"In the beginning I thought it was all play:" Parents' Perceptions of the Project Approach in a Second Grade Classroom

Mariana Souto-Manning and Kyunghwa Lee

Abstract

The idea of learning through projects has a long history in the field of education in general, and in early childhood education in particular. Many educators provide guidelines on how to approach project work with children and assert its benefits in various areas of children's learning and development. Yet few empirical studies investigate what parents think about their children's learning through projects. In this case study, we intend to fill this gap by exploring parents' perspectives of the project approach in a second grade classroom in which a majority of the students were from low-income families. Our analysis revealed the parents' undisputed positive perceptions of project work, which overall included (a) increasing motivation, (b) building a community of learners, (c) utilizing children's strength, (d) improving academic achievement, and (e) encouraging parent involvement. We conclude with implications for early childhood research and practice, particularly for collaboration between teachers and parents.

Key Words: parents' perceptions, project approach, parent involvement, early childhood education, classroom projects, motivation, community of learners, children's strengths, academic achievement, diversity

Introduction

In this article we report our collaborative inquiry into the perspectives of a group of parents regarding their children's learning through projects. Many parents in a second grade classroom where Mariana taught echoed what Cedric's father summarized in one sentence: "In the beginning I thought it was all play." (Note: All names of children and the school, except for the classroom teacher who is the first author of this manuscript, are pseudonyms.) The parents initially thought project work was "all play;" parents and students resisted when first implementing the project approach in this early primary grade classroom. Parents were used to having lengthy homework packets sent home daily, or at least weekly, and consequently asked for more homework. Students were used to sitting and doing desk work without having to be involved in problem solving/situated learning experiences, and they asked when they were going to learn real math with math textbooks. It was indeed more work for students to investigate and find answers to real-life questions than to complete mere paper and pencil tasks. Parents were used to watching their children finish pages of homework as opposed to going to the library or to the park to investigate the habitat of ants, for example.

As time went by, doubts and questions about project work faded. Doing projects that interested them, students often expressed their excitement about the learning that was going on inside and outside the classroom. Parents and siblings knew what was going on in the classroom as the students shared the questions they were pursuing and engaged their families in dinnertime conversations. Yet, we wondered how these parents came to see their children's learning through projects and decided to explore it together.

Framework

A project is an in-depth investigation of a topic in which "children's ideas, questions, theories, predictions, and interests are major determinants of the experiences provided and the work accomplished" (Katz & Chard, 2000, p. 5). Learning through projects is not a new idea. It was advocated during the Progressive Education Movement in the United States. Kilpatrick's (1918) article, "The Project Method," attested to this historical root. He articulated that a project as "the hearty purposeful act" (p. 320) could be used to actualize the ideal that "education is life" (p. 320), not a mere preparation for later life. He argued that educational experience should have a resemblance to the worthy life, which consists of the "purposive activity" (p. 322). Although the project method is similar to the Bank Street model (Katz & Chard, 1998, 2000), this

idea was most extensively used in early childhood classrooms in other countries, such as the British Infant Schools in the 1960s and 1970s (Helm & Katz, 2001) and Reggio Emilia schools in Italy that received international recognition in the past decade (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993, 1998).

The project approach "refers to a way of teaching and learning as well as the content of what is taught and learned" (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 3). As a way of teaching and learning, it requires a teacher who encourages children's active participation in their own learning through interaction with the environment, including people and objects, in personally meaningful ways. The content is "usually drawn from the world that is familiar to the children" (p. 3). This approach "is designed to help young children make deeper and fuller sense of events and phenomena in their own environment" (Katz, 1998, p. 28). Children work individually, in small groups, or as a whole class. During projects, children strive to find answers to questions conceived by themselves or in collaboration with their teachers. The goal of project work is to explore and learn more about a topic, not necessarily to find the right answer (Katz, 1994; Shalaway, 1997).

Gordon and Browne (2004) argued that projects are "the epitome of an integrated curriculum" (p. 398). The topic of a project is an authentic experience that children can research directly instead of relying solely on secondary sources through library research. Helm and Katz (2001) argued that while topics of interest to children need to be the heart of projects, not every interest of children is equally worthy of the time and effort implicated in high-quality projects. Topics should allow children to understand their own experience and environment deeply, to strengthen their disposition to investigate phenomena worthy of attention, to apply various skills, and to develop an understanding about various media applicable to their work. Projects encompass three phases: planning and getting started, investigating, and culminating and debriefing (Katz & Chard, 1989, 2000).

Methods

Setting

The School

The school, Atlanta Highway Elementary School, is located in Kimberly County, Northeast Georgia. Although the county is a semi-urban area with a population of approximately 100,000, it has problems comparable to metropolitan Atlanta's (e.g., homicides, robberies, unemployment, high free and reduced lunch rates in schools). The school served 420 students from Pre-Kindergarten

to 5th grade. The student population was made up of African-American (60%), Caucasian (23%), Latino (12%), Asian (4%), and multi-racial students (1%). Three-fourths of the students at the school were economically disadvantaged as defined by the *No Child Left Behind* legislation (U. S. Department of Education, 2005). Approximately 8% of the students were speaking English as a second language, and 16% were students with special needs.

The Classroom

The classroom was one of the three second grade classrooms at Atlanta Highway Elementary School. Among 22 students, 8 were boys, and 14 were girls. Seven students were African-Americans (32%), six were Latinos (27%), six were Caucasians (27%), and three were Asians (14%). Sixteen students (73%) received free and reduced lunch. Five students received ESOL services, six were in gifted programs, and three in special education.

Classroom Projects

Throughout the year, the students were engaged in several projects including topics such as our bodies, our neighborhood, seeds and plants, and ladybugs. In order to help readers have some sense of how the students learned through projects, we provide in this section a brief description of a project on the animals living on school grounds that Mariana did with the students. This particular project, which lasted about one month, began with a class discussion of what the students knew about these animals (e.g. ants, fish, birds)—what they were, where they lived, and why they lived where they did. Mariana and the students came up with questions, such as "What kinds of animals live on the school grounds?" "What do they eat?" "Why do they live on the school grounds?" "Where do they [usually] live?" Then the students went out, observed, took notes, and drew pictures of those animals. The class also invited a naturalist into class and interviewed her. The students built little models of different animal habitats, such as ant and fish habitats. Throughout the project, Mariana and the students were continuously engaged in conversations about what they were learning, and as they did, more questions arose. The recurrent problem-posing, dialogue, and problem-solving, as in democratic pedagogy (Freire, 1970), was an integral part of each project. Mariana and the students read about these animals using various resources and wrote reports about them. The students also walked parents through the process before presenting their first project findings. Finally at the end, the class invited families and peers and presented findings. This project addressed many state curriculum standards, such as reading non-fiction books and websites, engaging in descriptive writing, learning about habitats, estimating, counting, and measuring. The

students learned and applied these new skills and knowledge in the natural course of their investigations (Schuler, 2000).

Data Collection

Although Mariana (as the classroom teacher) was curious about how the parents viewed each project, she decided to wait until she was no longer teaching any of these children to follow up. She was aware of the risks the parents would be taking in providing honest feedback to their children's teacher. As summer vacation approached, she wrote a letter to the parents explaining that she would be on leave the following year to work on her doctorate degree. She told them that she would love to have them be part of her future research, and if they wanted to do so, they should give her their contact information. Of the 22 families, 19 returned contact information, although all of them responded to her inquiry: one parent said she really enjoyed keeping in touch, but did not have time to fit anything else in the day; another was moving back to Mexico; the other was moving to a neighboring school district and did not have the new address at the time.

When we started our collaboration, we found that parents' perspectives of the project approach had been rarely examined. We decided to work on remedying these omissions by initially getting feedback from the parents of Mariana's former students. We drafted a simple questionnaire-style letter and mailed it to the 19 parents in June 2004, one year after Mariana had taught the children. Atlanta Highway Elementary School has a high rate of transience, with families moving frequently. We learned that about one-fifth of Mariana's students' families had moved within a year. Four letters came back undeliverable. Out of the 15 questionnaires delivered, we received 12 in return, including 9 letters with consent forms. We used these 9 letters for our analysis in this paper.

This sample group includes the parents of three boys and six girls. Racially, we had three African Americans (33%), three Caucasians (33%), two Latinos (22%), and one Asian (11%) represented. The sample also included parents of three gifted students, two ESOL students, and two students receiving special education services. Three-fourths of the students in the sample group received free and reduced lunch. Interestingly, the sample closely resembles the make up of the whole class in many aspects.

In the letter sent to the parents, we wrote a text that would not suggest any positive or negative values of the project approach. We asked for the parents' perceptions in an open-ended manner as opposed to inquiries about the effectiveness of the project approach. A copy of the letter is in Figure 1.

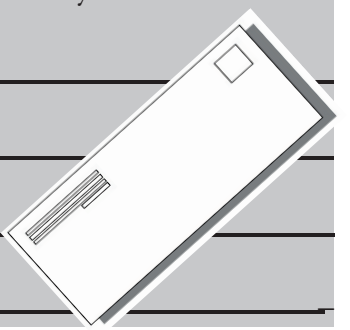
Figure 1. Survey Letter to Parents

Dear Parent,

Hi! I hope all is well with you and your family. I am writing to ask for your help. I am trying to find out the impact of different teaching strategies I used in my classroom. As you are your child's primary teacher, your feedback is very important. Please take the time and answer the one question below. Then, return these sheets to me by using the self-addressed and stamped envelope enclosed. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Mariana Manning

One of the teaching strategies I used in my classroom was the use of projects. Tell me how you perceived the use of this approach with your child.



As indicated in the letter, a self-addressed and stamped envelope was enclosed for the parents' convenience. Permission forms were also enclosed to be signed by the parents. A Spanish version on the reverse of the English language letter was sent to Spanish-speaking parents. Spanish answers were translated into English. Data gathered consisted of a corpus of over 1,000 words.

Data Analysis

We used qualitative data analysis methods by searching for emergent themes and patterns from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Asking the parents what they thought about project work through an open-ended question and categorizing their answers according to themes kept us "close to [our] gathered data rather than to what [we] may have previously assumed or wished was the case" (Charmaz, 2002, p. 676). Our focus during data analysis was on capturing and understanding these parents' voices as much as we could, rather than looking only for key words that we wanted to find. We read and reread the data to move "from studying concrete realities to rendering a conceptual understanding of them" (Charmaz, p.

675). We coded the data to identify themes. We then re-examined and combined our coding system to come up with five pertinent themes discussed in the following section.

Results

Unlike the initial resistance described earlier, all responses that we received from the nine parents included their overwhelmingly positive reactions to the project approach. Our analysis of these comments revealed five themes related to the advantage of learning through projects: (a) increasing motivation, (b) building a community of learners, (c) utilizing children's strength, (d) improving academic achievement, and (e) encouraging parent involvement. We discuss each of these themes below.

Increasing Motivation

Cedric is an African-American boy who lived with his father. His mother had moved to another state, and he often talked about this incident as if it was his own fault. Coming from a low-income family, Cedric received free/reduced lunch. While receiving gifted education in mathematics, he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). When asked about the project approach, Cedric's father reported positive changes that occurred in his son's attitude toward learning in school.

> In the beginning I thought it was all play. Then Cedric started to get into it. He wasn't in trouble anymore. It was like he had a purpose. He wanted to do all the stuff. He talked about it all the time.

Donaldo, a Latino boy, lived with both his parents. He received gifted services in the areas of mathematics and language arts. He was also in the process of being tested for special education services due to behaviors exhibited in first grade. His mother wrote:

> The year before, Donaldo had gotten into lots of trouble at school. His teacher sent us notes about his behavior almost every day. He was bored in class and didn't want to do what the teacher asked him. He read *Harry Potter* while the teacher wanted him to spell words like *hot*, *not*, and *cot*. In second grade Donaldo didn't get in trouble. He liked the projects. He used the computer to do research, just like his father at the university. He liked that a lot. We did, too. We went to school to see the presentations and not to learn about his bad behavior. He was motivated to do well, and he did.

According to her mother, Macy displayed such a motivation for learning in the classroom that "she didn't want to go to gifted classes anymore. She wanted to be there all the time. She came home talking about the project. She couldn't stop asking questions about the topic she was exploring." Maria's father also described the influence of project work on attendance: "During second grade, she didn't want to miss a day of school. Not even when she was sick."

Building a Community of Learners

Projects allowed those students who spoke English as a second language to participate in the classroom activities in a personally meaningful manner. Maria, a Latina student, was one year younger than her peers and received ESOL services. Her father wrote about how project work helped Maria's transition to a new school.

> Maria was a year younger than the other second graders and had just arrived from Bolivia. Classes had already started and she was nervous. I left her at school and remember she was afraid of not knowing the answer if the teacher asked her something. When we went to pick her up, she was talking to us about the project she was doing. It seemed like she was there forever.

Michael is a Korean boy with an English first name. Arriving in the middle of the school year, he had not only to adapt to a new language, but also to a new culture. His father reported:

> Nowadays he [enjoys] his school life more than never before. This is thanks to you and the projects. He liked the projects. When we got here, it was the middle of the year. He wanted a teacher standing and telling him what to do. You were not doing that. Michael started working with the projects. He talked to me and to his mother about [them]. He liked [them]. He learned a lot. The projects you did helped him learn English and feel good in America. He could be part of [the class] since the first week.

Macy is a Caucasian girl from an affluent family. A member of the local country club, she played tennis and piano. She received gifted services in language arts and mathematics and read sixth grade level books. In the quotation above, her mother reported Macy becoming part of a community of learners due to the project approach. Macy's mother detailed positive effects of working with peers of heterogeneous ability: "She made new friends, friends who were not reading at her same reading level. Friends who were not in gifted classes, and [she] learned they had much to teach her. She became a better person."

Monika, an African American girl diagnosed with Emotional/Behavior Disorders (EBD), often thought that others were better than her and did not like her. Her mother wrote about the influence of doing the projects on Monika's inclusion in the classroom and on her self-esteem:

> Projects have done a lot for Monika's self-esteem, heart, and feelings about herself and others. Now she feels she can do it. She can succeed. She is reading now!!! She now likes to read and learn. She now likes school.

As the students' teacher, Mariana was willing to learn about the topics investigated during the projects. Monika's mother noticed this and commented on how the teacher was part of this community of learners: "You learned with the kids."

Utilizing Children's Strength

Three parents reported that the project approach encouraged the children to utilize their strength and prior knowledge. Monika's mother wrote, in an emotional and praising tone, that "[there] will never be another teacher like you who knows children already know stuff, who loves them for who they are." Macy's mother's account focused on how projects helped meet an individual child's need and stretch her own capability: "The projects valued her intelligence. They challenged her, even knowing she reads [like] a sixth-grader and is in second grade."

Kay Lynn, an extremely bright Caucasian girl, was at ease reading and writing but had a hard time in mathematics. Sending her to a private school until the middle of the first grade year, Kay Lynn's mother developed a perception of projects as instructional activities beyond children's comprehension and mastery. In her response, Kay Lynn's mother described how she came to understand that, in fact, the interdisciplinary nature of the project approach encourages children to use their areas of strength to work on challenging areas.

> When we visited the school last year and peeked at your class…kids were…learning about mammals, reptiles, and other stuff. At the time I thought it was too much for first graders. They were doing a great job, though. In second grade, I learned that the projects allow children to work at their level, with a purpose. They [were] always engaged. Kay Lynn was studying water environments in such depth. She loved it! I think the projects allowed her to use reading and writing—which she likes—to learn about mathematics, a big struggle.

Improving Academic Achievement

In the era of accountability, particularly with the *No Child Left Behind Act*, test results are often considered official measures of success. Testing was another theme that emerged from the parents' comments. Although referring to a variety of different tests (e.g., SAT-9, CRCT, qualifier testing for gifted services), three parents brought up this topic. It is important to note, however, that these parents touched on this issue quite briefly. Cedric's father, for example, added to the end of his response: "when the tests came back, he did good."

Casey's mother was the only one who focused solely on the effect of projects on test scores: "I only have good things to say about the projects, and she did so well in the tests that now she's being tested for gifted!" In contrast to Casey's mother, Tatiauna's mother acknowledged the value of project work in relation to test results but with more appreciation for helping Tatiauna, an African-American girl from a low-income family, make sense of what she learned in school:

> Tatiauna liked the projects. She learned about a lot of stuff…The things she was learning in school were making sense. They related to her life. I didn't have time to do this. I work two jobs. Tatiauna did good. She passed the state test to go to the next grade.

Encouraging Parent Involvement

Some of the ways in which projects contributed to the involvement of parents in their children's learning were conveyed by three parents. Monika's mother wrote: "projects took us to our first library trip, now we go every week…I learned about forests as Monika did." Macy's mother reported that she and her husband "did things together and learned with [Macy] as she was engaged in those projects." Maria's father described how his family was involved in the projects.

> We learned with her. Her mother learned English reading…with Maria. I remember when we went to get sand at the park for her to take to school for a project. We spent a long time talking about the animals that lived in the sand and coming up with questions.

All these parents mentioned how they were "learning together" through the projects. The projects allowed the parents and their children to be engaged in learning activities in a non-hierarchical manner.

Discussion

Although none of these parents knew and read literature on the project approach, their comments echo what educators and educational researchers claim

to be advantages of learning through projects. First, the parents reported how projects helped their children's motivation for learning and curbed inappropriate behaviors. Katz and Chard (2000) argued that project work promotes children's intrinsic motivation for learning by capitalizing on their interest in the work and by making activities personally meaningful to them. Just as Cedric's father noted above about his son developing a purpose, "the sense of purpose with which children engage in a project activity is just as important as the completion of a particular piece of work" (p. 14). Katz and Chard also described that an open curriculum like a project has more external sources of stimulation than the traditional formal curriculum. By providing enough external sources of stimulation, projects help children—particularly those with behavioral problems—focus on their study, not disrupting the learning environment to create stimulation.

Second, the parents recognized that projects contributed to building a community of learners. The stories of the ESOL children being able to participate in learning activities from the first day in a new classroom, a gifted child wanting to stay in the regular classroom and learn with her heterogeneous-ability peers, and a child improving peer relationships and self-esteem by working on projects all correspond to Chard's (1998) assertion that the project approach lends itself to inclusive classrooms. According to Katz (1995), children tolerate a wider range of individual differences and behaviors in projects due to heterogeneous groups. They learn cooperation and sharing and help one another more frequently than they do in the traditional formal instruction time. Monika's mother attested how projects positively influenced her child's subjective "feelings" about her work and her relationships with others. Through friendships developed in cooperative learning, projects promote children's social competence and positive self-image (Katz & Chard, 2000; Katz & McClellan, 1997) and thus have both academic and social advantages (Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1990).

Third, the parents noted that projects allowed children to utilize their strengths and their prior knowledge for their learning. Macy's mother observed that projects value "children's intellectual powers" (Katz & Chard, 2000, p. 7). Kay Lynn's mother appreciated how projects help develop "the mastery disposition" (Katz & Chard, p. 42) by seeking challenge and maintaining high persistence when facing difficulties. Katz (1998) summarized that a project "increases children's confidence in their own intellectual powers, and strengthens their dispositions to continue learning" (p. 28).

Fourth, three parents mentioned how projects helped their children's test results. We note, however, that overall the parents did not give as much importance to testing as they did to their children's wanting to learn through the

projects. This result is quite encouraging, given that many early childhood teachers might be hesitant to implement the project approach due to their concern about parents' attention to their children's testing results, particularly in the current climate of the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Projects, in fact, provide meaningful contexts for children to acquire and apply skills and knowledge and contribute to long-term academic, intellectual, and social development (Katz & Chard, 2000). Making sense of learning in school, as Tatiauna's mother described, is one of the significant intellectual dispositions. Katz and Chard also argued that "[in] project work . . . the children and the teacher are accountable together" (p. 17). Children are held accountable for their learning in a project by reflecting on and evaluating the process and product of their work.

Finally, the parents acknowledged that they became involved in their children's education and learned with them through the projects. The banking system of education (Freire, 1970), which proposes parents and teachers deposit knowledge in children's minds as money in a bank, is exchanged for a model in which parents and children participate in learning activities together by going to the library, talking over dinner, observing at a park, and so on. Projects provide ample opportunities for parents to serve as experts, to teach relevant skills, to be co-learners, to identify resources in their communities, to observe teachers interacting with children, and to raise expectations for their children's education (Helm & Beneke, 2003). Helm and Beneke also pointed out that by encouraging parents to participate in their children's investigations, teachers are more likely to provide culturally sensitive activities.

Conclusion

Although much literature describes how to do projects with young children, few empirical studies have investigated what parents think about their children's learning through the project approach. If we as educators take seriously the idea that every parent is a child's first teacher (Powell, 1995), we need to learn more about parents' views of what is good for their children's learning and development. In our effort to remedy these omissions in literature, we received overwhelmingly positive reactions to the project approach from a group of culturally and economically diverse parents. These parents' comments align with claims made by many educators and educational researchers supporting project methods.

The results of this study are encouraging. Yet, we believe more research is needed to identify issues that this preliminary study could not address due to its limitations. For example, although the parents in this study knew that Mariana would no longer teach their children and thus their comments would not

negatively influence their children's lives in school, some parents might have had difficulties in discussing issues in a detailed and honest manner in their responses to the questionnaire-style letter. Such issues may be examined in our next stage of research through in-depth interviews with some, if not all, of these parents.

We invite early childhood educators to join us to explore how to make learning experiences meaningful to children and their families. A deep understanding of perceptions that our students' parents may have about learning activities should be our first step toward working with the parents for their children's successful education.

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