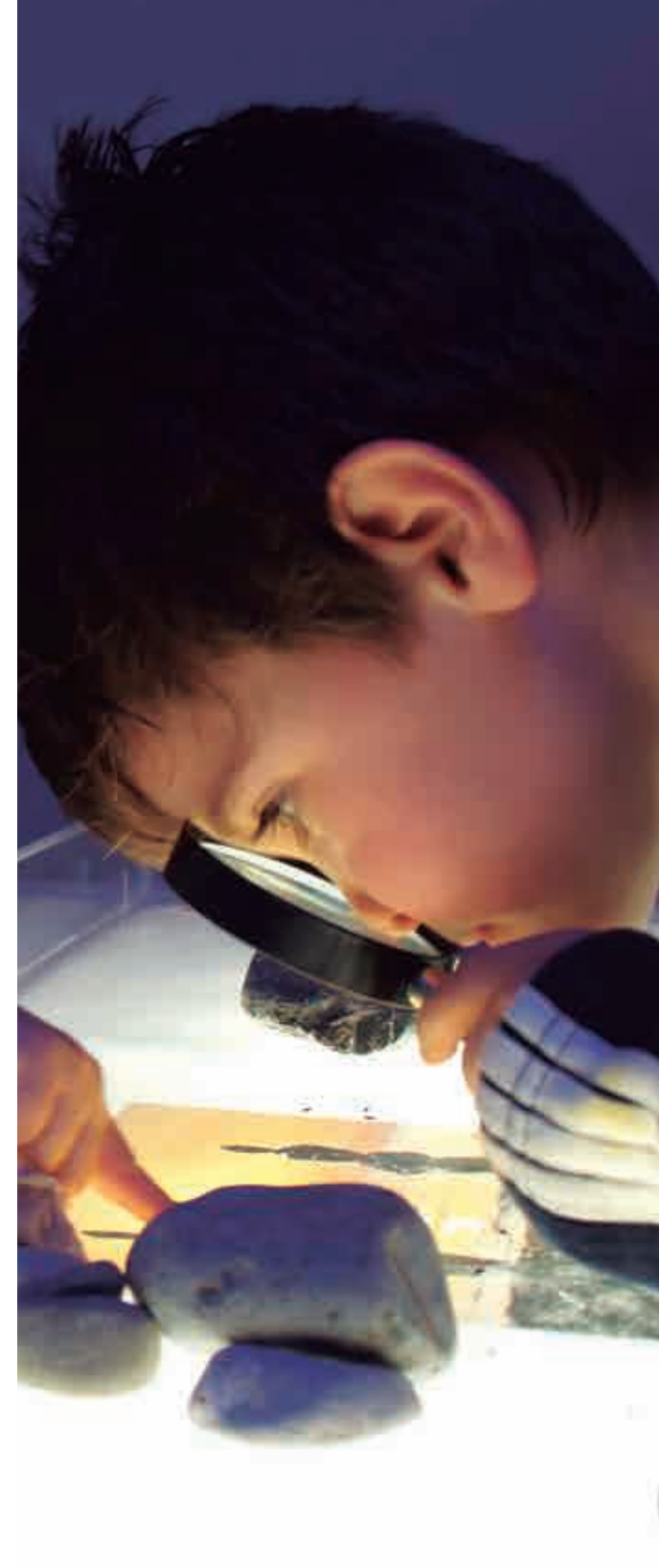
A mis adorados Juanitos, pues ellos tres siempre serán la fuente de mi inspiración.

—*Carmen A. Castillo*

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# Foreword

Involving young children in investigations that we refer to as “projects” first emerged in the United States almost a century ago. The educational philosophers and scholars John Dewey and William Kilpatrick were among several who alerted educators to the importance of engaging children’s minds more fully than did formal traditional teaching methods.

This book provides rich descriptions and illustrations of projects undertaken by young children in many parts of the world. As young children engage in the wide variety of project activities documented here, teachers, parents and family members, and the larger community being served can appreciate three of the main premises underlying these educational practices, outlined briefly below.

My extensive experience in teaching young children suggests that it is useful to keep in mind the following assumptions based on research about children’s development and learning. Furthermore, I encourage you to share these assumptions with their families.

First, one way of looking at the risks of excessive formal instruction is to keep in mind the distinctions between academic and intellectual goals and activities, especially during the early years. Academic goals are those concerned with acquiring small, discrete bits of information, usually related to preliteracy skills. Academic activities tend to involve drills, worksheets, and other kinds of exercises designed to prepare the children for later literacy and numeracy learning and uses. The items learned and practiced require correct answers and rely heavily on memorization versus understanding. Academic exercises consist largely of giving the teacher the correct answers that the children know she is waiting for them to provide. For young children, such academic activities include learning the days of the week. Although one of the traditional meanings of the term *academic* is “of little practical value or relevance,” these bits of information are essential components of reading and other academic competencies that ultimately become important. I suggest that the issue here is not whether academic skills matter. Rather, the questions are: When do they matter? And how much do they matter at what ages?

Intellectual goals and their related activities, on the other hand, address the life of the mind in its fullest sense, including a range of aesthetic sensitivities. The concept of *intellectual* emphasizes reasoning, hypothesizing, predicting, analyzing, imagining, developing ideas, and engaging in a quest for understanding. An appropriate curriculum for young children focuses on supporting their inborn intellectual dispositions. For example, children are naturally disposed to make the best sense they can of their own experience and environment. An appropriate curriculum in the early years is one that encourages and motivates children to seek mastery of basic academic skills, such as beginning writing skills, in the service of their intellectual pursuits. The children become more able to sense the purposefulness of their academic activities and efforts as they pursue their interests and observations. Thus, even young children engaged in various aspects of a



project investigation and documentation learn a great deal, as teachers facilitate their efforts to measure relevant phenomena and to write down a variety of words and numbers. In this way, they deepen their awareness of the uses of academic skills.

Another important aspect of development and learning that applies to project work is that it addresses the distinctions between excitement and interest. There are many occasions in the lives of young children when excitement occurs and is welcomed, such as birthday parties, holiday celebrations, and various kinds of play and games. In contrast, interest is a kind of slowing down of physical reactions and a strengthening of mental processing of ideas and events. Interest, which may appear as deep absorption, curiosity, and even fascination, is essential to aspects of extended project work throughout the early years.

A third distinction of project work is that its value is based on the experiences the children have as they undertake the varied activities and work involved. Among the values embedded in good project work are intellectual and social experiences. Project work is not designed around anticipated questions that are intended to address academic outcomes assessed in formal tests and examinations.

As can be seen in the reports and pictures of project work in this book, the children and their teachers are deeply engaged in their investigations and in providing documentation of what they are accomplishing. This book provides ample evidence of the many benefits project work offers our young children throughout their development.

—Lilian G. Katz, PhD, professor emerita, elementary and early childhood education, University of Illinois

# Preface

During many years of working with teachers of young children, we have found that a large number of them want to change their teaching practices so that they are more aligned with the demands of our times. Furthermore, teachers are often looking toward the future and are seriously reconsidering issues concerning what and how children should be learning at school. In these processes of individual and collaborative reflection, educators have frequently expressed interest in learning how to guide young children in developing skills and dispositions that will be universally valuable across places and times. This book provides you with step-by-step guidelines in using the project approach as a framework to enrich your practice, by planning educational experiences that nurture the lively minds of children. It illustrates how social-emotional development; academic benchmarks; and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) knowledge and skills are promoted in the context of a project. Additionally, this book offers a section about tools that includes templates and sample letters that you may consult and use throughout the course of project work. Its text and powerful, captivating images complement each other to facilitate understanding as you implement the project approach in your classroom.

# Acknowledgments

We first and foremost want to thank Dr. Lilian Katz, who, along with Dr. Sylvia Chard, has developed the project approach and has written extensively about it in books, articles, and papers, has lectured all around the world, and has mentored teachers and institutions in implementing practices that make learning meaningful.

We also want to acknowledge the work of Carlos Ramírez and of the many teachers who have contributed to this book with their experiences, their stories, and their amazing photographs, all of which bring the project approach to life.





# 1



## Understanding the Project Approach

A project is an extended and in-depth investigation of a real-world topic. Children gain deep understanding and knowledge by seeking answers to their questions through rich sensory, firsthand investigations. Projects are usually undertaken by a whole class, divided into small groups. These groups become experts in different aspects of the topic of study.

The project approach is not the whole curriculum and is compatible with and complementary to other experiences and instructional methods. Teachers of young children often wonder about the distinction between a thematic unit and a project. Table 1.1 highlights several differences. Note that with thematic units, teachers preplan from beginning to end. With a project, teachers respond to the children's ideas, and the unit's progression follows children's interests to achieve goals that the class members have set together.

The project approach provides a well-structured, user-friendly framework involving three phases. Like a good story, the project can be described as having a beginning, a middle, and an end, each memorable in its own way. The organization of projects into three sequential phases helps teachers and children identify the purposefulness of the work as it unfolds.

# Table 1.1: Distinctions between Thematic Units and Projects

Element	Thematic Units	Projects
Topic	This usually refers to a set of activities around a broad topic or large concept, such as the solar system.	This involves a piece of in-depth research about a real-world topic that is close to the children's lives, such as shoes.
Duration	The duration of thematic units is usually preset and not very long, as this kind of work tends to be superficial.	Projects are longer and may vary considerably in time, depending on the children's continued interest in the topic and on whether they have answered their questions and represented their newly gained understanding.
Role of the Teacher	The teacher acts as a director.	The teacher gives guidance, and children decide how to advance in their own work.
Learning Experiences	The teacher plans activities from beginning to end based on curriculum goals, regardless of the children's interests or questions.	Teachers assess students' prior knowledge, which helps identify questions for research. The learning experiences are designed to allow children to investigate their questions and meet learning and curricular objectives and standards as the project proceeds.
Skills	The teacher finds ways to connect the thematic unit with the curriculum goals. Counting, measuring, reading, spelling, and so forth are used in such a way that the theme serves as a pretext for applying basic skills.	Students meet curriculum objectives as the project progresses. Children apply skills to find answers to their questions and to represent their knowledge and understanding.
Gaining New Knowledge	Information is provided by the teacher mostly from books, manuals, or the Internet. Sometimes children go on a field trip as a culminating activity.	Field visits occur early in the project because this is an essential way for children to find answers to their questions. They also gather firsthand information by conducting interviews; seeing people at work; and examining equipment, places, and processes.
Representation	Children usually engage in the same kinds of activities. They might all color the same worksheet, make a puppet, or take part in a play.	The class is usually divided into interest groups. Children may work independently or collaboratively on varied representations of their new knowledge and understanding related to the questions they investigate. They may produce pieces of writing or drawings, participate in dramatic play, or construct models, among other evidence of learning.
Documentation and Display	Pieces of work may be displayed in the classroom. Because children's thematic work products usually look similar, it is difficult for children to identify their own creations. Display of the work is basically used to decorate the classroom walls.	Teachers document the children's learning process through note taking, photographs, recordings, and videos. They use this documentation to plan subsequent learning experiences. The work displayed reflects the story of the project that is taking place in the classroom and serves as a resource for further learning. Children can easily identify their work, talk about what they learned, and describe the challenges they faced during the project. They feel a true sense of ownership for their individual work products.



# Phase 1

At the beginning of the project, the teacher's role is to find out about the firsthand experiences and personal stories that form the basis of individual students' current understanding and what they already know about the topic. Students acquire a collective baseline understanding of the topic through hearing their classmates' stories, representing their own experiences, and sharing their work in class.

Throughout this phase, questions of what the children would like to research are developed in group discussion sessions and become the roadmap for the investigation.



## Phase 2

The teacher organizes experiences that allow students to get firsthand information to answer their questions. She brings in objects that youngsters can examine, invites experts to share information with the class, and plans for children to conduct fieldwork. The teacher finds opportunities for students to apply literacy and numeracy skills and acts as a facilitator in helping them represent their new knowledge and understanding in diverse ways.





## Phase 3

The teacher, on her own or with her students, decides when and how to conclude the project and how to share the experience with others. The teacher reviews and evaluates the work and usually asks the children to help select particular items for a presentation that will communicate the learning over the course of the project.

Many teachers find it helpful to use a project planning and documentation chart to guide them as they follow the structural features found in each phase, as shown in Table 1.2. The five features of project work—discussion, fieldwork, representation, investigation, and display—serve the children’s learning in each phase over the life of the project. As the project progresses through the phases and the teacher’s concerns change, each feature of the project work takes on new functions and significance. In appendix A, you can see an example of the project planning and documentation chart filled in with specific items related to a project on fruit.



# Table 1.2: Project Planning and Documentation Chart

Discussion	Fieldwork	Representation	Investigation	Display
<b>Phase 1—Beginning the Project</b>				
Sharing prior experience and current knowledge of a topic	Having children talk about their prior experience with their parents and caregivers	Using drawing, writing, construction, and dramatic play to share prior experience and knowledge	Raising questions on the basis of current knowledge	Sharing representations
<b>Phase 2—Developing the Project</b>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing for fieldwork and interviews</li> <li>• Reviewing fieldwork</li> <li>• Learning from secondary sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Going out of the classroom to investigate a field site</li> <li>• Interviewing experts in the field or in the classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating brief field sketches and taking notes</li> <li>• Using drawing, painting, writing, math, diagrams, and maps to represent new learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigating initial questions</li> <li>• Conducting fieldwork and library research</li> <li>• Raising further questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing representations of new experience and knowledge</li> <li>• Keeping ongoing records of the project work</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 3—Concluding the Project</b>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing to share the story of the project</li> <li>• Reviewing and evaluating the project</li> </ul>	Evaluating the project through the eyes of an outside group	Considering and summarizing the story of the study to share the project with others	Speculating about new questions	Summarizing the learning throughout the project





## How Long Should Projects Last?

Projects can last from a few days to several weeks. Short-term projects may arise from an unexpected happening or at the beginning or end of the school term. Longer-term projects are usually grounded on well-selected topics that lend themselves to deeper investigation. Phase 2 takes more time than either phase 1 or phase 3. The time spent on each phase of the project varies according to the age of the children. Younger children should spend a higher percentage of time on phases 1 and 3 than older children spend. For children in preschool to second grade, you would spend about 25 percent of the time on phase 1, 50 percent on phase 2, and 25 percent on phase 3. Those percentages assume that you are conducting a whole-class project.







# 2



## Identifying the Project Topic

At the beginning of a project, the teacher identifies the topic and introduces it to children and families:

- The teacher selects the topic of study.
- The teacher makes a topic web and a curriculum web to envision the potential of the topic.
- The teacher helps children represent their previous experiences in different ways.
- The children share their experiences with their classmates through discussion and displays of their work.
- The teacher informs families about the topic of study so that they may contribute their expertise, send in related objects, and share memories that their child has connected to the topic.
- The teacher identifies and helps the children formulate questions that will guide the investigation.



# Selecting the Topic

There are so many interesting things that are part of children's immediate experiences that the potential number of matters to learn about and topics to study is endless. Think of what youngsters encounter and have contact with in their lives every day, from an object as common as a shoe to going to a restaurant; projects provide valuable opportunities for children to gain a deeper understanding of how the world works. Not all topics are equally promising in terms of their educational value. Here are some important issues to consider when selecting a topic:

- Is it of value for the children's learning?
- How can the study of this topic build on what children already know?
- How will it help the children to make better sense of the world in which they live?
- Will the children be able to conduct firsthand, direct investigation by visiting field sites and talking to experts?
- Will it enable students to make sense of literacy and numeracy skills in real-life contexts (depending on the age of the children)?
- Will it meet curriculum standards?
- Will it provide opportunities for collaborative work?
- Will children be able to represent their understanding in different ways?
- Will the children be able to take initiative in pursuing the investigation?
- Will it provide opportunities for family members to become involved in the project?





Topics for young children need to be about objects or events that are within their own experience. Among the topics most valuable for toddlers are those that relate to aspects of their daily lives. These may include learning about oneself, water, clothing, pets, or anything that is part of their everyday experience.

Topics for preschool children can relate to familiar places, processes, and objects within their experience. Possibilities include restaurants, airplanes, signs, and the neighborhood around the school.

As children grow through the elementary grades, their interests broaden—as do their experiences with the world—and they become better able to learn about things that are more distant. Good topics for the early elementary grades may include the weather, electricity, or how a newspaper is written, printed, and distributed.

## Who Chooses the Topic?

The interests of the children are an important consideration in the selection of the topic. However, asking the children directly what they would like to study may not be the best strategy. Even though appropriate and enriching topics may originate this way, it is the teacher who has the ultimate responsibility of judging whether the topic will be worthy of the children's time and energy.







# Encourage *deeper engagements* in your **early childhood classroom** with the *Project Approach*

When teachers implement the project approach to learning, young children can follow their own real-world interests to gain deeper understanding. Children wonder about a topic, formulate their questions, and then figure out the answers for themselves in their own way.

By engaging their minds in this quest for understanding, children will gain both academic knowledge and skills. It's not an either-or proposition! The project approach helps children dig deeply into intellectual and social experiences that can help them see meaningful benefits of the skills they are acquiring.

*Picturing the Project Approach* will lead you every step of the way: identifying a topic, deciding on a project, developing the project, sharing the learning, and bringing the project to a close.



**Sylvia C. Chard** is professor emerita of early childhood education at the

University of Alberta, Canada. Dr. Chard is coauthor, with Lilian G. Katz and Yvonne Kogan, of *Engaging Children's Minds: The Project Approach* and coauthor, with Yvonne Kogan, of *From My Side: Being a Child*. She has lectured on interdisciplinary learning in Canada, the United States, and around the world.



**Yvonne Kogan** is cofounder and academic principal of the early childhood and

elementary departments of Eton School in Mexico City. She is a consultant on the project approach for several schools in Mexico and abroad. Her published works include *From My Side: Being a Child* and *Engaging Children's Minds: The Project Approach*.



For more than twenty years, **Carmen A. Castillo** has held several positions as a

teacher and principal. Currently, she is an educational consultant and trainer for schools in Mexico and abroad. She is also a presenter at national and international conferences.

  
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