

# The Project Approach: Creativity in the early years

A practical guide to developing a child-centred curriculum

by Marianne Sargent



**MATCHED TO 2012 EYFS**

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# An introduction to the project approach

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Current thinking supports practice that involves promoting independence in young children and giving them the tools to become proficient learners as they continue through their education (DCELLS, 2008a; Early Education, 2012; Featherstone and Featherstone, 2008; Glazzard et al, 2010). In recent years policy makers and researchers have placed emphasis on the importance of enabling children to take control of their learning. The integration of Assessment for Learning methods into the Primary Strategies, as well as the promotion of active learning and critical thinking skills in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) guidance for England, are other examples of this shift.

**The project approach is a child-centred teaching strategy that enables children to follow their interests and fascinations, while developing the independence, knowledge and thinking skills they will need to become life-long learners.**

## What the project approach involves

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Early years practitioners will be familiar with the use of themes and topics when planning curriculum delivery. It is common practice to choose a new topic each half term and plan subject related activities around it. Practitioners might use a topic about growing as inspiration for planning activities across various areas of learning. For example, mathematical activities might include measuring the heights of children or bean stalks; communication and language skills might be practised in a role-play gardening centre as children take on different roles; physical activities may involve playing jumping bean games; children may develop their understanding of the world by growing their own bean plants; they might create collages with paper petals; and they could share pictures of themselves as babies and find out about the needs of young children.



*During a farm visit some nursery children were particularly interested in chicken eggs, which triggered a project all about eggs*

Such activities serve their purpose and teach a range of knowledge and skills. However, although the overarching theme helps to create some commonality between areas of learning, teaching in this way can be disjointed and children often only scratch the surface in terms of learning any in-depth knowledge about the focus topic.

The project approach entails taking an area of interest – which may stem from a topic – and using this as a basis for in-depth enquiry or research. Areas of learning are not simply linked by a topic or theme; they are integrated as a result of the investigative process. Knowledge and skills are not taught in isolation, but rather acquired and practised within a meaningful context that makes sense to children. All projects stem from the interests of the children and

Project work is also central to the renowned Reggio Emilia Approach in Northern Italy, where in the absence of a formal curriculum, practitioners start with and build upon the curiosities of the children through the planning of *progettazione* or projects. Emphasis is placed upon group learning and discussion, with an aim to encourage children to engage in collaborative creative thinking with other children and adults to further their knowledge and understanding.

Documentation is centrally important to the Reggio Approach and is viewed as an extremely valuable resource for a number of reasons: for practitioners it serves as a useful formative assessment tool; for children it provides a means of facilitating reflective thought; and for parents it creates a picture of their children's learning (Thornton and Brunton, 2007). The explanation about planning, observation and assessment in the second part of this book is very much influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach to documentation.

### Projects and provocations

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Throughout the book references are made to both provocations and projects. They are defined as follows:

**Provocation** – The idea of a provocation has been adopted from Reggio Emilia where projects are triggered by initial thought-provokers or provocations. Anything can be used to provoke an investigation, including objects, pictures, events or questions.

**Project** – A project is planned to lead on from a provocation. Katz and Chard's (1989; 2000) model consists of three parts: practitioners and children first plan a project together; the children then carry out their investigations with the help and guidance of the practitioners; the project is drawn to a close with some form of presentation.

Projects can be planned with varying degrees of complexity. A practitioner may simply decide to set up a provocation, take a step back and observe while the children embark upon an open-ended investigation that has no set structure or format. The practitioner's role in this case is to observe the children and act as facilitator, providing the resources they need for their activities. The cocoon, frozen balloons and where is George provocations in the first part of the book are examples of this. On the other hand, a practitioner may decide to set

up a provocation with the intention of developing it into a full-scale planned project. The all about eggs project featured in the second part of the book is an example of this more complex and structured approach.

### The project approach in early years provision

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Many of the examples used throughout this book have been taken from foundation stage classrooms in maintained schools. However, the rich learning opportunities that project work presents are not restricted to these settings. The flexible nature of the approach makes it possible to adapt to any type of early years provision, including home-based provision. Projects can be undertaken in a one-to-one situation, with small groups, with a class, or even a whole school. The snapshot examples on pages 7 and 8 show how a variety of settings have used the project approach.

The first example demonstrates how a project can be carried out in a one-to-one situation within a restricted time-scale and with limited resources. The circumstances meant that the project needed a relatively tight structure and was adult-controlled to a large extent. However, it was still possible for the practitioner to choose an activity based upon the little boy's interests and share some control with him by enabling him to make his own informed choices about which materials to use when building his boat.

The project approach is just as applicable to practitioners who work in private settings with small numbers of mixed-age children. The size of the setting in the second example meant that there was less scope for providing an extensively wide variety of construction and craft materials that the children could experiment with and choose from. This was not practical for the childminder in terms of storage space or cost. However, the absence of a restrictive routine or timetable often associated with larger, maintained settings meant that she was able to devote a whole week to this project. The time available enabled her to fully involve the children throughout the whole project and children were able to design, plan and construct their own play mat. Furthermore, the scope of the project ensured that all of the children were involved regardless of age or

# Part One:

## Supporting early learning

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It is useful to look at the project approach in relation to early years practice that is recognised as conducive to effective early learning. In this section three provocations are featured and discussed, illustrating how various pedagogical aspects of project work support and promote children's learning. The discussion refers to the aims and principles of current British early years curricula and looks at how project work helps to meet requirements.

### A child-centred approach to teaching and learning

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**The project approach is representative of a child-centred pedagogy that stems from a positive image of the young child as a competent learner who is capable of taking an active role in their education.**

The cocoon provocation featured in this section demonstrates the inclusive potential of projects and shows how they can enthuse children of all aptitudes and abilities, as well as motivate children to want to learn by building upon their interests. The discussion also considers the importance of giving children time, space and freedom to investigate phenomena in their own way and looks at the link between personal, social and emotional skills and cognitive development.

### A positive image of the child

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In Reggio Emilia, where projects are an integral part of early childhood education, the child is viewed as an "active constructor of knowledge" that is rich in potential (Hewett, 2001, p.96). Children are seen as apprentices for later life that have the ability to take an active role in their education:

*We have a highly optimistic vision of the child: a child who possesses many resources at birth, and with an extraordinary potential which has never*



Projects allow children to take control of their learning. Children are trusted to seek out information for themselves and empowered to find out more about what interests them

*ceased to amaze us; a child with the independent means to build up its own thought processes, ideas, questioning and attempts at answers... (Malaguzzi, 2004, quoted in Bloomer and Cohen, 2008, p.16)*

Rinaldi (2001) describes the Reggio Emilia Approach as democratic, supporting the rights of children to actively participate in their education. Current British early years curricula documentation attempts to reflect a similar philosophy, promoting respect for children as individuals with a focus upon personal development and wellbeing, as well as academic achievement. The EYFS depicts a positive view of the child as "resilient, capable, confident and self-assured" (DfE, 2012, p.3). The Scottish Curriculum for Excellence states its purpose as "to enable each child or young person to be a successful learner, a confident