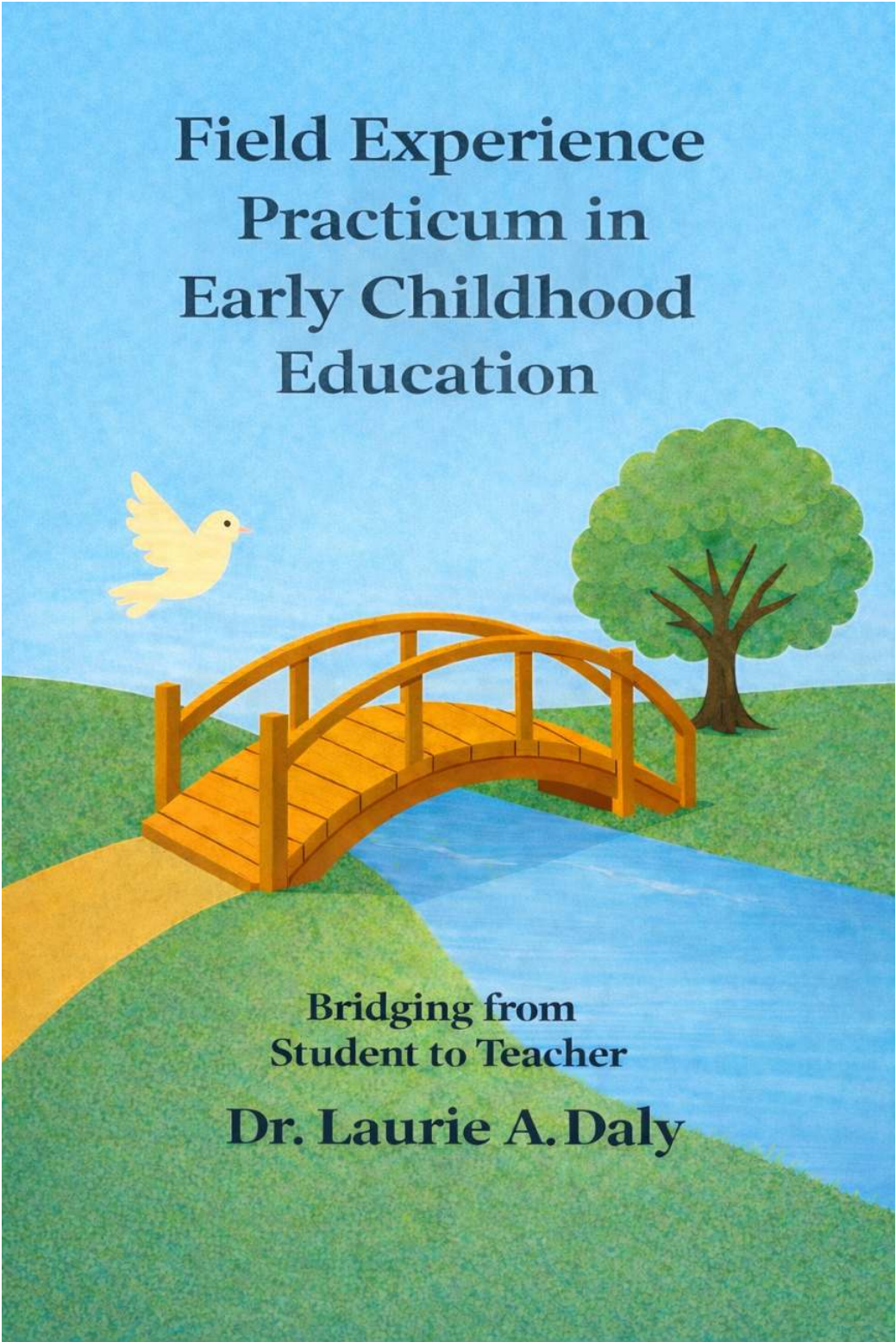


FIELD EXPERIENCE PRACTICUM IN ECE



Laura Daly
Woodland Community College



Field Experience Practicum in Early Childhood Education

**Bridging from
Student to Teacher**

Dr. Laurie A. Daly

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Introduction to Field Experience Practicum in Early Childhood Education



This textbook is grounded in a long tradition of reflective practice in early childhood education. Much of its philosophical foundation has been shaped by the work of **Lilian Katz**, whose scholarship on children's inquiry, dispositions, and the Project Approach has profoundly influenced the field. Like many educators who have learned from her writing and leadership, I have come to realize that her ideas have become so deeply integrated into my own thinking that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish where her influence ends and my own voice begins.

Katz's work has long emphasized teaching as an intellectual and ethical practice, one grounded in observation, reflection, and respect for children's curiosity. These principles have guided my work as a teacher, mentor, and teacher educator, and they are woven throughout this text. I was honored to have my first peer-reviewed journal article published in the *Journal of Early Childhood Research and Practice*, a journal long associated with Katz's scholarship and leadership in the field. That experience reinforced my commitment to inquiry-based teaching and reflective practice.

While this book reflects my own professional experiences in classrooms, practicum supervision, and teacher preparation, it is deeply indebted to Katz's scholarship and to the many educators who have extended and lived these ideas in practice. This text is offered as part of an ongoing professional conversation, one that invites new teachers to see themselves as researchers of learning, capable of noticing, questioning, and growing alongside children.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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- 1.4: Observing Children's Entrance Strategies in Play
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1.1: Chapter Introduction

1



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 1.1:** Identify and describe key expectations for practicum success, including routines, guidance practices, communication policies, and professional responsibilities.
- **SLO 1.2:** Identify observational skills by documenting children's behaviors, entrance strategies in play, and classroom routines using anecdotal notes.
- **SLO 1.3:** Identify positive interaction strategies, including respectful participation, family communication, conflict facilitation, and relationship-building practices.

Chapter 1 Short Overview

Chapter prepares new teachers and practicum students to enter early childhood classrooms with confidence, professionalism, and curiosity. It highlights essential expectations such as communication, observation, guidance, relationship-building, and reflective practice. The chapter also introduces the Project Approach, showing how curiosity and documentation support meaningful, inquiry-based learning.

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1.2: Learn the Classroom Expectations



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Stepping into the classroom for the first time, whether as a student teacher or a new educator, is a deeply meaningful experience in your professional journey. It can feel exhilarating and a little overwhelming all at the same time. During your practicum or fieldwork, you will begin to put theory into action and experience what it truly means to support young children's learning. Also, keep in mind that "each student is responsible for serious effort... As a student teacher, you will guide much of your own growth" (Machado & Botnarescue, 2011, p. 4).

The following tips are practical advice, which are designed to support you during this transition from student to teacher; they will support your practicum experience. These tips reflect the wisdom of experienced educators and the principles of the Project Approach from Helm and Katz (2001, 2011, 2016), which emphasize observation, reflection, and relationships as the foundation for meaningful teaching. This textbook and the following fifteen tips are intended to build confidence, help establish positive relationships, and encourage meaningful engagement with children, families, and colleagues.

Before beginning your practicum, meet with your site supervisor and/or mentor teacher to clarify expectations. Each classroom has unique expectations, and every early childhood program operates differently. Thus, understanding your role early on will set you up for success. Be sure to ask about:

- What are the daily routines, supervision responsibilities, and communication protocols?
- What are the policies on family interactions, confidentiality, and the use of personal devices?
- What are the procedures for guidance, conflict resolution, and documentation?

If anything is unclear, seek clarification. Your willingness to learn demonstrates professionalism and respect for your practicum experience. You may want to ask questions such as:

- What are my responsibilities during arrival, snack time, and outdoor play?
- What are the procedures for addressing safety or behavior concerns?
- Who should I speak to when I have questions?
- How do teachers collaborate and share information here?

If you are unsure how to respond to a situation, ask before acting. Communication and professionalism build trust and ensure consistency for children. Being proactive about expectations help to prevent uncomfortable misunderstandings. It also models the reflective habits that define intentional and appropriate teaching.

Observation is one of the teacher's most powerful tools for effective teaching. Katz and Chard (2000) remind us that meaningful learning begins with paying close attention to what children do and say. Spend your first few days closely observing classroom routines, transitions, children's activities and play, teachers' styles, and teachers' interactions. Observation reveals patterns, interests, and developmental progress. Also, notice how transitions are managed, how materials are arranged, and how children express themselves. Notice how the teachers communicate with the children and how the children respond. Observe how your mentor teacher manages routines, sets boundaries, and interacts with families.

Observation helps new teachers understand the classroom culture and can help identify opportunities to contribute meaningfully. Keep a small notebook or a pad of paper handy to jot down insights or questions. These notes will be useful in your planning and will help you connect with each child and other teachers more effectively.

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1.3: Observe Before You Act

Teachers can learn a great deal by carefully observing how children enter play situations. Some children confidently approach peers and join ongoing play through words or actions, while others wait at the edges, silently watching before deciding when or how to engage. A few may attempt entry through disruptive actions, such as knocking over blocks or grabbing materials, revealing uncertainty about how to join appropriately.

By noticing these entrance strategies, teachers gain valuable insight into each child's social development, temperament, and peer relationships. Observing these moments provides authentic opportunities for support. Teachers can also model positive entry strategies, coach children on ways to ask for inclusion, and help peers respond with kindness and openness. Recognizing and supporting these early social negotiations builds empathy, cooperation, and a sense of belonging within the group. This is important information and will help you support the children enter into your lessons and activities when that time comes.

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1.4: Observing Children's Entrance Strategies in Play

Children learn best in environments where they feel safe, known, and respected. Take time to learn each child's name, interests, and personality. Talk to every child. Every child deserves the individual attention of their teachers. A great place to start is by talking about the children's activities (Nilsen, 2017). Approach children at eye level, use their correct names, and listen attentively to their ideas. Build trust through gentle communication and by allowing relationships to unfold naturally over time, especially with slow to warm or cautious children. (*Note- We used to call these children "shy," but now we avoid that term because it may have negative connotations.)

Model patience, empathy, and humor. Avoid sarcasm because it can be misunderstood. Children learn from what teachers do more than what they say. Maybe you have heard the old adage that "Actions speak louder than words?" Also, this is equally important with colleagues; so, observe experienced teachers, ask questions, listen carefully, and show appreciation for their guidance.

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1.5: Build Positive Relationships

When interacting with children in play or activities, do so respectfully. Before joining a group of children at play, pause and observe. Find a natural opening, then enter respectfully by perhaps commenting on what you see (“I notice your tower is really tall!”), asking a question (“Can you tell me about your tower?”), or offering to contribute (Would you like me to hand you another block?). Avoid taking over or directing play. Instead, let the children’s ideas lead, and participate as a co-learner. Over time, this approach builds mutual respect, trust, rapport, and insight into children’s thinking.

In addition, we avoid “what questions” such as, “What are you building?” And instead, we use open ended invitational prompts such as “Can you tell me about...?”

- It **avoids objectifying** the child’s work (e.g., “What is it?”)
- It **invites meaning-making** rather than labeling
- It positions the child as the **authority on their own thinking**
- It aligns beautifully with **the Project Approach** and an **anti-evaluative** practice

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1.6: Respectfully Participate in Children's Activities

The heart of project work lies in following the children's curiosity. Observe what captures their attention. Watch for moments when children show sustained attention by returning to the same materials, asking repeated questions, or collaborating with peers. This might be puddles on the playground, a broken toy, an active ant hill, or a butterfly outside the window. These are entry points for inquiry and potential project topics. Discuss your observations with your mentor teacher or site supervisor and ask how the team tracks emerging interests. They can help guide you in turning these spontaneous interests into meaningful investigations.

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1.7: Follow the Children's Interests

Effective teachers strike a balance between structure and total freedom. Provide clear expectations and consistent boundaries while allowing children to make choices within those limits. Offering choices (e.g., “Would you like to paint at the easel or build with blocks?”) builds autonomy and reduces power struggles.

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1.8: Balance Guidance with Choices

Think about what you are going to say before you speak. Use positive language to guide behavior. Be sure to tell children what to do rather than what *not* to do. For example, say, “Please walk inside,” instead of saying, “Don’t run.” Reinforce cooperation by acknowledging effort and kindness: “You shared the markers with your friend. That was helpful.” Model calm, respectful communication, even when children are upset. This supports emotional safety and models social-emotional competence. When things are tense, it is wise to pause and take a breath before you speak. This will help you “respond” thoughtfully rather than “react” impulsively.

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1.9: Communicate Thoughtfully with Families

Remember that families are children's first teachers. Always greet them warmly and respectfully. Follow your site's expectations for communication. Some programs require that only the lead teacher speaks directly with families about progress or concerns. If you are permitted to share observations, focus on positive moments: "Jamie was very excited about our garden project today." Approach discussions with empathy and collaboration. Families appreciate honesty and kindness more than perfection. If a concern or challenge arises, discuss it privately with your mentor teacher or site supervisor, before approaching families.

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1.10: Communicate Thoughtfully with Families

At this point in your field placement, you are not expected to handle conflict independently. But disagreements do occur among the children. They should be seen as important learning opportunities and not as an interruption to learning. When conflicts arise, if allowed by the mentor teacher, help children express their feelings and listen to one another. Ask open-ended questions such as, “What happened?” or “What can we do to fix this?” Allow time for both sides to speak. Do not take sides; instead, guide the process of problem-solving collaboratively. Always remember that your goal is to build partnerships rooted in trust, empathy, and collaboration.

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1.11: When Conflicts Do Arise

Young children thrive on consistency and a sense of belonging. Clear daily routines help them feel secure and free to explore. Predictable schedules reduce anxiety and make transitions smoother. To help children anticipate what comes next, use simple cues and advance warnings such as “In five minutes, we’ll clean up and go outside.” Consistent routines also help teachers notice when a child needs extra support or reassurance. Some children require a five-minute warning for the five-minute warning. Other children may seem to be lost during transitions and need extra attention or guidance during this time.

A thoughtfully arranged classroom supports predictable routines and transitions, while also inviting exploration and independence. Materials should be accessible, labeled, and open-ended, encouraging children to make choices and engage deeply with their interests over time. A well-prepared environment communicates respect for children’s capabilities and curiosity. Keep displays simple, meaningful, and centered on children’s work rather than decorations. Together, well- thought-out routines and a responsive environment create the foundation for trust, engagement, and joyful learning.

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1.12: Stay Professional and Prepared

Arrive on time, dress appropriately, and maintain confidentiality. Bring a notebook, pens, and any required forms or materials. Avoid distractions such as cell phones, tablets, or unrelated conversations during instructional time. Demonstrate initiative by offering to prepare materials, assist with setup, or support small-group work. Always clean up your projects when they are completed and put things back where you found them. Professional reliability builds confidence and earns respect from colleagues.

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1.13: Stay Professional and Prepared

Set aside time each day, even five minutes, to reflect on what went well and what could be improved. Ask yourself: *What challenged me today? What questions do I have?* Reflection helps transform experience into professional growth by deepening self-awareness and intentionality.

As stated earlier, many teachers keep a simple journal or note pad to record observations, insights, and personal goals for improvement. Journals and notes become valuable tools for documenting learning moments, new understandings of child development, and strategies for supporting children more effectively. Over time, these reflections form a record of professional growth and confidence.

Discuss your reflections with your mentor teacher or peers. Sharing insights encourages dialogue, builds perspective, and helps you recognize your developing strengths as well as patterns in children's learning. Reflection not only strengthens teaching practice, but it also turns daily experiences into meaningful learning opportunities.

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1.14: Reflect Every Day

Growth in teaching happens through small moments, such as when a cautious child invites you into play, or when you successfully guide a conflict, or when a parent thanks you for your kindness. Take time to notice and celebrate these events. Teaching is a journey of continual learning, and each interaction contributes to your confidence and competence.

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1.15: Take Care of Yourself

Working with young children is deeply rewarding, but it can also be very demanding emotionally. Teaching young children requires patience, energy, and compassion. Practicum students often focus so much on meeting expectations that they forget to take care of their own needs. Self-care is not optional because it sustains your ability to show up fully for others. Rest when you can and seek support from mentors. Practicing self-care helps you stay calm, patient, and fully present with children and families.

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1.16: Take Care of Yourself

Self-care can look different for everyone, but it often includes:

- Taking short breaks when you feel overwhelmed
- Eating well and staying hydrated during long days
- Talking with mentors or classmates about challenges
- Getting enough rest and time outdoors
- Using brief grounding exercises, such as the 5-4-3-2-1 sensory method (Do this to reconnect with the present moment)

Emotional regulation is a cornerstone of self-care for helping professionals. Practical grounding strategies, such as the **5-4-3-2-1 sensory method**, guides individuals to regulate by reconnecting with the present through their senses by naming five things they can see, four things they can touch, three things they can hear, two things they can smell, and one thing they can taste. This technique helps calm the nervous system, reduce hypervigilance, and restore a sense of safety after moments of stress or emotional activation. For early childhood educators, such tools can help maintain emotional presence and model healthy regulation.

When you take care of yourself, you model healthy emotional regulation for children and build resilience for your future teaching career. Remember, caring for yourself **is** part of caring for others. So, relax and keep in mind that every teacher continues learning throughout their career. As Katz and Chard (2000) remind us, teachers grow as researchers of learning, discovering just as much about themselves as about their students.

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1.17: Checklist for Orientation with Your Mentor Teacher

Your first few days at your practicum or field site are essential for building trust, understanding expectations, and setting yourself up for success. Use this checklist to guide your orientation conversation with your mentor teacher or site supervisor. Bring a notebook or journal and pen to record their responses.

Professional Expectations

- ☐ What are the site's expectations for dress code and punctuality?
- ☐ What is the procedure for signing in and out each day?
- ☐ How should I communicate absences or schedule changes?
- ☐ What is the site's confidentiality policy regarding children and families?

Daily Routines

- ☐ What are my responsibilities during arrival, snack/mealtime, and outdoor play?
- ☐ How are transitions (e.g., clean-up, nap time) handled?
- ☐ Where should I keep my personal belongings and materials?
- ☐ What is the procedure for restroom breaks or leaving the classroom briefly?

Child Guidance and Safety

- ☐ How does the teaching team handle behavior guidance or conflict resolution?
- ☐ What should I do if a child gets hurt or upset?
- ☐ Are there specific emergency or safety procedures I should know (fire, earthquake, etc.)?
- ☐ Who should I notify if a safety or supervision concern arises?

Family Communication

- ☐ What are the expectations for interacting with parents and guardians?
- ☐ Am I allowed to share children's progress or daily notes, or should that be handled by the lead teacher?
- ☐ How does the program communicate with families (e.g., newsletters, documentation panels, digital apps)?

Curriculum and Documentation

- ☐ How does the classroom plan and document learning experiences?
- ☐ Are there ongoing projects or themes I will contribute to?
- ☐ How do teachers record observations or assessments?
- ☐ May I take photos or notes for my coursework (with permission)?

Professional Growth

- ☐ What is the best way to ask for feedback or schedule check-ins?
- ☐ Are there weekly meetings, reflections, or planning sessions I can attend?
- ☐ How can I best support the teaching team and contribute meaningfully?

After you have completed your orientation and have begun to feel comfortable with the routines and expectations of your practicum site, the next step is learning how to engage children in meaningful inquiry. The following section introduces the concept of the *Project Approach*, which is a teaching approach that emerges from the children's interests and values curiosity, collaboration, and creativity as essential tools for learning.

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1.18: Teacher's Guide to Getting Started with the Project Approach

For many early childhood educators, the Project Approach represents both a philosophy and a practice that transforms learning. New teachers often find themselves inspired by the idea of children leading investigations yet uncertain about where to begin. The following guidance offers a foundation for getting started, providing practical and reflective steps to help teachers enter project work with confidence and curiosity.

Start with Wonder

The essence of project work begins with curiosity, both the teacher's and the children's. Katz and Chard (2000) describe the Project Approach as a framework for building on children's natural desire to investigate the world around them. Teachers can model curiosity by expressing genuine interest and wonder: "I wonder how this bridge stays up," or "I notice the shadow changes when we move the light." When teachers demonstrate their own fascination, they validate children's ideas and invite shared discovery.

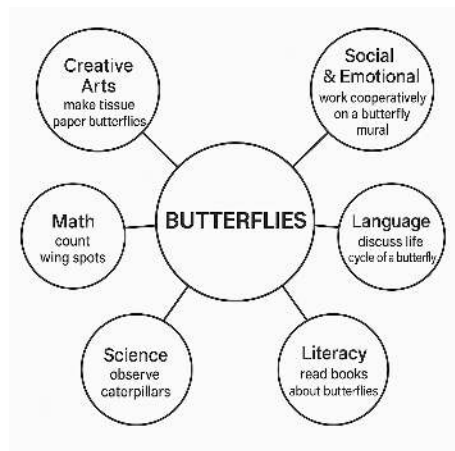
Begin Small and Familiar

New teachers may wish to start with short, manageable projects that last a week or two and focus on topics grounded in children's everyday experiences. Start with the familiar and move out from there. Beginning with something children already know and love, such as a favorite song, a cherished story, or a shared classroom routine, can provide a sense of comfort and connection that invites deeper inquiry. Projects about puddles, pets, playgrounds, or the local mail system can yield rich exploration without becoming overwhelming. As comfort grows, larger investigations can follow, expanding the scope and duration of project work.

Plan with Intention, but Stay Flexible

Planning is essential to successful project work, but plans must remain responsive to children's interests. Teachers create anticipatory webs to brainstorm ideas, predict possible directions, and connect potential standards or learning goals. Yet, as Katz and Chard (2000) remind us, no project unfolds exactly as expected. When children's questions take the project in a new direction, flexible teachers follow the inquiry rather than the plan. This balance between structure and spontaneity allows children's authentic curiosity to lead the way.

Figure 1.1 Sample Anticipatory Web



The Anticipatory Web image was created by the author using AI through ChatGPT

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1.19: Create Time and Space for Inquiry

Inquiry requires uninterrupted time. Teachers can support deeper engagement by designing schedules that allow for long blocks of exploration rather than fragmented periods. Materials should be open-ended and inviting. Clipboards, magnifiers (Keep out of the sun), drawing tools, and natural objects encourage documentation and experimentation. A classroom environment that values exploration sends a clear message that children's ideas are worth investigating.

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1.20: Document the Journey

Documentation is one of the most powerful tools of the Project Approach. Helm and Katz (2011) describe it as both mirror and map. It reflects children's thinking and guides teachers' next steps. Keeping notes, photos, and children's quotes not only captures learning as it happens but also helps teachers assess growth, plan new experiences, and share progress with families. Even brief records, such as a quote on a sticky note or a photo with a caption, can make learning visible. We call these anecdotal records.

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1.21: Reflect and Celebrate

Reflection is the thread that ties project work together. Children revisit earlier drawings, webs, or notes and consider how their ideas have changed. Teachers reflect on the learning process, asking what strategies engaged children most and what could be improved next time. Culminating events, such as class exhibits, books, or performances, celebrate effort, curiosity, and collaboration. As Helm and Katz (2011) note, these shared moments honor the process of learning rather than just the product.

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1.22: Growing as a Professional

Engaging in project work transforms teachers as much as it transforms children. New teachers become researchers of learning, discovering how children think, question, and represent their ideas. Over time, this mindset nurtures confidence, creativity, and professional joy. The Project Approach reminds educators that teaching is not about giving information, but about guiding discovery. It is a journey that benefits everyone involved.

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1.23: The Project Approach

As new teachers settle into the rhythm of classroom life, the next step is to understand the deeper philosophy behind children's inquiry. Chapter 1 introduces the foundations of *The Project Approach*—a teaching framework that combines curiosity, observation, and collaboration to make learning meaningful. This chapter explores how projects differ from traditional themes, how teachers and children become partners in discovery, and how inquiry-based learning supports all areas of development. With the groundwork of classroom readiness in place, we now turn to the heart of this textbook: learning how to guide children's investigations with purpose and joy.

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1.24: Chapter Summary

This chapter provides practical guidance for practicum students as they step into early childhood classrooms. It highlights essential skills such as observation, communication, relationship-building, and reflective practice. By understanding classroom expectations and embracing curiosity, new teachers learn how to support young children's learning with confidence and professionalism.

Chapter 1 Reflection Prompt

Consider your own entry into the early childhood classroom. What feelings—excitement, uncertainty, curiosity—do you notice as you imagine stepping into this role? Reflect on how observation, communication, and relationship-building shape your identity as a new educator. Finally, think about one professional habit you want to strengthen during your practicum and why it matters for your work with young children and families.

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1.25: Chapter Vocabulary

Observation: The intentional practice of watching and listening to children to understand their development, interests, and learning processes.

Entrance Strategies: The different ways children attempt to join play with peers, which offer insight into social development and interaction skills

Reflective Practice: The process of thinking critically about one's actions, decisions, and experiences to improve future teaching.

Guidance: Supportive and developmentally appropriate strategies used to help children learn self-regulation, problem-solving, and positive behavior. Also described as reminding the children what the classroom rules are.

Inquiry: An approach to learning based on curiosity, questioning, exploration, and investigation—central to the Project Approach.

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1.26: Extra Internet Resource Links



NAEYC- For Families and Educators: <https://www.naeyc.org>

Provides high-quality articles on classroom practice, guidance, family communication, and professionalism.

WestEd: Center for Child & Family Studies: <https://www.wested.org>

Offers videos, training resources, and research on infant/toddler caregiving, PITC principles, and reflective teaching.

Illinois Early Learning Project- Tips & Resources: <https://illinoisearlylearning.org>

Clear, practical guidance for early childhood teachers, including play support, observation strategies, and project-based learning examples.

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1.27: Chapter References



Helm, J. H., & Katz, L. G. (2001). *Young investigators: The project approach in the early years*. Teachers College Press.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: The Wonder of Inquiry- Why Projects Matter

- [2.1: Chapter Introduction](#)
- [2.2: Curiosity as the Heart of Learning](#)
- [2.3: Academic Goals vs. Intellectual Goals](#)
- [2.4: Habits of Mind- Thinking Like a Researcher](#)
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2.1: Chapter Introduction

2



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 2.1:** Distinguish between academic and intellectual goals in early childhood education and explain why intellectual dispositions matter for long-term learning.
- **SLO 2.2:** Identify and describe key Habits of Mind and analyze how these dispositions support inquiry-based learning in young children.
- **SLO 2.3:** Summarize the core principles of the Project Approach and explain how curiosity, documentation, and child-led investigation shape meaningful learning experiences.

Chapter 2 Short Overview ✂

This chapter introduces the importance of curiosity and inquiry as foundations for children's learning. It explains the difference between academic and intellectual goals and highlights the role of habits of mind in nurturing deep thinking. The chapter also connects the Project Approach to Reggio Emilia principles, showing how inquiry-driven learning environments support children's competence and creativity.

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2.2: Curiosity as the Heart of Learning



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Children are born with a natural sense of wonder. From the moment they can reach, point, or ask “why?” They are researchers of their world. And this innate curiosity is the foundation of all learning. In the early years, when children explore with their senses, manipulate materials, and experiment with ideas, they are doing the work of scientists, artists, and thinkers.

As educators, it is our role to nurture that curiosity, not to rush it. When we provide children with opportunities to question, explore, and test their ideas, we are honoring the most authentic form of learning, one that grows from genuine interest. The Project Approach celebrates learning driven by children’s questions and investigations.

Curiosity is a disposition to inquire, to seek explanations, and to wonder, not just to know, but to understand (Katz 1993).

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2.3: Academic Goals vs. Intellectual Goals

In early childhood education, it is important to understand the difference between **academic** and **intellectual** goals.

Academic goals focus on discrete bits of knowledge, learning letters, numbers, shapes, or colors. These are important building blocks, but they often rely on memorization and teacher direction.

Intellectual goals, on the other hand, develop children's habits of mind, the ways they think, question, and make sense of their world. When teachers support intellectual development, they help children become thinkers, not just learners of facts.

Academic goals focus on “**what**” children **know** or **can do**, while **intellectual goals** emphasize “**how**” they **think** and **approach learning**.

Examples of academic goals include helping children:

- **Recognize and name** basic colors, shapes, numbers, and letters
- **Count objects** accurately up to 10 (or higher, depending on developmental level)
- **Identify and write** their own name
- **Follow multi-step directions** (e.g., “Get your mat, find a spot, and sit down”)
- **Retell a simple story** in correct sequence (beginning, middle, end)
- **Sort and classify** objects by color, size, or shape
- **Identify basic sight words** or letter-sound relationships
- **Recognize numerals** and connect them to quantities

Examples of intellectual goals include helping children:

- Make sense of their experiences
- Theorize, analyze, and test their ideas
- Predict outcomes and check results
- Solve problems and persist in finding solutions
- Be aware of the feelings and perspectives of others

Academic goals are important and build knowledge, but intellectual goals cultivate dispositions and lifelong tendencies to approach learning with curiosity, care, and critical thinking.

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2.4: Habits of Mind- Thinking Like a Researcher

Academic goals address small units of knowledge and skills, while intellectual goals address dispositions, which are habits of mind that include a variety of tendencies to interpret experience (Helm & Katz, 2011). Projects invite children to become active investigators. Whether they are exploring how snails move, how bridges stay up, or where rain goes after a storm, young children learn best when they are encouraged to think, question, and wonder.

Some habits of mind that relate to intellectual goals include the disposition to Predict and to check predictions

- Predict and check predictions
- Make sense of experience
- Theorize, analyze, hypothesize and synthesize
- Find things out
- Strive for accuracy
- Be empirical (base knowledge on observation)
- Grasp the consequences of actions
- Persist in seeking solutions to problems
- Speculate about cause-effect relationships
- Predict others' wishes and feelings

These dispositions are intellectual rather than academic in focus. Intellectual dispositions deserve explicit attention in curriculum planning and teaching methods so they can be manifested, appreciated, and thereby further strengthened and developed. Unless the curriculum provides contexts in which the intellectual dispositions can be strengthened by being used and applied meaningfully, they may be weakened or even lost. Unfortunately, what happens in some classrooms promotes neither academic nor intellectual goals. Some children spend much time on relatively mindless activities like cutting and pasting precut Valentine hearts and in-group discussions from which many of the participants withdraw psychologically within minutes. These involve limited academic skills and do not provide for the development of intellectual dispositions. These activities do not challenge children and are often justified based on their being “fun” (Helm & Katz, 2011).

The **Habits of Mind** framework as defined by Costa & Kallick (2000), identifies 16 key dispositions that promote thoughtful, resilient, and ethical practice. These are not only essential for children's learning, but also for teachers' professional growth. By cultivating the following habits, we strengthen the ability to respond constructively to challenges, maintain well-being, and enjoy lifelong learning.

16 Habits of Mind

1. **Persisting:** Sticking with a task through completion, staying focused, and not giving up when faced with challenges.
2. **Managing Impulsivity:** Taking time to think before acting, remaining calm, and being thoughtful and deliberate.
3. **Listening with Empathy:** Devoting mental energy to another person's thoughts and feelings and making an effort to perceive another's point of view.
4. **Thinking Flexibly:** Being able to change perspectives, generate alternatives, and consider different options.
5. **Metacognition (Thinking about your thinking):** Being aware of one's own thoughts, strategies, feelings, and their effects on others.
6. **Striving for Accuracy:** Doing one's best, setting high standards, and checking for ways to improve.
7. **Questioning and Problem Posing:** Having a questioning attitude, knowing what data are needed, and finding problems to solve.
8. **Applying Past Knowledge:** Using what you learn and transferring knowledge to new situations.
9. **Communicating Clearly:** Striving for accurate communication in both written and oral form; avoiding generalizations, distortions, and exaggerations.
10. **Gathering Data with All Senses:** Using all five senses to observe and learn: taste, touch, smell, hearing, and sight.

11. **Creating and Innovating:** Generating new and novel ideas; demonstrating fluency and originality.
12. **Responding with Wonderment and Awe:** Finding the world awesome, mysterious, and intriguing with phenomena and beauty.
13. **Taking Responsible Risks:** Being adventurous and trying new things while staying safe.
14. **Finding Humor:** Seeing the whimsical, incongruous, and unexpected; being able to laugh at oneself.
15. **Thinking Interdependently:** Being able to work and learn from others in reciprocal situations.
16. **Remaining Open to Continuous Learning:** Having humility and pride when admitting we don't know; resisting complacency.

Figure 2.1 Habits of Mind



The Habits of Mind image was created by AI through ChatGPT

Teachers can strengthen these habits of mind by:

- Listening carefully to children's questions
- Encouraging them to test ideas instead of giving answers
- Providing materials for exploration
- Valuing mistakes as part of learning

When curiosity and critical thinking are honored, children begin to see themselves as capable problem-solvers and confident thinkers, who are filled with wonder and competence that lasts a lifetime.

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2.5: The Project Approach and the Reggio Emilia Connection

The Project Approach and the Reggio Emilia philosophy share a belief in children's competence, curiosity, and creativity. Both emphasize:

- The image of the child as competent and curious
- Learning as a collaborative process between teachers and children
- The role of documentation to make learning visible
- The role of the environment as a “third teacher”

While the Reggio Emilia approach emerged in Italy and focuses on the culture of community and creativity, the Project Approach (Katz & Chard, 1989) offers a structured way to plan in-depth investigations. These approaches help educators design classrooms where learning is meaningful, reflective, engaging, and joyful.

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2.6: Chapter Summary

Children learn best when their natural curiosity is nurtured through hands-on exploration and meaningful investigation. This chapter outlines how intellectual goals and habits of mind help children become thinkers, problem-solvers, and researchers of their own experiences. By combining the Project Approach with thoughtful teaching practices, educators create classrooms filled with wonder, collaboration, and purposeful learning.

Chapter 2 Reflection Prompts

When have you seen curiosity drive a child's learning? How can you balance structured routines with open-ended inquiry? Which *Habits of Mind* do you most want to model for children in your classroom?

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2.7: Chapter Vocabulary

Intellectual Dispositions: Tendencies or habits of mind that guide how children think, question, problem-solve, and interpret experiences.

Inquiry-Based Learning: An approach in which children investigate questions, ideas, or phenomena through exploration, experimentation, and discussion.

Habits of Mind: A set of 16 dispositions identified by Costa & Kallick that promote thoughtful, flexible, and resilient thinking.

Project Approach: A teaching framework that supports in-depth investigations of topics based on children's interests, questions, and observations.

Empirical Thinking: Using evidence from observation and experience to form conclusions or test ideas.

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2.8: Extra Internet Resource Links



Illinois Early Learning Project: <https://illinoiseearlylearning.org>

Excellent articles, videos, and teacher resources on inquiry, project work, and classroom investigations.

Project Approach Official Site (Judy Harris Helm): <https://projectapproach.org>

Provides examples of projects, teacher guides, documentation strategies, and articles directly tied to Helm & Katz's work.

Habits of Mind Institute: <https://www.habitsofmindinstitute.org>

Resources, explanations, and learning tools related to the 16 Habits of Mind for educators of all ages.

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2.9: Chapter References



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: From Themes to Projects- What's the Difference?

- 3.1: Chapter Introduction
- 3.2: Theme/Unit Vs. Project Approach
- 3.3: The Three Phases of the Project Approach
- 3.4: The Inquiry Process in Practice
- 3.5: Hands-On Exploration
- 3.6: Reflection
- 3.7: Content and Inquiry Skills
- 3.8: The Teacher's Role in Inquiry
- 3.9: Analyzing Documentation
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3.1: Chapter Introduction

3



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 3.1:** Distinguish between teacher-directed themes and child-initiated project work, identifying key elements of inquiry-based learning.
- **SLO 3.2:** Analyze how children's questions, prior knowledge, and shared experiences shape the development of a project topic.
- **SLO 3.3:** Identify the teacher's role in facilitating inquiry, including documentation, reflection, and scaffolding children's investigations.

Chapter 3 Short Overview

This chapter explains the distinction between traditional theme-based learning and the Project Approach, emphasizing how child-initiated inquiry leads to deeper engagement and understanding. Students explore how projects unfold over three phases, beginning with children's questions and developing through investigation, documentation, and reflection. Research and classroom examples demonstrate how inquiry-based learning strengthens both academic and intellectual development.

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3.2: Theme/Unit Vs. Project Approach



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Many early childhood classrooms use themes or learning centers to organize experiences and learning. These are valuable teaching methods that help children make connections across subjects. However, themes differ from project work in important ways. For example, a “Transportation” theme might include books about cars and trucks, matching puzzles, and block play with toy vehicles. Themes are valuable because they help connect experiences across different areas of the curriculum.

Whereas the Project Approach (Katz & Chard, 1989), takes learning a step further by centering it on the children’s own *questions and emerges from the children’s interests*. A theme is usually teacher-initiated, but a project invites children to take initiative, make decisions, and share responsibility for what they discover. Projects are extended investigations that begin with children’s own questions. While a theme may be teacher-initiated, in a project, children act as researchers, exploring real questions that matter to them.

Projects differ from themes in several ways:

- **Purpose:** Projects are built around inquiry, finding answers to questions children ask.
- **Process:** Teachers guide but do not direct every step. Children have a voice in what is explored.
- **Depth:** Projects often last weeks and involve fieldwork, experts, and revisiting ideas.
- **Ownership:** Children’s curiosity and initiative drive the investigation forward.

Theme/Unit Vs. Project Approach			
Aspect	Theme/Unit		Project Approach
Focus	Teacher-selected topic		Child-initiated investigation
Goal	Exposure to content		Inquiry and discovery
Teacher’s Role	Directs activities		Guides exploration
Duration	Short-term		Ongoing, evolving
Learning Style	Structured and predictable		Open-ended and emergent

A balanced classroom includes time for themes, routines, centers, and projects. It is like the rhythm of breathing in and out. Children need time to explore deeply and time to rest and absorb what they’ve learned. Projects support both academic and intellectual growth, which give children opportunities to use emerging literacy and numeracy skills while also learning how to think, reason, and reflect.

Research supports this balance. **Schweinhart (1997)** found that child-initiated learning activities contribute to children’s short- and long-term gains in academic and social development. Similarly, **Marcon (1992, 1995)** found that preschoolers engaged in child-initiated projects showed stronger mastery of reading, language, and math skills by fourth grade.

Projects often grow from a child’s simple question or observation, while themes typically start with a teacher-chosen topic. Both can create meaningful learning experiences, but they differ in who drives the learning and how deeply children engage with ideas. In a theme, the teacher plans activities that connect to a broad topic. In a project, children investigate a focused question that emerges from their curiosity, observations, or play. The following comparison illustrates how a common classroom theme, such as *Pets*, can evolve into an inquiry-based project like *How Dogs Communicate*, where children take greater ownership of the learning process.

Sample Theme/Unit Vs. Project Approach

	Theme Approach: “Pets”	Project Approach: “How Dogs Communicate”
Focus	A general topic chosen by the teacher. Children read books, make crafts, and sing songs about different pets.	A specific investigation sparked by children’s curiosity — “Why does my dog bark when the doorbell rings?”
Teacher’s Role	Plans activities in advance and introduces materials related to pets.	Observes children’s questions, helps them form testable ideas (“What sounds do dogs make and why?”), and guides research.
Children’s Role	Participate in teacher-led lessons and centers (drawing pets, sorting toy animals, reading “Clifford” books).	Collect data (record dog sounds, interview pet owners, notice body language), draw conclusions, and share findings.
Learning Outcomes	Vocabulary and recognition of different animals, classification skills.	Observation, inquiry, data collection, early literacy, and empathy through understanding animal communication.
Duration	1 week	3–4 weeks or longer, revisiting ideas, adding new questions, and expanding knowledge.

A *theme* connects experiences around a topic, while a *project* extends learning into genuine inquiry. In project work, children become researchers, applying literacy, math, and social skills to solve meaningful questions that come from their world.

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3.3: The Three Phases of the Project Approach

Phase 1: Beginning the Project

Children and teachers identify a topic of genuine interest. The class brainstorms questions such as “What do we already know?” and “What do we want to find out?” This sparks motivation and sets the direction for investigation.

Phase 2: Developing the Project

Children explore their questions through hands-on investigation, through observing, measuring, interviewing, collecting, or creating representations of what they discover. Teachers provide materials, field experiences, and gentle scaffolding to deepen inquiry.

Phase 3: Concluding the Project

Children and teachers reflect together. They share what they’ve learned through documentation, including photos, drawings, work samples, writing, displays, or presentations. This phase celebrates both the process and the joy of discovery, connecting children’s learning to families and the larger community (Katz & Chard, 1989).

Three Phases of the Project Approach: Roles and Decision-Making

Phase	Child’s Role	Teacher’s Role	Decision-Making Focus
1. Beginning the Project	Express curiosity, share prior knowledge, and pose questions	Observe interests, guide discussions, help define the topic, guide children’s brainstorming	Identify interests and questions. Children choose what to study
2. Developing the Project	Investigate, test ideas, and collaborate with peers	Provide materials, tools, fieldtrips, connect with experts, and scaffold deeper inquiry	Investigate, collect data, explore. Children decide how to explore and represent learning
3. Concluding the Project	Reflect, create documentation, and present findings	Support reflection, documentation, and help children represent findings. Organize sharing with families, celebrate progress	Reflect, document, and share learning. Children decide what to share and how

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3.4: The Inquiry Process in Practice

The inquiry process can be integrated into any area of the curriculum, science, art, storytelling, or social studies, because inquiry is about “**how**” children learn, not just “**what**” they learn. Inquiry begins when children notice something, wonder about it, and decide to find out more.

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3.5: Hands-On Exploration

Each learning experience begins with open-ended exploration, where teachers invite children to engage with materials, ideas, or phenomena. For example, children might explore shadows, patterns, how buildings stand tall, or why friends take turns. Teachers experience inquiry firsthand when they explore alongside children, modeling curiosity, questioning, and reflecting.

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3.6: Reflection

Inquiry thrives on reflection. After exploration, children and teachers pause to talk about what they observed, what surprised them, and what new questions have emerged. Reflection helps learners connect experiences, make meaning, and plan the next steps in their investigation.

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3.7: Content and Inquiry Skills

Inquiry learning strengthens both content knowledge and thinking skills.

Children practice:

- Observing closely
- Asking thoughtful questions
- Making predictions
- Collecting and analyzing information
- Representing their ideas through drawing, building, writing, or conversation

These habits of inquiry help children transfer learning across subjects and situations.

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3.8: The Teacher's Role in Inquiry

Teachers are facilitators of curiosity. They create the conditions for inquiry by:

- Asking open-ended questions
- Encouraging children to share theories
- Guiding observations and documentation
- Providing new and interesting materials
- Supporting reflection and next steps

When teachers model curiosity, they show children that learning is an active, shared process.

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3.9: Analyzing Documentation

Documentation such as notes, photos, children's drawings, quotes, or videos, all reveal how inquiry unfolds over time. By reviewing documentation, teachers identify patterns in children's thinking and discover opportunities to deepen or extend learning. Reflection on documentation connects theory to practice and sharpens teachers' understanding of inquiry as a cycle of discovery.

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3.10: Learning Conversations

Whole-group and small-group discussions help children make their thinking visible. Through dialogue, they share ideas, listen to others' perspectives, and refine their understanding. These “learning talks” are central to building community and developing communication skills.

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3.11: Mentoring and Collaboration

Inquiry grows through reflection and collaboration. Mentoring sessions and guided discussions allow teachers to share successes, analyze challenges, and refine their approach to child-led inquiry. By learning together, educators strengthen both their practice and their professional community.

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3.12: Choosing a Project Topic

Successful projects are:

1. Hands-on and concrete
2. Connected to children's prior experiences
3. Local and revisitable
4. Manageable with minimal adult assistance
5. Representable through children's natural expressive abilities
6. Supported by families and administrators
7. Culturally meaningful to the group

Teachers can spark project ideas by listening carefully to children's conversations, observing their play, or noticing a "catalytic event" in a shared moment or experience that captures curiosity. A catalytic event is an event that sparks interest and action.

At the heart of the Project Approach is a balance between **child initiative and teacher guidance**. Children take the lead in choosing topics, posing questions, and exploring ideas, while teachers act as facilitators. The goal is to provide resources, ask open-ended questions, and document the learning process. Decision-making is shared: children decide what to explore and how to represent their discoveries, and teachers help them connect experiences to broader developmental goals.

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3.13: Why Child-Initiated Projects Matter

Teachers who are comfortable with the Project Approach often weave its principles into other learning experiences. Some thematic units may “look” like projects, but unless they include genuine child initiation, decision-making, and engagement, they do not offer the same depth of learning. In project work, children take ownership of inquiry and ask questions, make choices, and reflect on their discoveries, which strengthens their confidence and motivation to learn.

In today’s early learning environments, many children spend long hours in group care settings where teacher-directed lessons dominate the day. Project work provides a vital counterbalance by inviting children to take initiative and responsibility for their own learning. As stated earlier, studies have shown that when children engage in self-directed exploration, they experience both short- and long-term advantages (**Schweinhart, 1997**).

Experienced teachers often blend project features into other types of learning. However, for a study to be a true project, it must include genuine child initiation, decision-making, and sustained engagement. Without these, learning remains teacher-directed and misses the benefits of inquiry.

Research demonstrates those benefits clearly:

- Schweinhart (1997) found that child-initiated learning activities correlate with stronger academic and social outcomes
- Marcon (1992, 1995) showed that preschoolers in programs emphasizing self-directed activity achieved higher mastery of reading, language, and math and later earned higher overall grade point averages
- Parental involvement naturally increases when children share authentic investigations; family participation reinforces curiosity and confidence

When children are trusted to make decisions about their learning, they develop self-regulation, motivation, and joy in discovery, which helps to develop skills that extend far beyond early childhood.

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3.14: Building Shared and Common Experiences

Before children begin an investigation, it's helpful for everyone to share a common foundation of experience. These shared moments help all children connect to the project topic, build vocabulary, and develop curiosity together.

Teachers can create shared experiences by:

- Reading stories or picture books related to the topic
- Bringing in real objects or artifacts to explore
- Inviting children to share what they already know or have seen
- Providing open-ended materials for play and discovery
- Watching short videos or slideshows together
- Introducing props, costumes, or role-play activities
- Offering art experiences that connect to the topic
- Playing games that encourage observation and discussion

These shared experiences create a common knowledge base and prepare children to ask deeper questions, think collaboratively as a community of learners, and build a shared knowledge base so that every child has something meaningful to contribute when the investigation begins.

Now that you've explored how projects differ from themes, the next step is to understand *how a project unfolds in real time*. Chapter 4 introduces the three phases of the Project Approach—beginning, developing, and concluding—offering practical examples for each stage. You'll see how teachers and children move from curiosity to investigation and, finally, to sharing and celebration of their discoveries.

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3.15: Chapter Summary

Themes can provide valuable learning experiences, but projects invite children to take ownership of their learning by investigating authentic questions. Through the three phases of the Project Approach—beginning, developing, and concluding—children gain skills in observation, inquiry, collaboration, and representation. This chapter shows how inquiry transforms the classroom into a community of thinkers where curiosity drives meaningful learning.

Reflection Prompts

Think of a time you saw a child show curiosity or ask an unexpected question. How might that moment have been used to spark a project? How does your role as a teacher change when learning is child-initiated rather than teacher-directed? Which phase of the Project Approach do you feel most confident about, and which phase feels most challenging? Why? How can shared experiences help ensure that all children—regardless of background knowledge—can participate meaningfully in a project?

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3.16: Chapter Vocabulary

Inquiry: A learning process driven by children's questions, observations, and desire to understand their world.

Child-Initiated Learning: Activities or investigations that originate from children's interests, ideas, and questions rather than from teacher-selected topics.

Documentation: Notes, photos, drawings, and quotes that make learning visible and guide reflection.

Shared Experiences: Common activities that help build background knowledge and prepare children to engage in a project.

Investigation: A process in which children collect information, test ideas, and make sense of findings during project work.

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3.17: Extra Internet Resource Links



Project Approach Official Site: <https://projectapproach.org>

Resources, examples, planning tools, and videos developed by Katz, Chard, and practitioners.

Reggio Children: <https://www.reggiochildren.it>

Offers insight into documentation, the role of the environment, and the image of the child.

HighScope Early Learning Research: <https://highscope.org>

Research summaries—including Schweinhart’s work—on child-initiated learning and long-term outcomes.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Phase I- Beginning the Project- From Curiosity to Investigation

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- [4.2: Developmental Readiness for Inquiry](#)
- [4.3: The Structure of Project Work](#)
- [4.4: Phase I- Beginning the Project](#)
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4.1: Chapter Introduction

4



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 4.1:** Identify and explain the key components of Phase I of the Project Approach, including selecting topics, building shared experiences, and generating inquiry questions.
- **SLO 4.2:** Analyze children's developmental readiness for inquiry and describe how early competencies support project-based learning.
- **SLO 4.3:** Demonstrate the ability to create webs, guiding questions, and focusing activities that support the beginning of a project.

Chapter 4 Short Overview ✂

This chapter introduces Phase I of the Project Approach, emphasizing how teachers identify children's interests, build shared experiences, and guide the formation of meaningful questions. It explores the developmental abilities that make young children ready for inquiry, including representation, classification, and early reasoning skills. Through examples and practical strategies, students learn how curiosity becomes the foundation for sustained investigation.

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4.2: Developmental Readiness for Inquiry



Let's Take a Deeper Look

The early years are a time of remarkable intellectual growth. Between ages two and six, children's thinking becomes increasingly sophisticated as they explore the world through play, talk, and imagination. Berk (1991) identifies several emerging competencies during this period:

- The use of representation through language, make-believe play, drawings, and simple maps or models
- The ability to take the perspective of others in familiar situations
- Distinguishing animate from inanimate objects
- Categorizing and classifying items by function or type
- Organizing objects hierarchically based on meaningful relationships

These abilities continue developing throughout kindergarten and first grade. In earlier decades, teachers were discouraged from introducing literacy or paper-and-pencil tasks in preschool. Today, however, early childhood educators are encouraged to provide literacy-rich environments that weave together reading, writing, art, and play (Whitmore & Goodman, 1995).

Projects naturally support these goals. Young children are highly motivated to share what they know. They might build structures, create art, or write about their discoveries—all authentic reasons to use language and symbols (Katz, 2016). Through projects, children gain a purpose for representing their ideas, deepening both understanding and expression.

Projects also nurture problem-solving, scientific thinking, and mathematical thinking. Children classify, sort, compare, and experiment with materials. They use mathematical reasoning as they measure, count, or record findings, and they develop inquiry habits as they observe, test, and revise their ideas.

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4.3: The Structure of Project Work

Katz and Chard (1989) describe the Project Approach as a structured, yet flexible framework composed of three phases:

1. **Phase I – Beginning the Project:** Discovering an idea of interest, generating questions, and identifying what children already know.
2. **Phase II – Developing the Project:** Gathering data through observation, fieldwork, interviews, and hands-on investigation.
3. **Phase III – Concluding the Project:** Summarizing and representing findings, reflecting on learning, and sharing outcomes with families.

This structure provides guidance without prescribing every detail. The teacher's challenge is to support children's curiosity without taking over their learning. Knowing when to step back, and when to gently scaffold, is one of the most essential skills in early childhood teaching.

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4.4: Phase I- Beginning the Project

Focus: Selecting a topic, building background knowledge, generating questions, and exploring ideas.

Project work begins when teachers notice genuine curiosity. This might be a question during play, an observation on the playground, or a conversation at snack time. During this phase, children and teachers identify a topic that sparks shared interest. Together they discuss what they already know, what they wonder about, and what they hope to find out.

Teachers guide this brainstorming by creating webs of children's ideas, recording their words, and helping them phrase questions for investigation. This stage is about inviting curiosity and not narrowing it down too soon.

Teacher's role

- Observe play and conversation for emerging interests
- Introduce focusing activities, such as stories, photos, or artifacts, in order to create a shared starting point
- Use webs or charts to record what children already know and what they want to learn
- Help children phrase open-ended questions ("How could we find out where the puddles go?")
- Provide opportunities for child decision-making and ownership. ("Where could we go to learn more about tide pools?")

Determining Children's Interests

Early in a project, the teacher identifies each child's current and emerging interests. Some interests appear in dramatic play, conversation, drawings, or repeated questions; others arise spontaneously from a shared experience, such as a class walk or a story that sparks curiosity.

A powerful moment of shared interest is called a "**catalytic event**." This is something that triggers enthusiasm and inquiry across the group, such as a found insect, a broken toy, or a community event. It can unite children's curiosity around one theme. Projects that begin this way often move quickly into investigation because children share a common experience and motivation to learn more.

Teachers can also introduce topics when they see rich potential for exploration. Broad, open-ended topics (like "water," "gardens," or "bridges") work best for mixed groups because they allow many directions for investigation.

Example:

During outdoor play, a child notices an anthill. Soon several children gather to watch. The teacher recognizes the excitement and launches an "Ant Project." Children observe ants, read picture books, and draw what they see through magnifiers.

Building Common Experiences

Before children can begin investigating, they need shared knowledge and language. Teachers can prepare the class by offering experiences that invite exploration and conversation. This is what Katz and Chard (1997) call "messaging around with the topic."

Strategies include:

- Reading picture books or telling related stories
- Sharing artifacts or photographs
- Facilitating discussions and dramatic play
- Providing open-ended art, blocks, or materials
- Watching short videos or taking short walks for observation

These shared experiences create a common knowledge base and prepare children to ask deeper questions, think collaboratively as a community of learners, and build a shared understanding so that every child has something meaningful to contribute when the investigation begins.

Child- and Teacher-Initiated Topics

Projects may begin with children's questions or with a teacher's purposeful suggestion.

- **Child-initiated topics** arise naturally and often progress quickly because children share firsthand experience

- **Teacher-initiated topics** can succeed when they are broad enough to invite many directions of inquiry, such as “roads,” “birds,” or “transportation”

Whether initiated by children or adults, strong projects maintain flexibility so that children can influence the investigation. However, following children’s natural interests keeps the project alive, responsive, and meaningful, thus creating space for deeper engagement and authentic learning.

Selecting and Introducing a Topic

Phase I begins with choosing a topic that captures children’s interest. Teachers use planning webs to evaluate feasibility and anticipate resources such as field trip sites, expert visitors, and materials.

The goal is to identify topics that are engaging, accessible, and meaningful to the group. Focusing activities, such as stories, artifacts, or photos, help to establish a common foundation before investigation begins. At the end of this phase, children generate webs and lists of what they already know and what they want to find out.

Guidelines for Selecting Topics

Katz and Chard (1997) recommend that project topics:

1. Deepen children’s understanding of their environment and daily experiences
2. Encourage careful observation of meaningful phenomena
3. Invite a range of skills, such as investigation, discussion, and representation
4. Provide opportunities to use various media and materials creatively

Practical Considerations for Young Learners

- Topics should be concrete and hands-on, allowing direct manipulation
- They should connect to prior experience and familiar vocabulary
- Field sites should be accessible for repeat visits
- Projects should enable child-led research and representation through drawings, constructions, or stories
- Topics should align with curriculum goals and be culturally relevant to the class community

Example:

A “Bicycle Project” succeeds because children see bikes daily, a bike can easily be brought into the classroom, children can visit a repair shop, interview owners, and test ideas safely outdoors.

Finding Out What Children Know

Once children have some background knowledge, the teacher helps them make their thinking visible. This can be done through webs, drawings, constructions, or small-group discussions. Creating a class web together helps children see connections among their ideas and generates vocabulary for future exploration. Although teachers do the physical writing of the web, the content reflects children’s dictated ideas, questions, and theories.

Webbing also provides teachers with insight into children’s prior understanding and shows how it changes as the project unfolds.

Sample of a Class Web for Bicycles (Children dictate and teachers write it)



The Class Web was created using AI through ChatGPT for illustrative purposes

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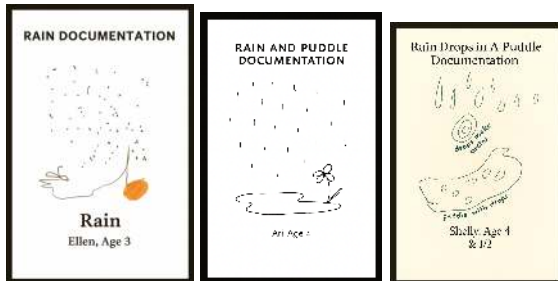
4.5: Documenting Early Representations

Children's early drawings, stories, and constructions are valuable evidence of learning. Label and date each piece, as these artifacts show growth in understanding, skill, and confidence over time. These early representations become the foundation for project documentation and later reflection.

Classroom Example

After a spring rainstorm, children notice puddles forming and disappearing. The teacher records their questions: "Where does the water go?" and "Why do puddles dry up?" A "Water Project" begins, with children drawing puddles, talking about rain, and planning how to explore evaporation. The teacher should capture what the children say about their drawings and insights.

Samples of Raindrops and Puddle Drawings



The Raindrops and Puddle drawings were created using AI through ChatGPT for illustrative purposes

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4.6: Formulating Questions for Investigation

Teachers can help children turn curiosity into inquiry by shaping their ideas into questions. Instead of asking, “What questions do you have?” try framing prompts around purpose and curiosity:

- “What would you like our visitor to tell us about?”
- “What do you wonder about this?”
- “What should we find out next?”

Children’s initial questions are just the beginning. As their knowledge deepens, new questions emerge, guiding the project’s next steps and keeping inquiry alive.

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4.7: Chapter Summary

Phase I focuses on beginning a project by recognizing children's curiosity, helping them share prior knowledge, and shaping their wonderings into questions worth investigating. Teachers support this work by observing play, offering shared experiences, and documenting early representations. By the end of this phase, children have a common foundation, a clear topic of interest, and a sense of ownership over their learning.

Chapter 4 Reflection Prompts

Think of a time when a child's question or observation showed deep curiosity. How might this moment serve as the beginning of a project? Which developmental abilities described in this chapter do you see most often in young children, and how do they support inquiry? What strategies would you use to help children make their thinking visible during Phase I? What questions could lead to sustained exploration, authentic investigation, and joyful learning? How do focusing activities and shared experiences prepare children to generate meaningful questions for investigation?

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4.8: Chapter Vocabulary

Catalytic Event: A moment or shared experience that sparks collective curiosity and motivates children to investigate a topic.

Focusing Activity: A story, object, photo, or shared experience used to introduce a potential project topic and build common background knowledge.

Representation: Children's use of drawings, models, writing, or constructions to express and develop their ideas.

Webbing: A visual tool used to organize children's prior knowledge and questions related to a project topic.

Open-Ended Question: A question that invites thinking, exploration, and multiple possible responses rather than a single correct answer.

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4.9: Extra Internet Resource Links



Project Approach – Phase Descriptions & Examples: <https://projectapproach.org>

Offers detailed examples of Phase I documentation, webbing, and topic selection.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): <https://naeyc.org>

Articles on inquiry-based learning, developmentally appropriate practice, and project work.

Reggio Children – Documentation and Inquiry: <https://www.reggiochildren.it>

Helps students understand how representation, environment, and observation support project beginnings.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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- 5.3: Teacher’s Role
- 5.4: Phase II Overview
- 5.5: Involving Parents
- 5.6: Selecting and Conducting Fieldwork
- 5.7: Preliminary Visits
- 5.8: Skill Development for Fieldwork
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- 5.10: Conducting the Investigation
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- 5.12: Data Collection and Graphing
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5.1: Chapter Introduction

5



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 5.1:** Identify the purpose and key components of Phase II of the Project Approach, including fieldwork, investigation, and representation.
- **SLO 5.2:** Analyze how teachers scaffold inquiry by modeling observation, documentation, and questioning strategies during fieldwork.
- **SLO 5.3:** Demonstrate the ability to design developmentally appropriate fieldwork experiences and representational activities that support children's investigations.

Chapter 5 Short Overview

This chapter explores Phase II of the Project Approach, where children deepen their inquiry through hands-on investigation, fieldwork, and increasingly complex representations. Teachers support this phase by modeling observation, arranging real-world experiences, and encouraging documentation through sketches, writing, charts, and dramatic play. Through these authentic learning opportunities, children expand their understanding, refine their questions, and strengthen intellectual habits such as persistence, curiosity, and collaboration.

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5.2: Focus- Investigation, Fieldwork, and Representation



Let's Take a Deeper Look

In Phase II, curiosity becomes investigation. Children test their ideas, collect information, and represent findings through drawing, writing, building, or dramatizing. Teachers arrange experiences that deepen exploration through field trips, experiments, or interviews, and provide tools such as magnifiers, clipboards, or digital cameras.

The questions children ask often come from their hearts and their own experiences. During a project in Point Reyes about cattle ranchers, for example, children wanted to know what the ranch workers ate. One child wondered if they ate baked beans over a campfire, just like in a television show he had seen at home. This curiosity led to genuine discovery: the children learned that the ranch workers all shopped at the same local grocery store as the children's families and enjoyed eating pizza at the same pizzeria that the class visited each year to make pizza.

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5.3: Teacher's Role

- Supply materials for hands-on exploration (e.g., books, magnifying glasses, clipboards, real tools, art supplies, and materials or artifacts related to the topic)
- Arrange visits or invite experts (e.g., a veterinarian for the *How Dogs Communicate* Project)
- Encourage documentation through sketches, graphs, or dictation
- Model observation and questioning (e.g., “What do you notice about how the bridge bends?”)
- Support collaboration and data sharing

Classroom Example:

In the *How Dogs Communicate* project, children record barking sounds, interview a local animal trainer, visit the town veterinarian, invite one or more dogs into the classroom, and chart different emotions expressed by dogs. They compare canine communication to human body language, strengthening empathy and language skills.

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5.4: Phase II Overview

Phase II begins with reviewing the planning webs and preparing for the collection of various kinds of data. Preparations are made for investigative experiences, and a field site is selected. The teacher communicates with field site personnel and expert visitors about how children are learning through the Project Approach and shares the specific questions that the young investigators are asking.

Not all schools are able to offer field trips due to policy, funding, or logistical constraints. However, meaningful investigation can still occur through alternatives such as expert visitors, virtual tours, neighborhood walks, or bringing artifacts and real-world materials into the classroom. When available, fieldwork experiences enrich learning, but they are not required for a project to be successful.

Specific investigative skills, such as asking questions, using construction tools (staplers, tape, and measuring tools), and making observational drawings, are introduced or revisited, with opportunities for children to practice them as needed. Revisiting both the children's planning web and the teacher's instructional web can spark new thinking. Displaying graphic representations alongside the web helps children visualize their learning and connect new ideas. As understanding deepens, children's questions grow more complex and sophisticated.

The Difference Between a Class Web (Child initiated) and a Teacher's Web (Teacher Generated)

A Class Web A Teacher's Web



These Webs were created using AI through ChatGPT for illustrative purposes

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5.5: Involving Parents

The beginning of Phase II is an ideal time to invite family involvement. Teachers can send home a letter announcing the project topic, describing upcoming plans, and listing the questions that the young investigators are trying to answer. This communication can also explain how the topic connects to curriculum goals.

This is also an opportunity to ask parents and other family members to contribute artifacts or resources for study. Parents often suggest experts or field sites and may volunteer to accompany the class on field trips. Such communication encourages dialogue at home, extending the learning environment and modeling curiosity, problem-solving, and persistence. These shared experiences not only deepen understanding but also help cultivate dispositions that support lifelong learning.

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5.6: Selecting and Conducting Fieldwork

Experiences in the field are a cornerstone of project work. Fieldwork allows children to investigate real-world contexts, observe closely, and engage in authentic inquiry. During fieldwork, young investigators seek answers to their own questions by exploring materials, interviewing workers, and documenting their findings through sketches, photographs, or video recordings.

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5.7: Preliminary Visits

Before bringing children to the site, the teacher visits independently to assess logistics, safety, and learning opportunities. This early preparation ensures smooth experiences by identifying resources, experts, and potential artifacts for study.

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5.8: Skill Development for Fieldwork

Skill Development for Fieldwork

Children may need support learning how to ask questions politely and confidently, especially to unfamiliar adults. Teachers can model this skill through classroom practice. Many children are naturally drawn to quantitative information, asking questions like “How many?” or “How big?” Teachers can introduce tallying, counting, and graphing before the trip so children can record information accurately.

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5.9: Observation and Documentation Skills

While young children are naturally observant, they benefit from guided experiences in focused observation. Teachers can lead short observation walks around the school, encouraging children to verbalize what they notice and later reflect as a group. Teachers can model observational drawing by sketching alongside the children, not to show technique, but to demonstrate persistence, noticing, and refinement. Photography may also be practiced beforehand, giving each child a responsibility for capturing a specific image to later caption and discuss.

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5.10: Conducting the Investigation

The heart of Phase II is the children's own inquiry. They visit field sites, talk with experts, and handle materials that extend understanding. As they learn, they record their discoveries through drawing, writing, building, and dramatic reenactment. When initial questions are answered, interest may fade, only to be renewed as new questions arise. This ongoing rhythm of *investigating*, *representing*, *discussing* characterizes the project cycle (Helm & Katz, 2016).

Teachers remain alert to nonverbal cues of curiosity—pausing to observe, touching, or revisiting an object—especially in very young learners. These subtle signs of engagement can guide next steps in exploration.

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5.11: Drawing and Painting as Research Tools

Teachers new to project work sometimes hesitate to guide children's drawing, viewing it as purely creative. Yet representational art, used as a means of study, deepens understanding. Drawing and painting allow children to analyze and document their world, developing observational and symbolic thinking. When children visit a fire station and draw a fire truck, it is appropriate to ask guiding questions such as, "*How many wheels are on the fire engine?*" or "*Where is the ladder hanging?*" *This can help* children clarify their thinking and notice details they might otherwise overlook. Once children begin to clarify and represent their thinking, the project naturally moves into systematic data collection.

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5.12: Data Collection and Graphing

Young investigators often gather quantitative information using tally marks or visual charts. Teachers can simplify data recording by providing gridded sheets or pre-made charts on clipboards. Coloring boxes or marking tallies helps children organize findings while developing early mathematical reasoning.

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5.13: Reviewing and Representing Experiences

After fieldwork, the review process helps children consolidate understanding. Teachers guide group discussions, inviting children to connect new learning to earlier questions or webs. Students share sketches, charts, and photos, which can be organized into a classroom display or visual timeline. These discussions also expand vocabulary and comprehension.

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5.14: Literacy Connections

Teachers can record children's words as shared dictation, creating class books or experience charts. These texts show how writing and reading document knowledge. A classroom "Word Wall" displaying project vocabulary reinforces language learning and curiosity about print. Revisiting photos or videos encourages children to redraw earlier sketches, adding new detail that reflects growing understanding.

Sample of a Classroom Word Wall



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5.15: Family Engagement in Representation

Parents can support this stage by donating materials or related artifacts. Some families extend learning by visiting similar sites outside of school and encouraging their children to share new discoveries with classmates.

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5.16: Representing Through Play

Younger children often express understanding through dramatic play rather than formal models. They may construct life-sized settings from cardboard and recycled materials, such as a bus, a hospital, or a post office. In the case of the project on “How Dogs Communicate,” they may want to create a dog bed and put bowls on the floor. These environments let children act out their discoveries, merging imagination and comprehension.

***Note:** During dramatic play, some children may suggest wearing a collar or leash as part of their exploration. While this idea often comes from curiosity or imitation, teachers should gently redirect this behavior. It is important to explain that collars and leashes are designed for animals and are not safe for children to wear, as nothing should be placed around a child’s neck. This guidance helps maintain physical safety while also reinforcing the understanding that children are not pets.

Projects nurture advanced play skills and social learning. Heidemann and Hewitt (1992) identify eight progressive skills teachers can observe and support:

- Pretending with real, substitute, or imaginary objects
- Role playing with sustained sequences and role declarations
- Using language to narrate play and create scenarios
- Sustaining play episodes for longer periods
- Collaborating with peers and entering playgroups respectfully
- Managing conflicts through communication and compromise
- Offering help and encouragement to peers

Through project work, children integrate emotional, social, and cognitive growth while engaging in meaningful play.

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5.17: Discussions

Discussion is a cornerstone of effective project work. Whether in small groups or whole-class conversations, discussion enables children to clarify ideas, compare experiences, and pose new questions. Teachers encourage peer-to-peer communication so that dialogue becomes a shared exchange rather than a teacher-directed sequence.

In some instances, the teacher introduces key information to deepen accuracy and conceptual clarity. At other times, questions are redirected to peers for collaborative problem-solving. These exchanges empower even the youngest children to engage in critical and reflective thought.

As interest naturally begins to fade and the project table grows quieter, teachers recognize that Phase II has reached its conclusion. The class is now ready to transition to **Phase III: Concluding the Project**, where reflection, documentation, and celebration bring closure and pride to the learning journey.

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5.18: Chapter Summary

Phase II transforms curiosity into active investigation as children engage with field sites, experts, materials, and tools to answer their own questions. Teachers scaffold this work by preparing children for fieldwork, modeling observation, and supporting documentation through art, writing, data collection, and dramatic reenactment. As children represent their growing knowledge and share discoveries, their inquiry becomes deeper, more focused, and ready to transition into the reflective and celebratory work of Phase III.

Reflection Prompts

How does fieldwork deepen children's understanding in ways that classroom-only activities cannot? Which teacher strategies during Phase II—modeling observation, documenting, scaffolding questions—do you feel most confident using, and which would you like to develop further? Think of a time when a child represented learning through drawing, play, or writing. What did that representation reveal about their thinking? How might you involve families in the investigative phase of a project in a way that feels authentic and supportive rather than obligatory?

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5.19: Chapter Vocabulary

Fieldwork: Direct, on-site investigation that allows children to observe real-world phenomena, interview experts, and gather meaningful data.

Representational Drawing: Art used as a tool for inquiry, allowing children to document, analyze, and refine their understanding of what they observe.

Documentation: The collection of notes, photos, sketches, quotes, and artifacts that record children's learning over time.

Investigative Skills: Abilities such as observing closely, asking questions, measuring, tallying, and recording data that support inquiry.

Catalytic Event: A moment that sparks shared curiosity and motivates children to explore a topic more deeply.

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5.20: Extra Internet Resource Links



Project Approach Official Website – Inquiry Examples & Fieldwork Guides: <https://projectapproach.org>

Provides examples of Phase II investigations, fieldwork preparation, and documentation.

Reggio Children – Documentation & Representation: <https://www.reggiochildren.it>

Helps students understand how representation, focused observation, and environment support inquiry.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): <https://naeyc.org/resources>

Offers articles on developmentally appropriate practice, inquiry-based learning, and project work.

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5.21: Chapter References



Chapter 5 References

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Phase III– Concluding the Project

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6.1: Chapter Introduction

6



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 6.1:** Identify the key components and purposes of Phase III of the Project Approach, including reflection, documentation, and celebration.
- **SLO 6.2:** Analyze how children demonstrate learning through documentation, final representations, and culminating events.
- **SLO 6.3:** Identify developmentally appropriate strategies for concluding a project and supporting children through reflection and self-assessment.

Chapter 6 Short Overview ✂

This chapter explores Phase III of the Project Approach, where children reflect on their investigations, document their discoveries, and share learning with classmates, families, and the community. Teachers guide this process by facilitating reflection, organizing documentation, and supporting children as they prepare culminating displays or presentations. Through these experiences, children deepen understanding, recognize their growth, and celebrate the learning journey.

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6.2: Focus- Reflection, Documentation, and Celebration



Let's Take a Deeper Look

The last phase of a project brings everything together. Children look back at their early ideas, drawings, and webs to see how their thinking has changed. They compare what they thought at the beginning to what they know now. They also begin preparing to share what they have learned with classmates, families, or the school community. This sharing can take many forms: a class book, a display, a story, or even a small event. The goal is to reflect, represent, and celebrate.

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6.3: Teacher's Role

- Help children decide how they want to share their work—maybe a display, a story, or a presentation
- Support children as they organize materials and prepare documentation
- Encourage reflection and self-assessment (“What did we find out?” “What surprised us?”)
- Invite families and community members to visit the classroom
- Celebrate effort, curiosity, teamwork, and growth—not just the finished product

Classroom Examples:

An example is when children who studied “How Dogs Communicate” might create a “Dog Communication Museum.” Children might display charts showing different kinds of barks; photos, drawings, or clay models of dog body language; images from interviews with a local animal trainer; or a video from their trip to the veterinarian clinic. Families could come to tour the museum, and can children proudly act as guides, explaining their work and answering questions.

Another example might be when a class investigated Bridges and builds a large model using recycled boxes and then invites families to a “Bridge Exhibition.” Each child could explain one feature, such as arches, suspension cables, triangular truss design, or supports, using vocabulary learned during the project. These kinds of celebrations help children take pride in their discoveries and give families a meaningful glimpse of the learning process.

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6.4: Concluding the Project

There comes a time when children are ready to move on. They may have answered their main questions, or the topic might require skills they have not yet developed. Interest can fade as curiosity is satisfied. Teachers new to project work sometimes worry that this means the topic failed, but it doesn't. This is a natural part of the process; it signals that the project has done its job.

In this phase, children reflect on what they learned, talk about their experiences, and decide how to share what they know. The teacher's role is to guide these reflections, help document the work, and create space for celebration and closure.

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6.5: Culminating the Project

Ending well is an important part of project work. A good conclusion helps children see themselves as thinkers and learners. It gives teachers a chance to see how far the children have come and helps families understand what project learning looks like in action.

Children summarize what they have learned through discussion, drawings, writing, or displays. Katz and Chard (1989) remind us that when children explain what they learned, they deepen their understanding and make it personal. Teachers can start this process by asking questions like, “How can we show others what we learned?” or “What should we add to our ‘What We Now Know’ web?” Revisiting earlier webs helps children see how their knowledge has expanded.

Children can also make new drawings that include everything they now know about the topic. Looking at these drawings together encourages them to talk about forgotten details and recognize their growth. These conversations help children feel proud and confident.

The review and discussion process is often the most meaningful part of the conclusion. As children see their ideas written down, displayed, or shared, they develop a sense of pride and ownership. A project might end with a book, a simple wall display, or a small event for families. The goal is not to make it grand, but to make it meaningful.

Culminating events bring everyone together. Parents often enjoy seeing their child’s work displayed and hearing them explain what they learned. These events strengthen the classroom community and help children experience the satisfaction of completing something important.

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6.6: The Power of Documentation

Documentation is the process of showing learning as it happens. It includes children's words, drawings, photos, and projects. Documentation tells the story of the work and gives everyone a chance to grow, including teachers, children, families, and communities.

For teachers, documentation is a planning and reflection tool. Looking at notes, sketches, and photos helps teachers see what children know and what might come next. For children, documentation is a sign that their work matters. When teachers take notes or photos, children notice that their efforts are valued. For families, documentation makes learning visible and it shows that meaningful learning happens through exploration, collaboration, and reflection.

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6.7: Types of Documentation

Teachers can use many kinds of documentation, including:

- **Individual Portfolios:** Writing samples, problem-solving work, or other items that show growth
- **Products:** Drawings, photos, dictated stories, or labels created by children
- **Observations:** Notes or checklists that capture curiosity, persistence, or collaboration
- **Child Reflections:** Children's own words about what they enjoyed or learned
- **Narratives:** Short summaries or project books that tell the story of the learning journey (Helm & Katz, 2011)

Collecting a variety of evidence across time gives a clear picture of each child's development and helps teachers plan experiences that build on their interests and strengths.

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6.8: Observation and Reflection

Project work gives teachers wonderfully rich opportunities for observation. As children explore and solve problems, teachers can note their use of language, play behaviors, and emerging skills. These observations can be recorded as brief notes or checklists and then linked to curriculum goals. Observation helps teachers plan next steps and see the learning that might otherwise go unnoticed.

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6.9: Children's Products

Drawings, charts, models, and written notes provide visible evidence of what children understand. Even a scribble or label can show meaning when viewed in context. Young children who are not yet writing express ideas symbolically through drawings or pretend writing. Dictated stories, interview notes, and field observations all show how literacy develops through purpose and use.

Comparing early and later webs, drawings, or projects helps children and teachers see growth. The differences between a first and final drawing of a bridge, for example, can reveal new vocabulary, deeper understanding, and sharper observation.

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6.10: Narratives- Telling the Story

Projects have stories with beginnings, discoveries, challenges, and endings. Teachers and children can tell these stories through photo displays, captions, and journals. Keeping the story alive during the project builds excitement and allows everyone to see how learning unfolds.

Some teachers create “project books” that include photos, children’s quotes, and short explanations. These books can be shared with families or other classes and often become treasured classroom resources. They help children revisit experiences and remember what they learned.

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6.11: Evaluating the Project

Evaluation means thinking about what worked well and what could be improved. Teachers reflect on children's engagement, curiosity, and collaboration. They also think about how the project met developmental and curriculum goals.

Jones et al. (1994) suggest useful questions for teachers:

1. Are children taking responsibility for their own work?
2. Are they deeply engaged in what they are doing?
3. Are they becoming more self-directed and thoughtful?
4. Are they collaborating with others?
5. Are tasks challenging and connected to real experiences?
6. Are children's products used as part of authentic assessment?
7. Does the teacher act as a guide and facilitator?

Project work helps teachers meet content standards through natural exploration. It connects academic skills with real-life learning and shows how curiosity can lead to genuine understanding.

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6.12: Project Conclusion

By the end of a project, children have journeyed through curiosity, exploration, and reflection. The conclusion is more than an ending—it is a celebration of growth, discovery, and community. Through reflection, sharing, and documentation, children see themselves as capable learners whose ideas and questions truly matter.

As projects conclude, teachers reflect not only on what children have learned, but also on the decisions that shaped the learning process. Questions often arise about materials, timing, teacher involvement, and how inquiry was supported along the way. These reflections naturally lead to an important consideration: **How do teachers plan learning experiences that remain flexible, responsive, and grounded in children's interests?** The next chapter addresses this question by examining lesson planning within the context of project work and emphasizing planning as a guide rather than a script.

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6.13: Chapter Summary

Phase III brings the project to a meaningful close through reflection, documentation, and celebration of new learning. Children revisit early questions, compare initial ideas to current understanding, and represent their knowledge through drawings, writing, models, stories, or displays. Culminating events strengthen community, highlight growth, and reinforce children's identities as capable thinkers and learners.

Reflection Prompts

How does reflection at the end of a project deepen children's understanding of what they learned? What forms of documentation do you find most powerful for showing children's growth, and why? How can culminating events strengthen relationships among children, teachers, and families? In what ways does concluding a project help children see themselves as capable learners and contributors to the classroom community?

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6.14: Chapter Vocabulary

Culminating Event: A meaningful gathering or presentation where children share their project findings with peers, families, or the school community.

Documentation Panel: A visual display of photos, quotes, drawings, and artifacts that make children's learning visible over time.

Reflection: The process of thinking back on experiences to understand new learning, growth, and changes in thinking.

Representation: Children's use of drawings, writing, models, dramatic play, or conversation to communicate what they know.

Authentic Assessment: Evaluation based on real work, such as children's products, discussions, observations, and documented learning.

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6.15: Extra Internet Resource Links



Project Approach – Documentation & Culmination: <https://projectapproach.org>

Provides examples of documentation panels, project books, and culminating events.

Reggio Children – Making Learning Visible: <https://www.reggiochildren.it>

Shows powerful examples of documentation that highlight children's thinking and growth.

Harvard Project Zero – Visible Thinking: <https://pz.harvard.edu/projects/visible-thinking>

Offers routines and strategies that support reflection, documentation, and learning visibility.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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7.1: Chapter Introduction

7



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 7.1:** Identify and describe the essential components of a developmentally appropriate lesson plan.
- **SLO 7.2:** Create lesson plans that integrate hands-on, inquiry-based learning aligned with early learning standards.
- **SLO 7.3:** Reflect on the effectiveness of a lesson using observation and documentation to guide next steps.

Chapter 7 Short Overview

This chapter examines lesson planning as the bridge between theory and classroom practice in early childhood education. It outlines the essential components of developmentally appropriate lesson plans and emphasizes the importance of intentionality, flexibility, and responsiveness to children's learning. Practical examples and templates support students in planning, implementing, and reflecting on meaningful learning experiences.

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7.2: From Ideas to Action



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Up to this point, this textbook has emphasized observation, inquiry, documentation, and the unfolding phases of project work. With this foundation in place, teachers are now ready to consider lesson planning, not as a rigid sequence of steps, but as a flexible process that supports children's investigations.

In project-based learning, lesson plans serve as **living documents**. Rather than prescribing exactly what will happen, they help teachers anticipate possibilities, prepare materials, consider safety and developmental needs, and remain responsive to children's questions and discoveries. Effective lesson planning in early childhood education balances intentionality with openness, allowing for the children's ideas to shape the direction of learning.

This chapter introduces lesson planning as a professional tool that supports inquiry, reflection, and ethical teaching practice. Students will learn how to write plans that are developmentally appropriate, adaptable, and aligned with the Project Approach, while still meeting practicum and program requirements. As you continue through this text and gain experience working with children, you will revisit and revise your lesson plans, deepening your understanding of planning as an ongoing, reflective process.

Writing lesson plans is a huge part of every teacher's job. In education, it is the bridge between theory and classroom practice, and this is how we turn great ideas into meaningful experiences. When lessons are written well, they facilitate curiosity, exploration, and discovery. They also help us become organized and prepared to implement the lesson. A well-written lesson plan defines the goals, identifies the measurable outcomes, describes the process in detail, lists the materials needed, considers possible problems, and includes practical tips. It also takes into consideration the age of the children, the group size, the space needed, the time required, and how many adults are needed. In addition, naming the lesson plan is a good idea for easy reference in the future.

The plan should be flexible so that we can anticipate possibilities, prepare materials, and respond to children's emerging interests. At the same time, it should be specific enough that any teacher can read the plan and understand how to implement it. Providing specific details ensures this balance.

Intentional planning helps guarantee that every lesson will support the children's learning in different areas of development, while still honoring their interests, ideas, and desires. Whether it's a small-group science experiment, a shared story time, or a block-building challenge, a well-planned lesson provides the structure needed for creativity to flourish while also meeting measurable outcomes. The lesson plan gives direction, but the children's curiosity gives it life.

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7.3: The Purpose of Lesson Planning

While projects unfold over weeks, lessons occur within a day or part of a day. They are the small steps that make the larger investigations possible. Lessons are the intentional, focused experiences that support and extend children's investigations. Thoughtful lesson planning helps teachers anticipate possibilities, prepare materials, and remain responsive to children's emerging interests.

In *Together We Are Better*, bev bos (1990) emphasizes that learning happens most powerfully in relationship—with materials, with peers, and with responsive adults. Lesson planning, then, is not only about preparing activities, but about creating conditions where collaboration, dialogue, and shared discovery can emerge.

A well-designed lesson plan helps teachers:

- Clarify learning goals and ensure activities align with developmental objectives
- Identify measurable outcomes to ensure that the goals are being met (in California, these outcomes are typically tied directly to the Desired Results Developmental Profile [DRDP], an assessment tool used to document children's developmental progress across multiple domains statewide; see Appendix A)
- Anticipate materials and interactions needed to support exploration
- Create equitable access for all children to participate and succeed
- Document intentional teaching, a key component of successful and professional practice

Lesson plans provide structure without limiting inquiry. They guide decision-making while allowing flexibility as children's ideas evolve.

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7.4: Essential Components of a Lesson Plan

Component	Description	Example
Lesson Title	A clear, descriptive title that communicates the main activity or investigation.	“Measuring Sticks: Comparing Stick Lengths”
Date	The day the activity will be implemented.	To be determined
Age Group	Developmental range targeted for the experience.	Preschool (3–5 years)
Group Size	Number of children participating and number of teachers needed; helpful for staffing and ratios.	Small group of 4 (1 teacher)
Time Needed	Estimated time for preparation, implementation, and clean-up.	• Prep: 10 min • Implementation: 20 min • Clean-up: 5 min
Goal(s)	Domain and broad developmental or curricular goal linked to a measure such as DRDP measures. Should address <i>why</i> the activity matters.	DRDP 2025: Cognitive Domain- MATH 2: Classification (Child shows increasing ability to sort objects into groups according to attributes, qualities, features, characteristics, or use)
Learning Objective(s)	Specific, measurable statements usually beginning with the words “Students will...” and linked to measurable developmental indicators, such as DRDP.	Children will sort objects into groups based on length using nonstandard measurement tools, then put the objects in a new order by length (DRDP 2025- MATH 2: Classification).
Materials Needed	All items required for set-up, engagement, and documentation.	• Sticks of various lengths • Tape • Clipboards • Markers • Chart paper
Introduction/Motivation	How you will spark interest, connect to prior learning, or pose a meaningful question.	“Yesterday we collected sticks for our fort. How can we figure out which stick is the longest?”
Procedure/Implementation	Step-by-step flow of the activity, including modeling, facilitation, and exploration opportunities.	1. Introduce materials and vocabulary. 2. Model how to compare lengths using a “zero line” (aligned starting point). 3. Invite children to sort sticks and record findings.
Potential Problems & Solutions	Anticipate challenges and outline strategies to support children or modify the environment.	<i>Problem:</i> Children may struggle aligning stick ends. <i>Solution:</i> Use painter’s tape to create a visual starting point/zero line. <i>Problem:</i> Children may poke peers or materials with sticks during exploration. <i>Solution:</i> Establish clear expectations for safe use, model how sticks are to be measured rather than play weapons.
Open-Ended Questions	Questions that promote deeper thinking, reasoning, and language.	“How did you decide this one goes first?” “What changed when you moved the sticks?”

Observation/Assessment	How learning will be documented and interpreted. Must align with DRDP measures.	Anecdotal notes, photos, recordings of child dialogue, DRDP-aligned checklists.
Possible Types of Documentation	Ways learning will be made visible for children, families, and colleagues.	• Photo panel • Quote wall • Learning story • Work samples • Portfolio entry • DRDP documentation
Reflection/Follow-Up/Extenders	Ideas for continuing the learning or expanding children's interests.	"Children showed interest in measuring other objects, offer other objects that can be sorted from shortest to longest."

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7.5: Measurable Lesson Goals

Intentional teaching requires connecting lesson objectives to observable developmental outcomes. As stated above, in California, early childhood educators use the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP, 2015 or 2025) to guide planning, observations, and assessments. For example, when planning lessons, educators identify which DRDP measure(s) the activity will address. This ensures experiences are developmentally appropriate, measurable, and aligned with state frameworks.

Each lesson should specify:

- The DRDP domain (e.g., Approaches to Learning–Self-Regulation [ATL–REG], Cognition–Math, Language and Literacy Development [LLD]).
- The specific measure (e.g., ATL–REG 1: Attention Maintenance or LLD 5: Comprehension of Age-Appropriate Text).
- The intended behavior or skill you hope to observe or support.

Sample DRDP (2025) Goals and Objectives

DRDP (2025)-P3 Domain	Example Goal	Example Objective
Approaches to Learning- ATL 1: Engagement, Attention, and Persistence	Develops increasing ability to engage by sustaining attention, contributing, and persisting, when appropriate, related to learning activities.	Children will read-aloud with puppets, inviting children to predict what happens next.
Foundational Language Development- FLD 2: Using Language (Expressive)	Uses increasingly complex language, including vocabulary, sentences, questions, narratives, and explanations, in their home language, English, sign language, or Augmentative and Alternative Communication.	Children will explain their drawings and represent their ideas verbally using complete sentences that communicate ideas or simple stories using common connecting words, signs, words and signs, or symbols.
Cognition (COG)- MATH 1: Spatial Thinking	Shows increasing understanding of objects in relation to each other and how objects move in space.	Children will measure and pour in the sensory table demonstrating the understanding of how an object moves in space (i.e., how objects move, rotate, turn, flip, or slide to move to a new place).
Physical Development- PD 2: Gross Motor Locomotor Movement Skills	Shows increasing proficiency in fundamental locomotor skills (e.g., rolling, crawling, cruising, walking, running, jumping, galloping).	Children will show increasing proficiency in fundamental locomotor skills by moving quickly from sitting, to standing, to running while playing Duck, Duck, Goose.

Tip: Always write your lesson goals in observable terms. For example:

- Instead of “Children will understand shapes,” write “Children will identify and name common shapes in their environment.” This makes your goals measurable, aligns them with DRDP descriptors, and supports authentic observation.

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7.6: Blank Lesson Plan Sample (Template)

Lesson Title:	
Date:	
Age Group:	
Group Size/Staffing:	
Time Needed:	Preparation: Implementation: Clean Up:
Space/Location:	
Goal/s: (Connect this to a measurable tool, such as the DRDP, and identify the developmental domain or area of development.)	
Learning Objective(s): (Specific, observable, and measurable; connect to a tool such as the DRDP.)	Children will....
Materials Needed: (Bullet points work well for gathering items.)	
Introduction: (How will you explain the activity to the children?)	
Procedure: (Numbering works well for implementing steps.)	
Safety & Equity: (Safety Considerations / Accommodations, if needed)	
Potential Problems and Solutions:	
Potential Open-Ended Questions:	
Observation/Assessment:	
Possible Types of	

Documentation:	
Reflection/Follow Activities/Extenders:	up

Tip: During practicum, use this format for one activity per week. After teaching, write a short paragraph describing what children did, what surprised you, what you might do differently next time, and how you might expand on this activity. Also, with time, you will create your own lesson plan forms and format it the way that it works best for you and your school. This is just a starting place.

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7.7: Implementing the Lesson- Practical Guidance

1. Prepare Your Environment

Gather and arrange materials before children arrive. Anticipate how they might explore and use the materials and what supports will be needed. Consider the flow of the space so transitions feel natural and unhurried. Test the materials in advance to make sure they work well and function as intended. For example, is the cup stable, or does it tip over easily and spill? Some teachers choose to define individual workspaces by using place mats or trays for each child. Even a strip of tape on the table can help clearly define personal space and support focused engagement.

Also, double check your list of materials to make sure that you have everything that you need. It can be disastrous to leave the area to retrieve a forgotten item once the children are engaged. For example, needing to get spoons for marble painting once the children are seated, will leave them alone with paint. Ideally, the teacher should be fully prepared and present when children begin the activity, allowing attention to remain on supervision, engagement, and learning.

2. Introduce with Curiosity

Begin with a question, story, or object that sparks wonder. Keep introductions short and concrete. Focus on what children will do, rather than what they will produce. If you have rules concerning the project, you want to make sure all the children understand them **before** you hand them the supplies. Once materials are directly in front of children, their attention naturally shifts to exploration, which can make listening more difficult. Always explain the reasons behind the rules because children are much more likely to remember and follow a rule if they understand why they exist.

Finally, we typically avoid making models or examples for the children to copy, because they will want to copy the adult's model instead of creating from their own ideas. Also, attempting to replicate an adult's work can lead children to feel inadequate when the model reflects a level of skill beyond their own (bos, 1982). Note: The early childhood educator, *bev bos*, intentionally styled her name in lowercase to reflect humility and a child-centered philosophy.

3. Observe and Respond

As children explore, observe their interactions, offer prompts and guidance only as needed. Your goal is to support independent discovery. In *Don't Move the Muffin Tins*, bev bos captured this stance clearly:

"When the activity is truly art and genuinely creative, all I have to do is put a name on the paper or perhaps stand by to add to the supplies" (bos, 1982, p. 3).

The following criteria, developed by bev bos (1987), offer a reflective lens for evaluating the *quality* of an activity as it unfolds, not as a checklist to be completed, but as questions to consider when observing children's engagement and responses.

1. Does the activity help children develop self-identification or positively reinforce their self-concept?
2. Does the activity encourage children to change or modify presented materials according to their own ideas and imagination?
3. Does the activity encourage children to create—that is, to make a song, story, or game completely from their own experience?
4. Does the activity encourage children to interact positively—that is, to choose to work with other children and/or a parent or teacher toward a larger goal?
5. Does the activity promote gales of laughter or heighten a child's sense of fun? Is it, in other words, irresistible? (p. 2)

With these reflective questions in mind, pause during and after the lesson to jot notes or snap photos (with permission). Be sure to take photos of their work samples. These observations and photos form the foundation for documentation and future planning.

4. Respect Their Name

Ask the children if they would like to write their own name on their work or if they would like you to write their name. If they choose to have you write it, ask where they would like their name placed and, when possible, ask them what color they would like

it written in. Sometimes children will paint over their name. That is okay. However, when children are invited to choose the placement and color of their name, they are less likely to paint or draw over it because they have a sense of ownership in the decision. Be sure to spell it out as you print it (bos, 1982), because this supports early literacy and name recognition.

5. Adjust and Extend

Flexibility is key. Effective teachers are responsive to what unfolds in the moment. If the activity moves in a new direction, follow the children's lead. Children's questions, strategies, and interests often reveal deeper learning opportunities than those initially anticipated. And adjusting a lesson may involve slowing down, simplifying materials, or offering additional support when children need more time or scaffolding. It may also mean shifting the focus to align more closely with children's developmental levels or cultural experiences. For example, a planned small-group activity may become a whole-group exploration if children show deep interest in the process or the materials. Another example is how a simple measuring lesson might become a week-long study of comparing objects, creating measurement charts, drawing representations, and using new vocabulary to describe size and quantity. Extensions can include introducing new materials, posing open-ended questions, documenting children's thinking, or connecting the experience to literacy, science, or the arts. Rather than viewing changes as "veering away from the plan," an effective educator will recognize them as evidence of meaningful, responsive teaching.

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7.8: Lesson Planning Checklist

Use this checklist to review your lesson plan before implementation.

Sample Lesson Planning Checklist

Planning Questions	Yes	No	Notes/Examples
Does the lesson align with a clear learning goal and objectives?	☐	☐	
Are materials age-appropriate, inclusive, and safe?	☐	☐	
Does the lesson invite open-ended exploration rather than a single “right” answer?	☐	☐	
Have you included opportunities for observation and documentation?	☐	☐	
Are transitions and time expectations realistic?	☐	☐	
Does the activity allow for multiple developmental domains (cognitive, social, language, physical)?	☐	☐	
Have you planned a brief follow-up or extension idea?	☐	☐	

Tip: Post your lesson plan and checklist on a clipboard in your learning area. Also, using plastic page protectors can help keep the plan clean and dry. This makes it easy to not only refer back to your plan, but also to jot down quick observations and demonstrate intentional planning to your mentor or practicum supervisor.

After implementing your lesson, take a few minutes to reflect. Reflective practice turns experience into expertise.

Every plan begins with a possibility, not a prescription.

The next chapter builds on this foundation by widening the lens of lesson planning. Once teachers begin implementing intentional lessons, they must consider how curriculum areas, literacy experiences, and family partnerships intertwine within project work. **Chapter 8 explores how educators integrate curriculum, literacy, and family engagement in ways that deepen learning and strengthen connections between home and school.**

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7.9: Chapter Summary

Lesson planning and thoughtful implementation are at the heart of effective teaching. Through intentional preparation, observation, and flexibility, educators create experiences that nurture curiosity, confidence, and connection. Lesson plans serve not as strict blueprints, but as flexible documents that evolve with each child's ideas and discoveries. The more you teach, the more you will refine your skills in lesson design. Remember that every plan is a hypothesis, which is an opportunity to explore what might be learned next.

Reflection Prompts

What did the children do, say, or notice that surprised you? How did how the children engage with the lesson you planned? How did your plan change once the lesson began? What evidence did you observe that learning objectives were being met? What would you do differently next time? How might this lesson connect to a future project or investigation?

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7.10: Chapter Vocabulary

Lesson Plan: A written outline that guides the intentional design and implementation of a learning experience.

Learning Objective: A specific, measurable statement describing what children are expected to do or demonstrate.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP): Teaching approaches that align with children's age, individual needs, and cultural contexts.

Documentation: The collection of observations, photos, and work samples used to make learning visible and guide instruction.

Scaffolding: Instructional support that helps children extend learning while gradually building independence.

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7.11: Extra Internet Resource Links



NAEYC – Developmentally Appropriate Practice: <https://www.naeyc.org>

Guidance on intentional teaching, planning, and responsive practice.

Project Approach Study Group (University of Illinois): <https://projectapproach.org>

Examples and resources connecting lesson planning to inquiry-based projects.

California Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP): <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ci/drdpforms.asp>

Official tools and guidance for aligning lesson goals with assessment.

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7.12: Chapter References



bos, b. (1982). *Don't move the muffin tins: A hands-off guide to art for the young child*. Turn the Page Press.

bos, b. (1987). *Before the basics: Creating conversations with children*. Turn the Page Press.

bos, b. (1990). *Together we're better: Establishing a coactive learning environment*. Turn the Page Press.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Integrating Curriculum, Literacy, and Family Engagement in the Project Approach

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- 8.3: Curriculum Requirements, Standards, and Projects
- 8.4: Planning for Incorporation of Curriculum and Standards
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8.1: Chapter Introduction

8



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 8.1:** Describe the three phases of the Project Approach and explain how each phase supports children's inquiry and learning.
- **SLO 8.2:** Identify ways curriculum standards and performance expectations can be integrated into project work through intentional planning and documentation.
- **SLO 8.3:** Identify how literacy experiences and family engagement naturally support project-based learning in early childhood classrooms.

Chapter 8 Short Overview

Building on the lesson planning foundations introduced in Chapter 7, this chapter focuses on how the Project Approach supports meaningful, standards-based learning through inquiry, documentation, and collaboration. It explains how curriculum requirements, literacy development, and family engagement can be naturally integrated into project work without compromising child-centered practice. By examining planning strategies and classroom examples, the chapter highlights how teachers guide learning across the three phases of a project.

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8.2: Overview of Phases I–III (Katz and Chard, 1989)



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Projects usually unfold in three overlapping phases called **Curiosity**, **Exploration**, and **Reflection** that reflect how young children naturally learn. During the **Curiosity** phase, children wonder, pose questions, and observe what is happening around them. In the **Exploration** phase, they investigate ideas through hands-on experiences, imitation, repetition, and experimentation with materials. Finally, the **Reflection** phase invites children to share their ideas, representations, and discoveries with others, helping them make meaning of what they have learned. Each phase builds upon the one before it and guides curiosity into sustained, meaningful inquiry. Although the Project Approach offers a sense of structure, it remains flexible enough to follow the children's lead. Every project will look a little different because every group of children brings different questions, experiences, and backgrounds to their work.

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8.3: Curriculum Requirements, Standards, and Projects

Increasingly, teachers of young children almost always work within defined expectations, whether they come from state frameworks, district curriculum plans, or program standards. Understandably, many educators want to know how project work fits within these requirements. It is important to remember that the Project Approach is not a stand-alone curriculum. It does not replace other learning experiences or prescribe specific content to teach. Instead, it provides a framework through which teachers can meet standards in ways that are meaningful and developmentally appropriate.

Project work often helps teachers accomplish more of the standards than they expect. Because projects invite in-depth exploration, children apply knowledge across domains such as reading, writing, language, problem-solving, mathematics, and science, while also developing confidence and persistence. The structure of the three phases and the focus on investigation help teachers plan intentionally so that learning goals are achieved in a natural and integrated way.

Performance standards indicate how competent or skilled children should become in specific areas. When teachers use authentic documentation such as drawings, tallies, dictated stories, photographs, or work samples, they gather strong evidence of children's progress (Katz & Chard, 1997). Documentation also honors the process of learning rather than only the end result.

Teachers who use the Project Approach report that content standards are not only met but often exceeded. Children demonstrate understanding through their own representations, writing about what they observe, counting objects for data charts, and explaining ideas to others. These skills emerge because the learning has purpose and meaning.

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8.4: Planning for Incorporation of Curriculum and Standards

To make sure that required content and standards are addressed, many teachers plan for them at the start of a project. **One common tool for this early planning is a teacher-created planning web, which helps educators visualize connections between children's interests, curriculum goals, and documentation possibilities.** Unlike class webs, which are generated from children's ideas and questions, or teacher webs, which connect specific activities within a topic to developmental domains or content areas, **planning webs are used by educators to anticipate curricular connections and intentionally prepare for instruction.**

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8.5: Types of Webs Used in Project Work

1. Class Web

- Generated with children
- Captures questions, ideas, predictions, and wonder
- Emerges during Phase I

2. Teacher's Web

- Created by the teacher
- Maps **developmental domains or content areas** related to the topic
- Helps teachers see **curricular breadth** and integration
- Not shared with children as a directive tool

3. Planning Web

- Created by the teacher for intentional planning
- Connects standards (e.g., DRDP), objectives, materials, and documentation
- Used to prepare lessons and assess learning

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8.6: Planning Web Template

This template helps teachers map out possible directions before beginning a project. It keeps planning intentional while leaving room for flexibility as children’s interests evolve.

Center Topic:

Write the main topic in the center of the web—e.g., “Bridges,” “Birds,” or “Shadows.”

Branch 1: What We Already Know

- Children’s prior knowledge
- Everyday experiences
- Vocabulary already used

Branch 2: What We Want to Find Out

- Children’s questions and wonderings
- Predictions or hypotheses

Branch 3: Fieldwork Possibilities

- Possible site visits
- Experts to invite
- Materials or tools for observation

Branch 4: Curriculum Connections

- Science: observation, classification, measurement
- Literacy: vocabulary, dictation, labeling
- Math: counting, comparing, graphing
- Art: drawing, collage, sculpture

Branch 5: Documentation Ideas

- Photos, videos, drawings, dictated stories
- Children’s quotes
- Journals or group displays

Branch 6: Materials and Resources Needed

- Recyclables, natural items, books, digital media
- Fieldwork supplies (clipboards, cameras, etc.)

Example of a Planning Web



The Planning Web was created by AI through ChatGPT for illustration purposes.

The planning web shown above illustrates how teachers can begin organizing curriculum goals, standards, and documentation

before a project begins. Once teachers have visualized potential connections through a planning web, they can move into more systematic planning. The following process is widely used to guide this work:

1. **Gather all applicable requirements:** Collect the standards or learning outcomes for the age group being taught.
2. **Analyze the expectations:** Ask guiding questions such as:
 - What knowledge, skills, and dispositions are children expected to develop?
 - What should children know and be able to do? If unclear, make a separate list and seek clarification.
 - Are there measurable performance standards? For example, does “counting” mean reciting numbers by rote or counting objects one-to-one?
3. **Watch for emerging interests:** Observe the children for signs of curiosity that connect with curricular goals. A topic that excites them and addresses learning outcomes is often the best foundation for a project.
4. **Create a planning web:** Begin by listing and mapping large concepts related to the topic and then connect curriculum goals to those concepts.
5. **Add objectives and documentation methods:** Identify how children’s learning can be captured through photos, dictations, or work samples.

Once the planning web is complete, teachers can review whether the topic supports enough opportunities to meet goals while keeping the experience child-centered. Thinking carefully about this relationship allows teachers to introduce resources, materials, and vocabulary at just the right moments.

As children experiment with different materials such as blocks, paper, cardboard, tape, string, clay, craft sticks, loose parts, and natural objects, they begin to understand that bridges can be built in many ways, each with unique strengths and challenges. This hands-on exploration will bring the project to life.

A word of caution is important. Projects rarely unfold exactly as planned. Children’s interests may shift or narrow to a particular aspect of the topic. Teachers can highlight this new focus and revise connections within the planning web. Revising and adjusting the plans as the project develops helps ensure that learning remains authentic, responsive, and meaningful.

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8.7: Integration of Early Literacy Experiences

Projects naturally strengthen literacy development because reading and writing serve real life purposes. Thus, children read to gather information, write to communicate, and use language to represent their ideas. As projects unfold, books, signs, and labels become part of the investigative process.

Teachers can support literacy development by:

1. Providing books, magazines, and digital resources related to the project.
2. Creating project dictionaries with photos and labels to encourage copying and word recognition.
3. Building a project word wall and adding new vocabulary as discoveries are made.
4. Encouraging purposeful writing, such as labeling drawings, writing questions, making lists, and dictating captions for photos.
5. Supplying clipboards and writing tools for field visits.
6. Drawing children's attention to the role of print in their environment.
7. Having children revisit, redraw, and rewrite ideas to deepen understanding.

When children see their words written down, or hear them read aloud, they understand that their thoughts matter. Literacy takes on meaning when it grows from curiosity.

Classroom Examples:

In the “How Dogs Communicate” project, children could record barking sounds, observe body language, and generate words that describe what they noticed, such as, *growl*, *wag*, *bark*, and *sniff*. They can dictate their findings to teachers, write captions for photos of local dogs, and create a “Dog Communication Museum” for families to visit. Writing, reading, and storytelling all can emerge organically from the children's questions and observations.

In the project on “Bridges,” children might write questions such as “What makes a bridge strong?” and “How does it hold so many cars?” They can label parts of bridges, such as *arches*, *cables*, and *supports*. These words could all be added to their project word wall. Children may record the number of bridges seen on neighborhood walks, make tally charts, and dictate captions for the bridges they build. This way, reading and writing become natural tools for thinking and communicating, not separate lessons apart from their investigations.

Teachers who weave literacy into projects help children recognize that reading and writing are practical, joyful ways to make sense of the world (Helm & Katz, 2011).

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8.8: Parents and Family Engagement

Parent and family participation can greatly enhance project work. Families can bring valuable expertise, materials, perspectives, and encouragement, and children gain pride and confidence when their families are involved in classroom learning.

A simple invitation at the start of a project can make a meaningful difference. Teachers can send home a letter explaining the project topic, the purpose of the study, and specific ways that families can contribute. Parents often feel more involved and connected when they are invited to donate materials, share knowledge, suggest community resources, visit the classroom, or accompany a field trip. These partnerships strengthen learning at school while also extending curiosity and conversation into the home.

The way invitations are extended also matters. Personalized contact, such as a brief conversation or phone call, is often more effective than just a general note. When asking for support, being specific helps families see how their knowledge and experiences can add to the project. For example, “Would you be willing to bring photos of your garden for our plant project?” is clearer and more inviting than “Can you help with the garden project?”

Some parents may feel uncertain about sharing their knowledge and believe that they lack expertise. When teachers explain that the children’s questions guide the project, families often come to understand that everyday experiences, and cultural practices, and practical skills are valuable contributions.

Creating a welcoming environment is also essential. Teachers can prepare children to greet visitors, wear name tags, and show guests around the classroom. When families feel comfortable and respected, they are more likely to return and stay involved.

Documentation panels that include photos of parents working alongside their children build pride and strengthen the sense of community. Culminating events, such as displays, open houses, or performances, give families opportunities to celebrate learning together. Scheduling these events at accessible times allows more families to attend. Many families appreciate the chance to see their child’s work and gain a deeper understanding of the purpose and value of project learning.

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8.9: Putting It All Together

When viewed as a whole, the three phases of the Project Approach form a natural rhythm of learning:

1. **Curiosity:** wondering and asking questions
2. **Exploration:** investigating, revisiting, and representing ideas
3. **Reflection:** sharing, synthesizing, and celebrating learning

Teachers move fluidly between roles: observer, guide, facilitator, and learner. Their role is not to control the process, but to create conditions where discovery, collaboration, and meaning-making can flourish.

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8.10: Closing Thoughts

By integrating curriculum, literacy, and family engagement through project work, we create classrooms that are vibrant, connected, and full of purpose. When standards are integrated into the children's inquiry and families are welcomed as partners, children often experience a joy in discovery while also meeting important learning goals. The Project Approach demonstrates that academic rigor and developmentally appropriate practice are not opposites. In fact, they work best when joined together through meaningful investigation.

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8.11: Chapter Summary

The Project Approach provides a flexible framework for meeting curriculum standards while honoring children's curiosity and ways of learning. Through intentional planning, authentic documentation, and integrated literacy experiences, teachers support deep understanding across developmental domains. When families are welcomed as partners, project work becomes a shared, meaningful learning experience that connects school, home, and community.

Reflection Prompts

How do the three phases of the Project Approach reflect the way young children naturally learn? In what ways can authentic documentation support both curriculum goals and children's inquiry? How might integrating literacy experiences into projects change the way children view reading and writing? What are some practical ways you could invite families to participate in project work during your practicum?

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8.12: Chapter Vocabulary

Project Approach: A curriculum framework that organizes learning around children's questions, investigations, and in-depth studies.

Documentation: The collection of children's work, words, and representations used to make learning visible and guide instructional decisions.

Performance Standards: Descriptions of what children should know and be able to do at various stages of development.

Curriculum Integration: The practice of addressing multiple learning domains and standards within a single meaningful investigation.

Family Engagement: The active involvement of families as partners in children's learning and classroom experiences.

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8.13: Extra Internet Resource Links



Project Approach Study Group (University of Illinois): <https://projectapproach.org>

Foundational articles, examples, and videos directly connected to Katz and Chard's work.

NAEYC- Developmentally Appropriate Practice: <https://www.naeyc.org>

Resources on curriculum, family engagement, and integrated learning in early childhood settings.

Illinois Early Learning Project: <https://illinoisearlylearning.org>

Practical guidance on observation, documentation, literacy, and project-based learning.

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- Katz, L. G., & Chard, S. C. (1997). *The project approach: An overview*. ERIC Digest. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.
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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Using the Project Approach with Specific Populations

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9.1: Chapter Introduction

9



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 9.1:** Distinguish how the Project Approach can be adapted for infants, toddlers, children with special needs, and second language learners.
- **SLO 9.2:** Identify strategies for supporting inclusive learning through project work, including collaboration with families and specialists.
- **SLO 9.3:** Summarize how project-based learning promotes engagement, inquiry, and intellectual dispositions across diverse populations.

Chapter 9 Short Overview

With a foundation in inquiry, documentation, and lesson planning, this chapter explores how the Project Approach can be adapted to support diverse learners, including infants, toddlers, children with special needs, and second language learners. Through classroom examples, it illustrates how inquiry-based projects promote inclusion, engagement, and meaningful learning. The chapter also emphasizes collaboration with families and specialists as essential to successful project work.

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9.2: Inclusive Learning Through the Project Approach



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Many teachers worry that projects may not be appropriate or may be challenging for children with special needs, disabilities, differing abilities, diverse learning needs, or infants and toddlers. However, extensive classroom experience shows that the Project Approach works particularly well in inclusive settings. Because projects are collaborative, flexible, and grounded in children's interests, they naturally support multiple ways of participating, expressing ideas, and demonstrating understanding.

In project work, children's interests are encouraged, and the learning experience can be shaped to meet all children's needs. Projects do not require that every child participates in every experience, which allows for individual education plans and individual abilities. Because much of the work in projects is undertaken in small groups, it is easier to ensure that individual goals are met.

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9.3: Working with Infants

While the Project Approach is most often associated with preschool and primary classrooms, its principles can also inform work with the very youngest learners. Although infants are too young for formal project work, teachers can still apply the *principles* of the Project Approach, such as observation, curiosity, and responsive interaction. For example, an infant teacher might notice a baby's repeated fascination with light and shadow, then hang translucent scarves or use mirrors to extend exploration. Projects at this level are sensory and adult-facilitated but still respect children's agency and inquiry.

A wonderful example of a project with older infants was demonstrated at the Hillcrest House, in Clearlake, California. Here the project was "Pasta." None of the infants had a wheat intolerance. They explored different pastas and different pasta sauces, while being careful not to introduce any foods that might cause allergies. The older infants even participated in making pasta from scratch. These types of early experiences lay the groundwork for later project work by building sustained attention and wonder.

As children move from infancy into toddlerhood, their growing mobility, communication, and curiosity make them ready for more extended, teacher-facilitated investigations. The same sense of wonder that drives infants' explorations can now be channeled into small, hands-on projects that invite deeper engagement.

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9.4: Implementing Projects with Toddlers

Teachers often ask whether the Project Approach can be used with toddlers. Generally, age three is considered the youngest for full implementation, because this age group often needs significant support in the early phases. However, at the Old Firehouse School in Lafayette, California, teachers have successfully adapted the Project Approach for two-year-olds.

One memorable example was their “*Ball Project*.” The project began when parents tossed soft balls into the play yard while children were outside. It literally started “raining balls.” The toddlers eagerly collected and carried the balls but were unsure what else they can do with them. Teachers followed the children’s interest, introducing new ways to explore tossing, kicking, catching, bouncing, and rolling balls. Gradually, they added games and equipment, such as a small basketball hoop, a miniature soccer goal, and a Nerf baseball bat. Teachers modeled dribbling, rolling, and catching while talking about what was happening.

By the end of the project, the toddlers could roll, kick, throw, and catch balls with growing confidence. While toddlers cannot yet create webs or formulate questions for experts, they can investigate simple subjects from multiple perspectives. The Ball Project demonstrates that, with thoughtful scaffolding, even the youngest learners can engage in meaningful inquiry.

Toddlers can become actively involved in the investigation portion of projects. Documentation shows toddlers’ growth in thinking and understanding, and teachers report that parents respond with enthusiasm to these toddler “projects.” While the activities occurring in these classrooms are not the Project Approach as defined by Katz and Chard (2000), they do represent in-depth investigations of topics that are meaningful and appropriate for toddlers. Children are deeply engaged in exploration and learning. Typically, the culmination of a toddler project takes the form of a teacher-created summary that documents what occurred and tells the story of the inquiry.

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9.5: Working with Children with Special Needs

The flexibility of project work makes it particularly well suited to inclusive classrooms. The same strategies that engage toddlers—choice, observation, and exploration—can be adapted to support children with a wide range of abilities and learning needs. Thus, the Project Approach is particularly effective for supporting children with special needs because it emphasizes individualized, hands-on, and social learning. Projects can be easily adapted to each child's developmental level, sensory needs, and communication style. Because participation is flexible, every child can contribute in meaningful ways, whether this is through observation, manipulation of materials, or active dialogue.

When planning projects, teachers can collaborate with special education specialists, therapists, or family members to align project goals with Individualized Education Program (IEP) objectives for children three years of age and older, or Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) objectives for children under age three. Projects allow these goals such as communication, fine motor development, and social interaction, to emerge naturally within authentic learning experiences.

For example, a child with limited verbal skills might document fieldwork through photographs, drawings, or gestures, while a peer provides oral narration. Another child might take a leadership role by organizing materials or assisting with a display. These experiences foster belonging, competence, and collaboration.

Project work integrates multiple modes of representation, visual, tactile, linguistic, and kinesthetic. It provides an inclusive framework that values diverse learning strengths. Children with diversified needs are not only participants in the project process, but also contributors whose unique perspectives enrich the collective investigation. And just as projects can be adapted for children with varying developmental and physical abilities, they also offer rich opportunities for children learning a second language.

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9.6: Supporting Second Language Learners

Projects can be very helpful for second language students. Teachers can use the Project Approach to help these students meet language goals. Focusing projects on the children's immediate environment and the interests of the children and their families helps achieve language goals.

Christian (1994) says that for bilingual classrooms, experiential or hands-on learning works especially well because students can get meaning from experience as well as from language. Christian also suggests that graphic representation techniques such as webbing, small group discussions, and direct experience on field trips help children pick up relationships that might be missed because of language differences. These experiences also reinforce new vocabulary and concepts (Katz, 2011).

Wong Fillmore (1985) recommends strategies for children who are just learning to speak English. Many of these are already part of the Project Approach or are easily incorporated.

The strategies recommended are (Katz, 2011):

1. **Use demonstrations.** These can occur during field site visits and classroom visits by experts. Bringing artifacts into the classroom for children to use or incorporate into dramatic play increases understanding of what was demonstrated.
2. **Model and role-play.**
3. **Provide new information in the context of known information.** Discussion enables children to connect new words and concepts with what they already know.
4. **Repeat words, sentence patterns, and routines.**
5. **Tailor questions** for different levels of language competence and participation.

Because language learning is deeply connected to children's home experiences and cultural contexts, collaboration with families is a critical component of inclusive project work.

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9.7: Family and Community Partnerships

Teachers collaborate with families of diverse learners to strengthen project work and ensure inclusive participation. Effective strategies include:

- Using family interviews to identify topics connected to children's home lives and cultural experiences
 - Inviting parents or community members who speak other languages or work in relevant professions to share knowledge and experiences
 - Providing translated materials, visual supports, or multilingual documentation so all families can engage meaningfully with classroom learning
-

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9.8: The Broader Impact of the Project Approach

The Project Approach strengthens intellectual dispositions, as well as social skills. These benefits alone are reason enough to engage in project work. Projects help children develop expectations about what answers may emerge from the questions they pose, while reducing reliance on rote learning, drills, and isolated exercises. It gives children a basis from which to predict what answers will come from the questions they have posed.

For both children and teachers, project work reenergizes a love of learning. Children engage deeply with meaningful topics, while teachers participate alongside them as curious learners. Through observing, listening, and documenting, teachers gain insight not only into the project topic, but also into the processes through which children construct understanding.

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9.9: Teacher Reflection and Collaboration

Inclusive project work also supports teachers' professional growth. Collaboration with specialists, co-teachers, and families encourages reflective practice and shared inquiry. Katz and Chard (2000) describe teachers as “*researchers of learning*.” This stance invites educators to approach each project as both a teaching opportunity and a form of professional investigation. By intentionally observing, documenting, and reflecting, teachers deepen their understanding of how children while continuing to learn themselves.

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9.10: Chapter Summary

The Project Approach provides a flexible framework for inclusive learning across a wide range of developmental abilities and language backgrounds. By adapting project work to children's interests, strengths, and needs, teachers support participation, inquiry, and belonging for all learners. Collaboration with families, specialists, and colleagues strengthens both teaching practice and children's learning experiences.

Reflection Prompts

How does the flexibility of the Project Approach support inclusion for children with diverse abilities and language backgrounds? What adaptations might be necessary to use project work with infants or toddlers? How can collaboration with families and specialists strengthen inclusive project work? Reflect on a child you have observed. How might project work support that child's interests, strengths, and needs?

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9.11: Chapter Vocabulary

Inclusive Practice: Teaching approaches that support the participation and learning of all children, regardless of ability or background.

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A legal document outlining specific goals and supports for a child with identified disabilities.

Second Language Learners (SLLs): Children who are learning a language in addition to their home language.

Scaffolding: Instructional support that helps children extend their learning and gradually gain independence.

Multiple Modes of Representation: Different ways children express understanding, such as drawing, movement, speech, or construction.

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9.12: Extra Internet Resource Links



Extra Internet Resources for Understanding

Project Approach Study Group (University of Illinois): <https://projectapproach.org>

Foundational resources, examples, and research connected to Katz and Chard.

DEC (Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children): <https://www.dec-sped.org>

Evidence-based practices for inclusive early childhood education.

Colorín Colorado: <https://www.colorincolorado.org>

Practical strategies and resources for supporting dual language learners.

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9.13: Chapter References



Christian, D. (1994). *Two-Way Bilingual Education: Students Learning Through Two Languages*. Center for Applied Linguistics/National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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10.1: Chapter Introduction

10



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 10.1:** Distinguish between documentation and display, explaining how documentation makes learning visible.
- **SLO 10.2:** Identify multiple forms of documentation used to support assessment, reflection, and planning.
- **SLO 10.3:** Summarize how pedagogical documentation supports collaborative reflection and responsive teaching.

Chapter 10 Short Overview ✂

This chapter explores documentation as a powerful tool for making children's learning visible. Drawing from the Reggio Emilia and Project Approach traditions, it explains how documentation supports assessment, reflection, and instructional planning. The chapter also highlights how documentation strengthens communication with families and deepens collaborative professional practice.

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10.2: The Power of Documentation



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Documentation is far more than collecting students' work. It's a way of seeing and understanding learning. Inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, documentation captures children's thinking, problem-solving, and **relationships with peers, adults, and materials** as they unfold. It helps teachers, children, and families recognize the depth of learning that might otherwise remain unseen or unnoticed. As Katz and Chard (2000) emphasize, observation and interpretation are integral to understanding what children know and what they can do. Thus, documentation turns fleeting moments into stories of growth.

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10.3: Collecting Evidence of Learning

Teachers can gather many forms of evidence, depending on the project's goals and developmental levels:

- **Photographs and video clips** showing exploration, collaboration, and process
- **Planning webs** that evolve across the phases of a project
- **Anecdotal notes and transcribed quotes** capturing children's language and reasoning
- **Children's art, writing, or constructions** that reveal emerging understanding
- **Audio recordings** of storytelling or peer dialogue that capture expressive language

Together, these artifacts tell the story of both the learning process and growth. The key is intentionality and deciding what to capture, why it matters, and how the information will inform instruction.

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10.4: Documentation for Assessment and Reflection

Documentation is one of the most authentic ways to assess learning (Helm & Katz, 2011). Instead of relying only on checklists or standardized tools, teachers can use photos, notes, and observations to see how children apply new ideas, solve problems, and show emerging skills. Helm and Katz (2011) describe documentation as both a *mirror* and a map; it reflects children's thinking while guiding teachers toward their next steps. Taking time to review what's been collected helps teachers plan new experiences, adapt instruction, and create environments. These all support inquiry.

For children, revisiting documentation offers a chance to pause and think about their own learning, which builds metacognition. Looking back at their drawings, stories, or photos helps them see progress and recognize how their thinking has changed. This kind of reflection builds pride, confidence, and a growing sense of ownership over their learning journey.

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10.5: Sample Ideas for a Documentation Board for “How Dogs Communicate”

Project Title:How Dogs Communicate

Guiding Question:

“How do dogs tell us what they need or how they feel?”

Photos:

Several photographs of the service animal visiting the classroom, children observing dogs in their neighborhood, a veterinarian explaining how dogs are cared for, and children role-playing dog movements during dramatic play.

Children's Words (Dictation):

- “When the dog growls, it means go away.” Emma, Age 4
- “The tail wags fast when the dog is happy.” Jack, Age 4
- “He hungry when his brings his bowl.” Lucy, Age 3

Children's Representations:

Drawings of dogs and some with labeled body parts such as *ears*, *tail*, and *mouth*.

Vocabulary Development:

Behavior Words:

Bark • Growl • Whimper • Wag • Pant

Concept Words:

Canine • Service Dog • Body Language • Den • Tail • Ears • Paws

Teacher Reflection:

“Children are beginning to connect body language to emotional meaning. These shared discussions, children demonstrate growing empathy, respect for animals, and an emerging understanding of responsible care.”

Curriculum Connections:

- **Language & Literacy:** Dictated sentences, vocabulary development (DRDP 2025–FLD 2 & FLD 3)
- **Social-Emotional Development:** Interpreting emotions and empathy (SED 3 & SED 4)
- **Science:** Observation and comparison (COG SCI 1)
- **Documentation/Assessment:** Anecdotal documentation (FLD 3; SED 3; & COG SCI 1)

Social Emotion:

Children learned that caring for dogs includes:

- Providing food, water, and shelter
- Engaging in play and gentle interaction
- Maintaining health through grooming and exercise
- Visiting a veterinarian for preventive care (checkups, vaccinations, and medicine)

Field Visit:

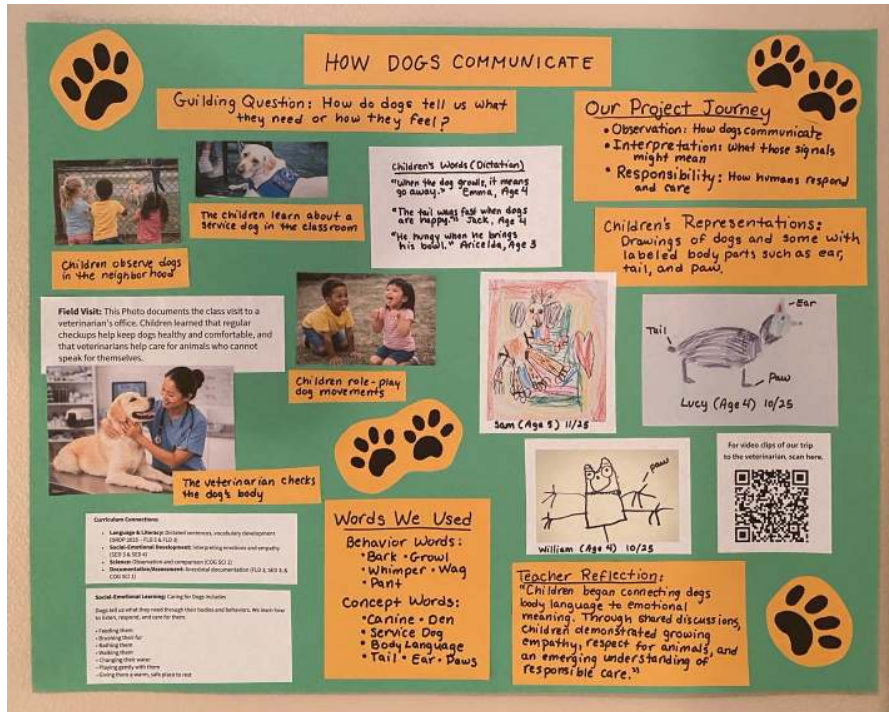
Photos and captions document the class visit to a veterinarian’s office. Children learned that regular checkups help keep dogs healthy and comfortable, and that veterinarians help care for animals who cannot speak for themselves.

Children's Thinking (Reflective Question for Children):

- “How can we tell when a dog is scared or needs help?”
 - “The ears go back.”
 - “Sometimes the head goes down.”

- “My dog cries and whimpers.”
- “He hides under the bed.”
- “The tail don’t wag.”

Sample Documentation Board for “How Dogs Communicate”



HOW DOGS COMMUNICATE

Guiding Question: How do dogs tell us what they need or how they feel?

Our Project Journey

- Observation: How dogs communicate
- Interpretation: What these signals might mean
- Responsibility: How humans respond and care

Children's Words (Dictation)

"When the dog growls, it means go away." Emma, Age 4

"The tail wags fast when dogs are happy." Jack, Age 4

"He runs when he brings his bowl." Aricelda, Age 3

Children's Representations: Drawings of dogs and some with labeled body parts such as ear, tail, and paw.

Sam (Age 8) 11/25

Lucy (Age 4) 10/25

William (Age 4) 10/25

For video clips of our trip to the veterinarian, scan here.

Field Visit: This photo documents the class visit to a veterinarian's office. Children learned that regular checkups help keep dogs healthy and comfortable, and that veterinarians help care for animals who cannot speak for themselves.

Children observe dogs in the neighborhood

The children learn about a service dog in the classroom

Children role-play dog movements

The veterinarian checks the dog's body

Words We Used

Behavior Words:

- Bark • Growl
- Whimper • Wag
- Pant

Concept Words:

- Canine • Den
- Service Dog
- Body Language
- Tail • Ear • Paws

Teacher Reflection:

"Children began connecting dogs' body language to emotional meaning. Through shared discussions, children demonstrated growing empathy, respect for animals, and an emerging understanding of responsible care."

Curriculum Connections:

- Language & Literacy: Shared narratives, vocabulary development (LAFS.2022-12.2.6.3-4.2.6.4)
- Social-Emotional Development: Integrating emotions and empathy (2022-12.2.6.4)
- Science: Observation and comparison (SC.50.12)
- Document Analysis/Research: Research documentation (FLA.1.3.12.2.4, 1.3.12.2.5, 1.3.12.2.6)

Social-Emotional Learning: Caring for Dogs Initiative

Dogs tell us a lot of things about their needs through their bodies and behaviors. We learn how to listen, respond, and care for them.

- Feeding them
- Drinking water
- Resting them
- Playing with them
- Changing their water
- Playing gently with them
- Giving them a warm, safe place to rest

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10.6: Communicating Learning to Families

Documentation bridges school and home and even can extend learning into the border community. Panels, portfolios, and digital journals invite families into the learning process by making children's thinking visible. Sharing these materials in public community spaces such as a library, veterinary office, or bank lobby, invites the whole community into the process. When families and communities see the children's questions, words, and representations displayed, they gain a deeper understanding the complexity and purpose of classroom learning.

In the *"How Dogs Communicate"* project, documentation panels included photographs of children observing dogs' body language, children's drawings of dogs with labeled features, and dictated statements explaining what different movements and sounds might mean. QR codes linked to short videos or audio clips from a visit to the veterinarian, allow families to hear children's explanations in their own voices. These interactive elements add depth to the documentation and make learning more accessible for families who could not visit the classroom or join the field trip.

To spark conversation and reinforce learning at home, teachers may also send brief documentation summaries to families. For example:

"Today we learned that dogs communicate using their bodies and sounds. Children noticed that ears going back, tails not wagging, and whimpering can be signs that a dog feels scared or needs help. Ask your child how they think we can help dogs feel safe."

These short summaries invite families to continue the conversation at home while honoring children's observations and emerging empathy.

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10.7: More Than Displaying Art

Documentation is different from decoration. While displaying children's work can make a classroom look beautiful, documentation goes deeper and it provides context and/or meaning. Documentation explains **“what”** children were learning. It explains **“why”** the experience mattered, and **“how”** growth occurred. And when teachers add captions, notes, or short narratives, those displays become stories or snapshots of what was learned. This will invite reflection from both children and adults.

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10.8: Collaborative Reflection and Pedagogical Documentation

The definition of “pedagogy” is the art, science, or practice of teaching, including the methods, strategies, and theories that shape how learning happens. And it considers what is taught, how it’s taught, and how developmental and cultural factors influence one’s learning.

In the Reggio Emilia approach, documentation isn’t just for display, but it’s also for study. Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (1998) remind us that pedagogical documentation turns teaching into research. And it encourages educators to look closely at children’s thinking while also reflecting on their own practice. Teachers often meet as a team to discuss and interpret the children’s work. They typically share observations and discuss emerging patterns of thought. These collaborative conversations, sometimes called “*pedagogical documentation*,” transform simple data into deep insight.

Through reflective and collaborative meetings, teachers move from describing “*what*” happened towards asking “*why*” it happened. And then they move onto “*how*” to build from it. Katz and Chard (2000) note that such dialogue strengthens teachers’ ability to plan responsively, connect learning across domains, and better understand each child’s development. Helm and Katz (2011) and Edwards et al. (1998) both emphasize that reflection deepens teachers’ insight into how children learn and elevates teaching into an ongoing process of inquiry.

When teams analyze documentation together, they:

- Identify emerging interests or themes across groups of children
- Connect children’s ideas to developmental frameworks and standards
- Generate new questions for investigation or project extensions
- Reflect on teaching strategies that supported (or limited) inquiry

Collaborative reflection also nurtures a professional learning community where teachers view themselves as researchers of learning. Over time, this habit deepens collegial trust, refines instructional practice, and reinforces that documentation is both a tool for *teaching* and a mirror for *professional growth*.

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10.9: Closing Thoughts

Documentation helps teachers tell the ever-unfolding story of the children's learning. It may begin with a note about a child's idea, a quick photo, an interesting quote, or a simple reflection at the end of a day. And these methods of documentation capture discovery and emotion that might otherwise be forgotten. This means that over time, they help teachers see children as creative thinkers, who learn through curiosity, interaction, and collaboration. Documentation also helps teachers on their own learning journey because it inspires reflection and helps generate new ideas. These stories are powerful when they're shared and can strengthen community and trust. Now, as you begin to plan your project work, remember that documentation is both a record and a guide. It shows where you've been and helps direct where learning is ready to go next.

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10.10: Chapter Summary

Documentation transforms everyday moments into meaningful records of learning and growth. Through intentional observation, reflection, and collaboration, teachers use documentation to guide instruction and deepen understanding of children's thinking. When shared with children, families, and colleagues, documentation becomes a bridge that connects inquiry, assessment, and community.

Chapter 10 Reflection Prompts

How does documentation differ from simply displaying children's work? What types of documentation do you find most helpful for understanding children's thinking? How might documentation support your communication with families? In what ways can collaborative reflection on documentation strengthen teaching practice?

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10.11: Chapter Vocabulary

Documentation: The intentional collection and interpretation of children's work, words, and actions to make learning visible.

Pedagogical Documentation: The collaborative study of documentation to reflect on teaching and learning processes.

Metacognition: Awareness and reflection on one's own thinking and learning.

Anecdotal Notes: Brief, focused written observations of children's behavior, language, or interactions.

Representation: The many ways children express understanding, including drawing, building, writing, movement, and speech.

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10.12: Extra Internet Resource Links



Project Approach Study Group (University of Illinois): <https://projectapproach.org>

Foundational resources on documentation, inquiry, and project work.

Reggio Children- Documentation and Pedagogy: <https://www.reggiochildren.it>

Articles and examples of pedagogical documentation in practice.

NAEYC- Observation, Assessment, and Documentation: <https://www.naeyc.org>

Guidance on authentic assessment and developmentally appropriate documentation.

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10.13: Chapter References



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

11: Mentoring Student Teachers and Adult Learners

- 11.1: Chapter Introduction
- 11.2: The Role of the Mentor
- 11.3: Supervision and Support Networks
- 11.4: Matching Mentors and Student Teachers
- 11.5: The Seven Steps of Mentoring
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 Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 11.1:** Distinguish between mentoring, supervision, and coaching roles in practicum and professional learning contexts.
- **SLO 11.2:** Identify effective mentoring strategies that support adult learners' growth, confidence, and professional identity.
- **SLO 11.3:** Summarize mentoring frameworks and evaluation approaches that promote reflective practice and ethical leadership.

Chapter 11 Short Overview

This chapter explores the role of mentoring in supporting student teachers and adult learners during practicum experiences. It examines mentoring structures, relationship-building strategies, and developmental frameworks that guide effective supervision and professional growth. The chapter also introduces evaluation and feedback models that strengthen reflective practice and leadership capacity.

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11.2: The Role of the Mentor



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Practicum experiences are where theory meets practice—where new teachers begin the journey of transforming coursework into meaningful interactions with children. These early experiences shape professional identity and confidence. Because of this, mentoring plays a vital role in helping student teachers integrate knowledge, refine skills, and develop reflective habits.

New teachers often need daily, even hourly, support. Mentors plan to spend time each day observing, modeling best practices, and providing feedback. This creates a rich, collaborative learning environment. As Sciarra et al. (2016) explain, “What you are doing, in effect, is providing hourly or daily support during the initial trust-building period but stepping back when the new teacher can function independently. You are scaffolding the experience for the teacher just as you would for a child in the classroom, gradually increasing the challenge as you stay nearby because your ongoing support is still important when things do not go well” (p. 308).

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11.3: Supervision and Support Networks

All adult learners in practicum placements must be supervised to ensure the welfare of both the children and the teacher-in-training. Participation in a formal mentoring program strengthens supervision quality and consistency. Many states have developed early childhood mentor programs. For instance, the California Early Childhood Mentor Association (CECMA) partners with community colleges to provide guidance for students and professionals. Similar programs exist in New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Colorado, Iowa, and Michigan, each supporting professional development through reflective and relational practice.

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11.4: Matching Mentors and Student Teachers

The process of pairing a student teacher (mentee) with a mentor should be intentional and collaborative. A good fit—based on teaching style, communication, and mutual respect—can make all the difference. The mentee must feel comfortable and supported.

Mentoring structures vary:

- **Structured Mentor Programs:** Full-time mentors are matched with several mentees and provide regular observation and feedback
- **Unstructured Mentor Programs:** A list of mentors is available for mentees to select from; typically, 1–3 mentees per mentor. Mentors visit the practicum site, observe, and help develop action plans typically lasting 3–6 months
- **Formal Leadership Mentor Programs:** Designed to prepare experienced educators for leadership roles through individualized, intensive mentoring

Once placements are established, the mentoring process can begin.

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11.5: The Seven Steps of Mentoring

Step 1: Building Relationships

Effective mentoring begins with trust. The mentor should introduce themselves and establish rapport by actively listening, showing genuine interest, and sharing relevant experiences. As Peterka (2024) explains, mentors build trust by being empathetic and reliable, creating psychological safety for open communication. Without this foundation, mentoring is less effective.

Step 2: Orientation

This phase sets direction and defines expectations. Mentor and mentee should agree on:

- Roles and responsibilities
- Meeting times and frequency
- Goals, timelines, and evaluation methods
- Procedures for accessing materials and support

Providing written information, such as handbooks, policies, or the program philosophy, clarifies responsibilities and reinforces professionalism. Clarity prevents confusion and keeps the focus on growth.

Step 3: Goal Setting

Together, mentors and mentees identify goals that are specific, realistic, and achievable. Many new teachers need guidance in setting developmentally appropriate teaching goals. The mentor helps break these goals into smaller, manageable steps with measurable outcomes.

Step 4: Action

In this phase, the mentee implements strategies, tries new approaches, and reflects on what works. The mentor provides ongoing feedback, resources, and encouragement. Peterka (2024) notes that mentors help mentees navigate challenges and self-doubt, strengthening resilience and confidence.

Step 5: Reflection and Feedback

Feedback is an essential part of professional learning. Mentors should offer it with care, balancing encouragement with constructive critique. Reflective conversations allow mentees to identify barriers, acknowledge growth, and make thoughtful changes. Sensitivity and empathy are key.

Step 6: Winding Down

As the practicum ends, mentoring naturally transitions toward closure. The mentor helps the mentee reflect on progress, celebrate successes, and plan for continued growth. This phase may also include introducing the mentee to professional networks or next-step opportunities.

Step 7: Moving On

The final stage involves stepping back and allowing the mentee greater autonomy. Ideally, the mentor remains available for occasional guidance and encouragement, even as formal supervision decreases. Many mentoring relationships evolve into lasting professional friendships built on mutual respect and shared learning (Peterka, 2024).

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11.6: Transformative Coaching Model

Another useful framework is the Transformative Coaching Model, which unfolds in three phases:

1. **Foundational:** Relationship building, setting expectations, and developing an action plan with timelines.
2. **Transformative Learning:** The mentee internalizes new concepts and demonstrates growth in performance and understanding.
3. **Reflective Dialogue:** Mentor and mentee engage in ongoing reflection, deepening their commitment to applying new learning.

This model highlights mentorship as a reciprocal process that transforms both teacher and mentor.

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11.7: Evaluation and Professional Growth

Evaluation is an ongoing process that fosters reflection and accountability. As Lance (2025) explains, effective evaluation methods support desired outcomes and build morale. Common evaluation approaches include self-assessment, peer review, and management by objectives (MBO), each providing opportunities for reflection and growth.

Common Performance Appraisal Types (Lance, 2025, para. 16)

Type	Best for	Key Benefit	Watch Out for
Traditional Top-Down	Clear hierarchies	Simple and direct	Can feel one-sided or biased
360-Degree Feedback	Leadership development	Well-rounded feedback	Time-consuming and sometimes inconsistent
Self-Assessment	Coaching and reflection	Promotes ownership	Can be inflated or too self-critical
Peer Review	Team-focused roles	Captures peer-level insights	Risk of bias or tension
Management by Objectives (MBO)	Goal-driven work	Aligns goals and outcomes	Can miss the human side of work
Rating Scale (1-5)	Standardizing performance	Easy comparisons	Can oversimplify performance
Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scale (BARS)	Roles with observable behaviors	Reduces subjectivity	Time intensive to build and maintain; may cause fatigue
Checklist / Weighted Checklist	Large teams or admin simplicity	Fast and consistent	Lacks nuance
Continuous Performance Management (CPM)	Fast-paced environments	Real-time feedback	Can overwhelm if unstructured

Niche Performance Appraisal Types (Lance, 2025, para. 17)

Type	Best For	Key Benefit	Watch Out For
Critical Incident Method	Coaching or behavioral roles	Ties feedback to specific events	Misses broader patterns
Narrative Appraisal	Complex or creative roles	Personalized, detailed feedback	Inconsistent across reviewers
Project-Based Appraisal	Short-term or freelance work	Timely and relevant	Hard to track long-term behaviors
Competency-Based Appraisal	Skill development	Clear growth targets	May miss impact on outcomes
Forced Ranking	High-competition environments	Sharp differentiation	Can damage morale or teamwork
HR Accounting Method	Finance-driven orgs	Ties talent to ROI	Can feel impersonal or abstract
Psychological Appraisal	HiPo identification	Predicts future potential	Requires trained professionals and care in delivery

Combining methods often yields the best results. For instance, pairing self-assessment with reflective discussion helps mentees take ownership of their progress while receiving meaningful feedback from mentors. The goal of evaluation is not judgment, but professional development, which is a cornerstone of ethical and reflective practice.

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11.8: Chapter Summary

Mentoring is a relational and reflective process that supports new teachers as they develop confidence, competence, and professional identity. Through intentional relationship-building, goal setting, feedback, and evaluation, mentors guide adult learners toward greater independence and growth. Effective mentoring benefits not only the mentee but also the mentor, strengthening teaching practice and professional communities.

Reflection Prompts

What qualities do you think are most important in an effective mentor, and why? How can mentoring relationships support both professional growth and emotional resilience? Which mentoring step or framework in this chapter resonates most with your learning style? How should evaluation and feedback be used to support growth rather than judgment?

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11.9: Chapter Vocabulary

Mentor: An experienced professional who supports another's learning and growth through guidance, feedback, and relationship-building.

Mentee: A student teacher or adult learner who receives support and guidance through a mentoring relationship.

Scaffolding: Temporary support that helps learners build skills and confidence until they can work independently.

Reflective Practice: The process of examining one's experiences to improve professional decision-making and growth.

Performance Appraisal: A structured method for evaluating professional performance to support development and accountability.

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11.10: Extra Internet Resource Links



NAEYC- Professional Learning and Leadership: <https://www.naeyc.org>

Resources on mentoring, reflective practice, and leadership in early childhood education.

California Early Childhood Mentor Program / CECMA: <https://www.cecma.org>

Information on mentoring structures, professional development, and reflective supervision.

The Mentoring Partnership (National): <https://www.mentoring.org>

Research-based mentoring frameworks applicable to adult learners and educators.

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11.11: Chapter References



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12.1: Chapter Introduction

12



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 12.1:** Analyze potential project topics to determine their feasibility, relevance, and developmental appropriateness.
- **SLO 12.2:** Design planning tools (e.g., webs, checklists, fieldwork forms) that support inquiry-based project work.
- **SLO 12.3:** Apply documentation and reflection to inform responsive planning and next steps in project implementation.

Chapter 12 Short Overview

This chapter bridges planning and practice within the Project Approach by offering practical tools for selecting topics, organizing fieldwork, and designing environments for inquiry. It emphasizes planning as a flexible, reflective process that evolves through documentation and collaboration. Teachers learn how thoughtful preparation creates the conditions for meaningful, child-centered investigations.

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12.2: Implementing Project Work



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Project work becomes most powerful when theory meets classroom practice. Translating the principles of the Project Approach into daily routines requires thoughtful preparation, flexibility, and responsiveness to children's ideas. This chapter provides practical guidance for teachers preparing to plan and implement a project, from selecting topics to organizing fieldwork and designing environments that inspire inquiry. Planning does not mean scripting every moment; rather, it involves anticipating possibilities and creating space for authentic investigation.

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12.3: Planning and Documentation Are Two Sides of the Same Coin

The thoughtful preparation that begins a project, such as selecting topics, designing environments, and planning for fieldwork, naturally evolves into documentation once the investigation begins. The tools in this section help teachers bridge that process.

Each template encourages educators to think intentionally about what children are learning, how that learning can be made visible, and what next steps might emerge. By using checklists, webs, and planning forms, teachers record not only logistical details but also pedagogical reflections, which capture the ongoing dialogue between planning, observation, and responsive teaching.

These resources can be adapted for college coursework, classroom projects, or mentor–mentee collaboration. Over time, they become artifacts of professional growth, which is evidence of how thoughtful planning transforms curiosity into meaningful learning.

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12.4: Selecting “Doable” Topics

Choosing the right topic is one of the most important steps in successful project work. Katz and Chard (2000) recommend selecting topics that connect to children’s everyday experiences while offering opportunities for investigation and discovery.

- Good project topics are tangible, observable, and accessible, such as: Bridges, Birds in Our Neighborhood, or The Bakery
- Projects that are too broad include: Transportation or Weather
- Projects that are too narrow include: Red Trucks or Circles

Teachers can test the strength of a topic by asking:

- Can children learn directly through firsthand experience and fieldwork?
- Does the topic invite problem-solving, exploration, and collaboration?
- Can it connect to multiple developmental domains and curriculum standards?

Encouraging children to participate in topic selection builds ownership and engagement. Teachers can begin with a class discussion or shared brainstorming web by asking, “What have you been wondering about lately?” or “What would you like to find out?” Often, children’s questions point directly to strong project topics.

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12.5: Topic Selection Checklist

Use the following checklist to decide whether a potential project topic is both “doable” and developmentally meaningful. Strong project topics emerge from children’s genuine interests and allow for hands-on investigation, collaboration, and curriculum integration.

Questions to Consider	Yes No	Notes/Examples
Can children explore the topic through firsthand experience or observation?	☐ ☐	e.g., Children can visit, build, or collect related materials.
Does the topic connect to children’s everyday lives or community?	☐ ☐	e.g., Nearby park, construction site, garden.
Questions to Consider	Yes No	Notes/Examples
Can children investigate over time, with opportunities to revisit ideas?	☐ ☐	Sustained inquiry builds depth of learning.
Will this topic encourage problem-solving and creative thinking?	☐ ☐	e.g., Building, classifying, comparing, predicting.
Can it be explored through multiple domains (language, math, science, art)?	☐ ☐	Multidisciplinary potential is key.
Is it rich enough to include expert input or field experiences?	☐ ☐	Can guests, families, or field trips enhance the project?
Is the topic culturally relevant and inclusive for your group?	☐ ☐	Reflects children’s backgrounds and interests.
Is it safe, age-appropriate, and feasible with your available resources?	☐ ☐	Practical constraints matter.
Are there clear opportunities to document learning?	☐ ☐	Allows for visible evidence of thinking and growth.

Tip: If most of your answers are “Yes,” you’ve likely found a strong and meaningful project topic. If many are “No,” consider refining or combining ideas.

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12.6: Refining Planning Webs

As discussed in chapter 8, planning webs help teachers visualize the relationships between children's interests, curriculum goals, and potential learning opportunities. Remember that an planning web is created before a project begins and might anticipate and include some of the following:

- Key concepts and vocabulary
- Possible fieldwork sites or community experts
- Connections to literacy, math, science, and social studies
- Ideas for documentation and assessment

As the project develops, the planning web evolves. Teachers update it to reflect the questions children ask, the new directions they pursue, and the discoveries they make along the way. This living document ensures the project remains both responsive and intentional. **Tips:** When introducing webs to children, use pictures or simple icons to represent ideas. This visual approach invites participation from children who are not yet writing and helps everyone see their contributions as part of the collective plan. Keep your planning web posted near your documentation area. As the project unfolds, add sticky notes or photos to show how your thinking, and the children's thinking, has evolved.

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12.7: Planning Web Checklist

Use the following checklist to ensure that your evolving planning web includes both the practical and reflective elements of project work. A well-developed web supports children's inquiry while aligning with developmental and curricular goals.

Questions to Consider	Yes No	Notes/Examples
Have you included children's prior knowledge and questions?	☐ ☐	Capture their words, drawings, or discussions.
Does the web identify possible directions for inquiry rather than a fixed plan?	☐ ☐	Leave space for new discoveries.
Are curriculum connections (science, literacy, math, art) visible?	☐ ☐	Note which domains naturally emerge.
Have you listed fieldwork or expert visit ideas?	☐ ☐	Think about local resources and community ties.
Are documentation methods identified (photos, quotes, journals)?	☐ ☐	How will you make learning visible?
Is the web visually clear and collaborative?	☐ ☐	Consider using children's drawings or icons.
Have you revisited and updated the web as the project evolves?	☐ ☐	Reflect new questions or discoveries over time.

Tip: Post your planning web where children can see it and contribute ideas. Invite them to add photos, drawings, or sticky notes as their understanding grows. This shows that their thinking shapes the project.

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12.8: Sample Fieldwork Planning Form

Project Title:	Guiding Question:
Age Group:	Date(s):
Planning Questions:	Details/Notes:
· Where are we going or who is visiting?	
· What do children want to find out?	
· What materials or tools will we bring?	
· How will children record their observations?	
· What are the safety and supervision considerations?	
· How will we follow up after the field experience?	
· How can families participate or extend learning at home?	

Tip: After each fieldwork experience, take a few minutes to write down children’s comments, sketches, and spontaneous ideas. These details often become the seeds for the next phase of the project.

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12.9: Using Fieldwork Planning Checklists

Fieldwork connects classroom inquiry to the real world. Use the following checklist as a guide for preparing meaningful, purposeful, safe, and developmentally appropriate field experiences. Strong field experiences connect directly to children's investigations, encourage observation and inquiry, and help extend project learning beyond the classroom. Thoughtful preparation ensures that children can explore, question, and document their discoveries in authentic ways.

Fieldwork Planning Checklist

Questions to Consider	Yes No	Notes/Examples
Have you confirmed the purpose of the fieldwork with the children?	☐ ☐	e.g., "We're going to the bakery to find out how bread rises."
Have children helped generate questions to guide the visit?	☐ ☐	Builds ownership, focus, and curiosity.
Can all children participate safely and comfortably?	☐ ☐	Consider accessibility, allergies, and sensory needs.
Are safety and accessibility needs addressed for all children?	☐ ☐	Include children with special needs and sensory needs.
Are supervision plans and ratios clearly established?	☐ ☐	Confirm with site policy.
Have you discussed expectations for behavior and observation with children?	☐ ☐	Talk about being respectful visitors and scientists.
Have you confirmed transportation, permissions, and schedules?	☐ ☐	Collect permission slips early.
Have you prepared tools for observation and documentation (clipboards, cameras, notebooks)?	☐ ☐	Choose age-appropriate methods.
Have you planned follow-up discussions or representation activities after the visit?	☐ ☐	Drawing, dictation, dramatization, or displays.
Can families participate or extend learning at home?	☐ ☐	Invite family photos or stories related to the topic.
Will you revisit the documentation with children to reflect on what they discovered?	☐ ☐	Strengthens metacognition and recall.

Tip: Before heading out, review your checklist with your mentor or site supervisor. Talking through the plan together helps anticipate challenges you might overlook on your own, such as accessibility, timing, or group dynamics. During the visit, carry a small notebook or use sticky notes to capture children's comments and questions. These spontaneous observations often become key evidence in your documentation and can inspire the next steps of the project.

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12.10: Integrating These Tools

Treat these templates and checklists as living documents rather than forms to complete once. They can be revised, annotated, and expanded as children's investigations unfold. This habit builds reflective practice and reinforces the idea that planning in the Project Approach is a cycle, not a script. Thoughtful planning does not end when the project begins; it evolves through documentation, reflection, and collaboration. Each tool serves as both a record of the learning process and a guide for what might come next.

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12.11: Preparing for Fieldwork and Expert Visits

Field experiences bring the curriculum to life. Visiting a bakery, post office, garden, or veterinarian clinic provides authentic, sensory-rich learning that deepens understanding. Preparation is key to meaningful fieldwork:

1. **Plan collaboratively.** Engage children in listing what they already know and what they hope to learn.
2. **Prepare logistics.** Contact the site, confirm safety procedures, and arrange transportation and supervision.
3. **Gather observation tools.** Clipboards, notebooks, pencils, and digital cameras support children's documentation.
4. **Preview expectations.** Discuss with children how to behave respectfully as visitors and learners.

After the visit, teachers guide reflection and recall by asking children to draw, write, or dictate what they observed. Experts may also be invited into the classroom to demonstrate skills, answer questions, or share their experiences. These encounters enrich children's understanding and connect classroom learning to the broader community.

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12.12: Designing Environments for Inquiry

The classroom environment serves as what Reggio educators call the “third teacher” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Its design communicates expectations and values about learning. A thoughtfully arranged environment supports curiosity, independence, and collaboration.

Teachers can:

- Arrange materials so children can access and return them independently
- Provide spaces for small-group investigations, large-group discussions, and quiet reflection
- Include documentation panels that show the process of learning rather than only finished products
- Offer open-ended materials such as blocks, art supplies, natural objects, recycled items, and writing tools

A well-prepared classroom conveys respect for children’s competence and encourages exploration. When children see their questions and discoveries reflected in the environment, they understand that their ideas matter.

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12.13: Collaborative Planning with Colleagues

Effective project work often involves collaboration among co-teachers, assistants, and specialists. Shared planning builds consistency and ensures that everyone understands the project's goals. Brief daily reflections or planning huddles allow teachers to share observations and plan next steps together. Collaborative planning also models professional dialogue and reflective practice for student teachers and assistants.

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12.14: Using Documentation to Guide Planning

Documentation collected during a project, such as photographs, children's quotes, sketches, and notes, all serve as a roadmap for next steps. Reviewing documentation allows teachers to identify patterns of interest, emerging questions, and learning progress. Helm and Katz (2011) emphasize that documentation helps teachers plan responsively: it makes children's thinking visible and informs decisions about how to extend inquiry.

For example, if documentation shows children repeatedly sketching bridges with arches, the next step might involve introducing real photographs of real bridges, visiting a local foot bridge for sketching, or inviting a civil engineer to visit. Planning that emerges from documentation remains rooted in children's authentic curiosity.

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12.15: Sample Planning Forms, Webs, and Checklists

Teachers benefit from simple tools that make planning visible and organized. These planning tools serve as working documents that evolve throughout the project and remind teachers to remain flexible and reflective. Thoughtful planning transforms curiosity into meaningful exploration. The Project Approach reminds educators that planning is not about control; it is about creating conditions where discovery can flourish.

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12.16: Chapter Summary

Effective project work begins with intentional planning that remains open to children's ideas and discoveries. Through checklists, forms, planning webs, and documentation-driven reflection, teachers transform curiosity into sustained inquiry. When planning is viewed as a living process rather than a fixed script, learning becomes deeper, more responsive, and more meaningful.

Reflection Prompts

How did children's interests influence the planning decisions in this chapter? Which planning tool (web, checklist, or fieldwork form) feels most useful to you, and why? How can documentation help you decide what comes next in a project? Describe a topic from your own classroom or practicum site that might be "doable" for project work. What makes it a good choice?

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12.17: Chapter Vocabulary

Fieldwork: Direct, firsthand experiences outside the classroom that support investigation and inquiry.

Inquiry: A process of learning driven by curiosity, questioning, exploration, and investigation.

Documentation: The collection and interpretation of evidence that makes children's thinking and learning visible.

Responsive Planning: An approach to planning that adapts to children's emerging interests, questions, and understandings.

Living Document: A planning or documentation tool that is continuously revised and updated as children's inquiry evolves, reflecting ongoing observation, reflection, and responsive decision-making.

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12.18: Extra Internet Resource Links



Project Zero- Visible Thinking: <https://pz.harvard.edu>

Practical tools for making thinking visible through documentation and reflection.

NAEYC- Developmentally Appropriate Practice: <https://www.naeyc.org>

Guidance on inquiry-based learning, planning, and curriculum alignment.

Reggio Children/Reggio Emilia Approach: <https://www.reggiochildren.it>

Foundational resources on environments, documentation, and inquiry.

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12.19: Chapter References



Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (Eds.). (1998). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach—Advanced reflections* (2nd ed.). Ablex Publishing.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

13: Reflecting, Sharing, and Celebrating Learning

- [13.1: Chapter Introduction](#)
- [13.2: The Joy of Closure](#)
- [13.3: Ways Children Can Share What They've Learned Include](#)
- [13.4: Project Documentation \(Exhibitions and Displays\)](#)
- [13.5: Elements of an Effective Project Display](#)
- [13.6: Sharing Findings and Telling the Story of Learning](#)
- [13.7: Building Children's Confidence Through Reflection and Presentation](#)
- [13.8: Closure and Transition to New Learning](#)
- [13.9: Ways to Mark Closure](#)
- [13.10: Honoring Children's Work](#)
- [13.11: Sample Template- Class Book Outline](#)
- [13.12: Reflection and Celebration Checklist](#)
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13.1: Chapter Introduction

13



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 13.1:** Analyze the role of reflection, documentation, and celebration in Phase III of the Project Approach.
- **SLO 13.2:** Identify developmentally appropriate ways children can represent and share their learning.
- **SLO 13.3:** Design strategies for documenting, sharing, and celebrating learning with families and communities.

Chapter 13 Short Overview

This chapter explores the final phase of the Project Approach—reflection, sharing, and celebration. It highlights how children make meaning by revisiting their learning, representing discoveries, and communicating ideas to others. Teachers learn how thoughtful closure honors both the learning process and the community built through inquiry.

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13.2: The Joy of Closure



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Completing a project is both an ending and a beginning. When children share what they've learned, meaning is constructed from their own experiences. And they are also able to take pride in their accomplishments. Phase III of the Project Approach focuses on reflection, representation/documentation and should be a time of celebration. It is a time to show off what was learned and honor the learning journey.

And in this phase, it is important to display the finished work, but it is also important to revisit the entire process. What did we wonder about? What did we discover or learn? How did we grow as thinkers? How did we collaborate together? By helping children think about these questions, teachers can reinforce metacognition and foster the sense of ownership. Thus, we build community.

Closure is not just about finishing for the sake of moving on. It is also about **recognizing growth**, revisiting questions, and celebrating the sense of community that was developed during the project. By guiding children to reflect on their questions and what they discovered or created, teachers facilitate self-awareness, communication skills, and most importantly, a lifelong love of learning.

Teaching Insight:

Children's reflections often reveal how deeply they've understood a topic. When a four-year-old says, "We learned that bridges are strong because they use triangles," or "Dog pull their ears back when they are scared," they are expressing genuine understanding and connection.

When children make sense of their findings and share their ideas, they transform from learners into teachers. This process allows them to share knowledge with peers, families, and the community. Presentations and documentation allow children to become the teachers, which reinforces the notion that their ideas matter.

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13.3: Ways Children Can Share What They've Learned Include

Ways Children Can Share What They've Learned Include:

- Class discussions or “show-and-tell” presentations
- Illustrated charts, graphs, or maps of discoveries
- Documentation boards with photos and captions explaining what was learned
- Portfolios
- Dramatic re-enactments or puppet shows
- Constructed play environments
- Word Walls
- Observations
- Self-reflections
- Artwork depicting what was learned or recreating concepts
- Musical expressions
- Books written and illustrated by the children
- Teacher journals
- Digital slideshows, videos, or narrated photo journals

Teachers guide children in choosing what to share and how to represent it. The emphasis should remain on **process instead of product** (Helm & Katz, 2001). Be sure to celebrate the thinking and collaboration behind the final display.

Tip: Encourage children to describe what surprised them most or what they want others to know about their topic. These reflections often reveal the most authentic learning moments.

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13.4: Project Documentation (Exhibitions and Displays)

As discussed in Chapter 10, documenting a project allows families and visitors to experience the richness of children's investigations. A well-designed display communicates both the learning *journey* and the *thinking* behind it.

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13.5: Elements of an Effective Project Display

Elements of an Effective Project Display:

- **Documentation Panels:** Photos, children's quotes, and teacher reflections that tell the story of the project and explain the learning journey
- **Artifacts and Models:** Items children created or collected during their investigation
- **Interactive Elements:** Opportunities for visitors to ask questions, leave comments, or explore materials
- **Context Labels:** Short captions explaining what children were doing and why it mattered

Documentation displays should highlight collaboration, curiosity, and growth and are not just “cute” pieces of work. They actually celebrate the *process* of learning as much as, if not more than, the evidence of learning. They are an invitation for dialogue among teachers, children, and families.

Tip: Involve children in creating the displays. When they decide what to include, they are reminded about what they learned. This process strengthens their ability to summarize, sequence events, and take pride in their contributions; thus, learning is enhanced.

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13.6: Sharing Findings and Telling the Story of Learning

When children share their findings and take on the role of teacher, they can communicate what they've discovered with pride. The early experiences in presenting to peers, families, and community members helps to build confidence and ease in self-expression. And these are skills that continue to support them throughout their lives. Remember that teachers guide this process by supporting children to choose what they want to share and how they want to share it. The emphasis remains on the story of inquiry rather than polished perfection.

Sample Documentation Display Planning Form

Display Component	Purpose or Focus	Who Will Help?	Materials Needed	Notes
Photos and Quotes	Show children's inquiry process	Teacher and children	Printer, labels, mounting board	Select quotes that reflect curiosity
Children's Artifacts	Represent discoveries	Children	Tables, display stands	Rotate items weekly
Written Narratives	Share learning goals and outcomes	Teacher	Printed text or captions	Include learning objectives
Family Contributions	Extend connections between school and home	Families	Comment cards, sign-in sheet	Invite families to write reflections

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13.7: Building Children's Confidence Through Reflection and Presentation

By presenting the findings, this action gives children opportunities to communicate, reflect, and develop confidence. Teachers can scaffold this process by:

- Presenting in small groups before sharing with families
- Providing sentence prompts, such as “I used to think... but now I know...”
- Using drawings or photos to help remember the sequences of events
- Encouraging peers to ask supportive questions or offer compliments
- Celebrating all voices, ensuring even quieter children are supported to participate

Reflection also builds empathy and perspective-taking. Children learn to listen to others' perspectives, appreciate their peers' contributions, recognize effort, appreciate diverse talents, and see themselves as part of a shared learning community. These are the early steps towards respectful collaboration and self-assessment.

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13.8: Closure and Transition to New Learning

The end of a project offers a natural moment for closure and a launching for new beginnings. Teachers can help children acknowledge their learning journey, and celebrate what they learned, and say goodbye to the topic with gratitude and celebration.

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13.9: Ways to Mark Closure

Ways to Mark Closure:

- Create a “Class Book” documenting the project with photos and children’s dictations
- Host a “Family Celebration Day” or small gallery walk to share learning
- Sing a song, share a group reflection, or hold a “passing the torch” moment into the next project
- Revisit early questions and notice how their understanding has changed

These experiences give children a sense of accomplishment and continuity, reinforcing that learning is an ongoing process of inquiry and reflection. Closure helps children understand that learning is cyclical: we explore, reflect, and move forward with joy and curiosity.

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13.10: Honoring Children's Work

Educators honor children's work by treating it as meaningful evidence of growth and thought. When we document and celebrate learning authentically, we convey respect for children's efforts, curiosity, and ideas. Reflection, celebration, and display help children internalize the message that **"My ideas matter. My learning has value."** Reflection is not simply a final step. But rather, it is the heartbeat of the Project Approach. It is a practice of looking back in order to move forward. When children revisit their own learning, they see themselves as capable thinkers (Helm & Katz, 2011).

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13.11: Sample Template- Class Book Outline

Page/Section	Title or Description:	Contents:
Title Page:	<i>Our Investigation of _____</i>	By: School/Class Name
Section 1:	Our First Ideas and Questions	Photos or drawings showing prior knowledge and wonderings Children's quotes: "What We Knew When We Started"
Section 2:	Exploring and Investigating	Photos and stories from the project process Children's quotes: "What We Discovered" QR code linking to short videos
Section 3:	Designing, Building, and Representing	Models, charts, work samples, or representations Children's quotes: "What We Built or Created"
Section 4:	Reflecting on Our Learning	Reflections and children's quotes: "What We Learned" (e.g., "I learned I can make big things with my friends!" or "Triangles make buildings strong.")
Section 5:	New Questions and Future Projects	New questions and possible next project ideas Children's quotes: "What We Want to Learn Next"

Tip: This class book serves as documentation, reflection, and communication with families. It makes children's thinking visible while supporting ongoing planning and inquiry. Send a copy of the class book home digitally or in print for families to revisit and discuss together.

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13.12: Reflection and Celebration Checklist

Use this checklist to plan for a meaningful closure that honors both the learning process and the people who made it possible.

Planning Question	Yes Not Yet	Notes
Have we revisited our original questions and reflected on what we learned?	☐ ☐	
Did children have opportunities to choose what to share and how?	☐ ☐	
Are documentation displays or exhibits child-centered and meaningful?	☐ ☐	
Have we included families or the community in our celebration?	☐ ☐	
Did every child contribute to the class book or presentation?	☐ ☐	
Have we taken time for teachers to reflect on what worked well and what could improve next time?	☐ ☐	

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13.13: Chapter Summary

The final phase of the Project Approach is a celebration of the mind and heart. Through reflection, presentation, and collaboration, the children construct meaning and develop pride in their achievements. For teachers, this phase offers a chance to see the full arc of learning and how curiosity became inquiry, and then how inquiry became understanding. When we slow down and take time to celebrate, we remind ourselves that the journey of learning is as important as its destination.

Reflection Prompts

What strategies help you ensure that every child's voice is heard during group sharing? Why is reflection an essential part of learning rather than just an ending activity? How can you balance celebrating accomplishments while maintaining curiosity for what comes next? How can you use insights from this project to inform your planning for the next one?

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13.14: Chapter Vocabulary

Reflection: The process of looking back on experiences to make meaning and deepen understanding.

Representation: The ways children express learning through drawings, models, language, movement, or other symbolic forms.

Documentation Display: A curated presentation of photos, quotes, and artifacts that tells the story of learning.

Metacognition: Awareness of one's own thinking and learning processes.

Closure: Intentional activities that mark the completion of a learning experience while supporting transition to new inquiry.

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13.15: Extra Internet Resource Links



Project Zero – Documentation & Reflection: <https://pz.harvard.edu>

Research-based resources on reflection, visible learning, and documentation.

Reggio Emilia Approach – Documentation Practices: <https://www.reggiochildren.it>

Foundational perspectives on representation, exhibitions, and pedagogical documentation.

NAEYC – Assessment & Documentation: <https://www.naeyc.org>

Practical guidance on documenting learning and engaging families.

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13.16: Chapter References



Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (Eds.). (1998). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach—Advanced reflections* (2nd ed.). Ablex Publishing.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

14: Caring for the Self- Mindful Presence in Reflective Teaching

- 14.1: Chapter Introduction
- 14.2: The Importance of Educator Well-Being
- 14.3: Mindfulness and Reflective Presence
- 14.4: Building Emotional Intelligence
- 14.5: Setting and Protecting Boundaries
- 14.6: Practical Strategies
- 14.7: Everyday Self-Care Practices
- 14.8: Recognizing Stress and Re-Centering
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14.1: Chapter Introduction

14



Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- **SLO 14.1:** Identify practices that support self-care and emotional well-being for early childhood educators.
- **SLO 14.2:** Define mindfulness, metacognition, and emotional intelligence as they relate to teaching practice.
- **SLO 14.3:** Describe relational and compassionate approaches that extend mindfulness in the classroom.
- **SLO 14.4:** Recognize how boundary-setting and reflective practice sustain professional integrity and prevent burnout.

Chapter 14 Short Overview

Teaching young children requires not only professional skill and creativity, but also emotional presence, patience, and compassion. These qualities cannot be sustained without care for the self. Educators who nurture their own well-being are better able to model calmness, empathy, and joy in their classrooms. This chapter explores practical ways to sustain emotional balance, cultivate mindfulness, and maintain professional resilience over the course of a teaching career. Through reflection and intentional practice, educators learn that self-care is not indulgence; it is an ethical responsibility that protects the children, families, and colleagues with whom they work.

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14.2: The Importance of Educator Well-Being



Let's Take a Deeper Look

Early childhood professionals pour tremendous emotional energy into nurturing others. Without replenishment, even the most dedicated teacher can feel depleted. When educators practice self-awareness and care for their own needs, they protect their capacity for compassion and creativity.

“You cannot pour from an empty cup.” (Common proverb)

Self-care is not separate from professionalism; it is a foundation for it. The emotional tone teachers bring to the classroom directly affects children’s sense of safety and belonging. A calm, grounded adult helps children regulate their own emotions, approach challenges with curiosity, and build positive relationships.

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14.3: Mindfulness and Reflective Presence

Mindfulness means being fully present while paying attention on purpose, being in the moment, and responding without judgment. It allows educators to notice their thoughts, feelings, and bodily cues before reacting.

Practicing mindfulness can take many forms:

- Taking three slow, deep breaths before transitions
- Noticing sensory details (light, sound, children's laughter) to anchor awareness
- Pausing to observe rather than rushing to fix

Reflective presence extends mindfulness into professional practice. It is the intentional habit of pausing to ask:

- What am I noticing about this moment?
- How are my emotions influencing my response?
- What might the child be experiencing right now?

This awareness transforms everyday challenges such as conflict, fatigue, or miscommunication, into opportunities for growth and understanding. Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response (Frankl, as cited in Covey, 1989).

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14.4: Building Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions and to respond skillfully to the emotions of others. In early childhood settings, this includes:

- Remaining calm during classroom upsets
- Expressing empathy without taking on others' distress
- Repairing relationships after misunderstandings
- Helping children label and manage their own feelings

Emotionally intelligent teachers model self-regulation, respect, and authenticity, which are key elements of social-emotional learning for children.

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14.5: Setting and Protecting Boundaries

Caring professionals often struggle to say no. However, clear boundaries are essential for sustaining energy and preventing burnout. Boundaries help teachers remain compassionate without becoming overwhelmed.

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14.6: Practical Strategies

Practical strategies include:

- Communicate availability clearly (“I’ll respond to that after nap time.”)
- Set a consistent end time for work each day
- Use “I” statements: “I need a few minutes to reset before we begin.”
- Pause before agreeing to extra tasks and ask, “Is this mine to carry?”

Boundaries are not barriers; they are bridges to balance. When educators honor their limits, they model self-respect for both children and colleagues.

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14.7: Everyday Self-Care Practices

Self-care is most effective when woven into daily life and not reserved for weekends or vacations. Here are simple, research-informed ways to sustain wellness:

Practice	Why It Matters	Examples
Create Daily Rituals	Grounding rituals provide calm and predictability.	Morning reflection, gratitude journaling, or a mindful walk before class.
Move Your Body	Physical movement relieves stress and restores focus.	Stretch between transitions, dance with children, or take a short outdoor break.
Nourish Yourself	Food, rest, and hydration support emotional regulation.	Eat balanced meals, drink water, and rest without guilt.
Connect with Colleagues	Supportive relationships build resilience.	Share challenges, celebrate successes, and seek mentorship.
Unplug Regularly	Technology boundaries protect attention and rest.	Set device-free hours or screen-free mornings.
Reflect Often	Reflection transforms experience into growth.	Keep a brief end-of-day journal or voice note.

Tip: Keep a small notebook for your “moments that matter”—a place to jot down a child’s comment, a classroom breakthrough, or something you learned about yourself. Over time, this becomes a record of growth and gratitude.

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14.8: Recognizing Stress and Re-Centering

Stress is inevitable, but awareness helps educators respond instead of react. When you notice signs of tension, such as shallow breathing, irritability, or fatigue, pause and re-center:

1. **Breathe deeply.** Count four seconds in, four seconds out.
2. **Name what you feel.** (“I’m feeling overwhelmed right now.”)
3. **Ground yourself.** Notice your feet on the floor or the sounds around you.
4. **Choose a response.** Decide what’s most important in the moment.

Mindful awareness supports not only self-regulation but also the co-regulation children need to thrive.

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14.9: Compassionate and Relational Teaching

Authentic care for others begins with self-compassion. Compassionate teaching recognizes that mistakes, fatigue, and frustration are part of the human experience. When teachers respond to themselves with kindness, they also become more patient with children and colleagues.

Relational presence is the ability to connect with others through empathy and listening. This creates emotionally safe classrooms. It turns daily routines into opportunities for connection and meaning. Being truly present with another person is the most generous form of teaching.

(Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

Teaching is an act of love; self-care gives love to yourself and helps keep that love alive
(Daly, 2025)



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14.10: Chapter Summary

Sustaining the emotional and physical well-being of educators is essential for ethical, reflective, and joyful teaching. Mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and compassionate boundaries allow educators to bring their best selves into the classroom every day. When teachers care for themselves, they also care for their communities, and the children learn by watching.

Reflection Prompts

When during your teaching day do you feel most grounded and emotionally present, and what conditions support that feeling? What physical or emotional signals help you recognize when you are becoming overwhelmed or depleted? Which self-care or mindfulness practices from this chapter feel most realistic for your daily teaching routine, and why? How can modeling healthy boundaries and emotional regulation support children's social-emotional development?

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14.11: Chapter Vocabulary

Mindfulness: Intentional, nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment.

Metacognition: Awareness of one's own thought processes; "thinking about thinking."

Emotional Intelligence: The ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others.

Boundaries: Healthy limits that protect time, energy, and emotional well-being.

Reflective Practice: The habit of examining one's experiences to improve understanding and action.

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14.12: Extra Internet Resource Links



Greater Good in Education (UC Berkeley): <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/education>

Research-based practices for mindfulness, compassion, emotional regulation, and educator well-being.

NAEYC- Educator Well-Being: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/educator-well-being>

Articles and resources focused on self-care, boundaries, and sustainable teaching in early childhood education.

Mindful Schools: <https://www.mindfulschools.org>

Practical mindfulness strategies for educators and classrooms, including brief, realistic practices.

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Appendix A

Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) 2025

Purpose of This Appendix

This appendix provides direct access to the California Department of Education's *Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) 2025*. Rather than reproducing the assessment instrument, this appendix links readers to the official source to ensure accuracy, accessibility, and compliance with copyright and use guidelines.

 <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ci/drdpforms.asp>

About the Author

Dr. Laurie Daly has been a full-time professor at Woodland Community College's Lake County Campus since 2006, where she teaches in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Department. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education from Pacific Union College, a Master's degree in Education with an emphasis in ECE from Sonoma State University, and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Mills College. Her dissertation, *Aggressive Behavior in Preschool Children and Its Influences*, was based on field research conducted in Lake County, California (Daly & Perez, 2009).

With a lifelong commitment to children, families, and communities, Dr. Daly began her career in early childhood education at the age of 19 as a preschool teacher's aide. In her mid-twenties, she became the founding preschool director of Papermill Creek Children's Corner, the first full-time, permanent childcare facility in Point Reyes, California.

Dr. Daly was first certified as a Mentor Teacher in 1992 in Marin County and holds credentials in all five modules of WestEd's Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC). Professionally, she integrates the roles of professor, child development specialist, researcher, and child advocate. Passionate about ethical leadership and high-quality early learning, Dr. Daly continues to inspire the next generation of educators with insight, warmth, and deep respect for the children they serve.



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