

How We Are Learning: An Introduction to the Project Approach

What is the project approach?

The project approach is a method of teaching in which an in-depth study of a particular topic is conducted by a child or a group of children.

How is it different from others ways of learning?

Our children study one topic for a long time period. The topic is selected partly because they were interested in it and it is meaningful to them and their lives. The children will go into great depth and often at a level higher than many adults would expect for this. The teacher integrates content knowledge like math, reading, and science into the project.

How is a project planned?

The children make many of their own plans with the teacher's help. Plans usually include an on-site visit and/or interviews with experts. An expert is anyone who knows a great deal about the topic of study.

How will children learn?

Children use a variety of resources to find answers to their questions. These include traditional resources like books. They also conduct in-depth investigations on site visits. The children plan questions for interviews and have assigned tasks for trips or for interviewing experts. They make field notes and draw or write on site. They make plans for building structures and play environments that will help them sort out what they are learning about the topic.

Children do their own problem solving with the teacher structuring problems and assisting in finding solutions and resources. Children will redraw and rewrite as their knowledge grows. Some of the ways that they will record their learning are project books, posters, murals, artwork, graphs, charts, constructions, and journals.

How does the teacher know if children are learning?

The teacher collects children's work, observes what they do, and analyzes their work. This is called documentation. The curriculum goals of the school or center are reviewed and documentation is planned to be sure that children are learning concepts and skills specified in the goals. Often a display will be prepared that shows what students are learning.

Is this the only way these children are learning?

The project approach is one way among a variety of ways that children learn. The project integrates much of the same knowledge and skills presented in more formal ways in the classroom. Projects have the added advantage of providing an opportunity for children to apply and use what they are learning as they solve problems and share what they know. It provides opportunities for developing group skills such as working with others and challenges children to think, which supports brain development.

How can others help with projects?

Realize that children have their own questions and are learning to use you and many resources to find answers. Take their questions seriously, and listen to what they have to say. Provide space and opportunities for them to draw or photograph what they are studying. Children learn best when many senses are involved, so anything that they can touch, see up close, or hear is helpful. Things that can be borrowed for study in the classroom are valued and appreciated, especially parts of machines, tools, samples of products, and so forth. We hope you will follow up, view our documentation, and find out how children have processed what they have learned.