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The Project Approach: A Strategy for Inclusive Classrooms

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The Project Approach: A Strategy for Inclusive Classrooms

Mark's interest in trains helped his teachers to decide to make trains the topic for their next classroom project. The classroom teachers created a curriculum web and met with Mark's parents. They met with Mark in advance and asked him to tell them what he knows about trains, so that during the meeting they could ask him specific questions to share with the group. Mark listed the different parts of a freight train and what each one does. He talked about Thomas the Tank Engine. At the class meeting, the teacher asked Mark to share the parts of the freight train. Mark then read the book *Freight Train* by Donald Crews to the class. The teacher addressed the entire class, providing an opportunity to share what they knew about trains. The children decide to visit a train yard and interview an engineer. Each child drew a picture and dictated or wrote a question. They excitedly discussed what they learned and decided to create their own freight train out of cardboard boxes.

During the train project, Mark works on his goals of turn taking and initiating authentic interactions with other children, not just the teacher. The teacher facilitates these interactions, using the opportunity to provide verbal prompts. Other children work on individual goals to meet their specific needs. Charles works on sorting and counting items to go into the train. Anne sells tickets and learns to label and identify money. Andre takes orders in the dining car and builds her writing skills.

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> "The project approach is a detailed, thoughtful exploration of a subject matter of significance to the children."

Meeting the needs of children with disabilities requires strategies for engaging each and every child as an individual and facilitating their participation as a member of a group. The use of the project approach meets the needs of individual children by building on an awareness of children's interests and high expectations (Helm & Katz, 2001). All early childhood teachers should be intentional in their instruction, curriculum design, and interactions with children. In this time of standards-based education, early childhood special educators are even more fully expected to be accountable and explicate the purpose and goals of activities they implement in their classrooms (National Association for the Education of Young Children & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2003). Early childhood special educators can make learning visible with the use of the project approach (Harris & Gleim, 2008). In this article, the alignment of the project approach with key practices necessary for successful inclusive environments will be explored. The purpose of this article is to describe the utility of the project approach in inclusive settings and its reflection of strategies recommended for use with children with disabilities, such as enhancing engagement, data-based decision making, building classroom communities, universal design for learning, and natural, authentic environments.

The Project Approach

The project approach is a detailed, thoughtful exploration of a subject matter of significance to the children. It is a multifaceted approach that varies in implementation according to the interests and abilities of students and allows for meeting the needs of diverse learners (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2009). Learning through projects began with engineers and tradespeople and has occurred for more than 400 years (Howell, 2003). Project work has evolved over time. Originally focusing on construction as the final goal, the project approach now involves collaborative and comprehensive investigations of a topic of interest (Helm & Katz, 2001). Students engage in a process throughout which they work toward common goals and develop shared understandings. Students are engaged in meaningful and purposeful problem solving (Howell, 2003).

The project approach is grounded in collaboration, communication, and an assumption that children are competent. Children communicate and have multiple means to do so, including verbal explanations, drawings, photographs, writing, dictation, and art. Documentation is an integral part of this communication (Helm, 2003). The environment is the third teacher, where every space has a purpose in engaging children. The teacher's role is a partner, nurturer, guide, and researcher (Cadwell, 2003).

A common myth about the project approach is that it may keep children with disabilities on the sidelines. With careful planning, this will not be the case. The use of the project approach should be an opportunity not only for collaboration among children but also for collaboration among

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professionals and families. Projects are suited to meet the needs of children with disabilities in a variety of ways (Helm, Beneke, Scranton, & Doubet, 2003; Vakil, Freeman, & Swim, 2003).

First, projects are collaborative and focus on strengths and assets rather than deficits. Children can choose and decide how to participate in the activities. Every child makes a contribution toward the project. Adaptations would be the same as with any curriculum: modification of time, space, or materials. There is an emphasis on the interests of children, which demonstrates respect for each and every child. Although children have opportunities to participate in diverse learning experiences, not every child is expected to participate in every experience (Helm & Katz, 2001). Because of the initial effort to develop a sense of community, the role of adaptations for children with disabilities changes in that plans address how each and every child can be an equal participant. Adaptations are not an afterthought but a key aspect of planning (Helm et al., 2003).

Furthermore, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and Individualized Family Service Plan goals can be met using the project approach. For example, children working on increasing their vocabulary might label drawings with new words and learn to use new vocabulary in small-group discussions (Helm et al., 2003). Speech, language, and social development are enhanced as children engage in purposeful literacy activities, which occur in all phases of project work. Children represent their learning and share what they learn with their peers and caregivers (Helm et al., 2003). Children become researchers, seeking answers to their questions and collaborating with each project. Projects help to meet the needs of diverse groups of learners. Children can be engaged in the manner that best meets their learning needs so their time in the classroom is meaningful. Project work emphasizes small-group work. Encouraging participation in small-group discussion allows for increased opportunities for communication, participation, and relationship building for children with and without disabilities (Helm et al., 2003).

Second, projects develop in phases, from topic selection to investigation to culmination and conclusion. In the first phase, the teacher may select a topic based on the interests of a child with a disability. This will help connect the child to the class and provide him or her opportunities to be in a leadership role. The topic should be

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relevant to young children and something that can be realistically investigated. The teacher will collaborate with the teaching team to create a curriculum web that includes possible questions, IEP goals, possible group experiences, and opportunities for parent participation. He or she will then do a web with the children to determine what they already know and that they want to learn. The teacher can help each child to come up with a question to investigate. The second phase is investigation. The teacher invites visiting experts to the classroom. He or she arranges to go on site visits to allow children to address their questions rather than simply tour facilities. Children can then represent what they learned in a variety of ways. In inclusive settings, it is helpful to pair children with peers. Documentation occurs through each step with photographs or video, children's reflections and understandings, and teacher observations. In the third phase, the class discusses what the children have learned and plans a way to share what they have learned.

In the next section of this article, I describe six components of successful inclusive practices in early childhood: (a) enhancing engagement, (b) using principles of universal design for learning (UDL), (c) data-based decision making, (d) meaningful parental involvement, (e) building classroom communities, and (f) designing and implementing natural and authentic environments, interventions, and assessments. I will describe how each of these components is inherent in the project approach.

“Children's experiences influence learning and should be designed to enhance rather than constrain learning.”

Enhancing Engagement

> For the first time this school year, Mark interacts meaningfully with other children as part of the train project. In the morning, he grabs his mom's hand and hurries her to the classroom to see his friends. He tells his peers about trains, writes labels for the train, and explains how many windows and wheels there should be on each train car.

Children's experiences influence learning and should be designed to enhance rather than constrain learning (Wolery, 2006). Every moment of time is important. Interest in materials increases engagement, which leads to learning and further interests (Odom & Wolery, 2003). Promoting active engagement of children is a recommended practice in early childhood special education (Wolery, 2006).

Children demonstrate engagement in a variety of ways, including behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioral engagement involves participation in activities, such as following classroom rules. Persistence and concentration also fall under the category of behavioral engagement. Emotional engagement involves feelings and attitudes toward teachers, peers, and school. Happiness, anxiety, and sense of belonging are all part of emotional engagement. Cognitive engagement is defined as an investment of time and energy to comprehension and mastery of skills (Fredricks et al., 2004). All three types of engagement are incorporated in the

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use of the project approach and are associated with positive outcomes for each and every child.

Behavioral engagement is inherent in the project approach as all children participate in different ways. Emotional engagement develops as children work collaboratively and develop a sense of community. Children are cognitively engaged as they use and master skills involved in investigation, communication, and representation (Fredericks et al., 2004). The time spent in the classroom using the project approach is productive. Learning time is maximized as children are actively engaged in pursuing the answers to questions about a topic of interest. In universally designed classrooms, children are also engaged in a variety of ways.

Using Principles of UDL

Mark is interested in trains and is motivated to participate in the project. He constructs trains with Legos as well as facilitates building and painting the classroom train. He reads books to other children and takes photographs with a camera. He is able to participate successfully in his own way while also engaging and interacting with his peers.

UDL involves flexibility in curriculum development and presentation (Council for Exceptional Children, 2005). Teachers build in the devices necessary for each and every child to access the curriculum from the onset rather than attempt to make adaptations after the curriculum has already been developed. Three main principles of UDL apply to the project approach.

First, information is presented in a variety of ways. In the project approach, presentation of information could be in the form of a visiting expert, a site visit to a location related to a topic, reading books, and hands-on exploration. Teachers share information verbally by telling children, visually by creating an interactive chart, and tactually by including textures, such as flannel boards. The project approach also incorporates a variety of teaching methods to meet the needs of children. For example, projects involve small-group work, independent research, modeling, peer support, and direct teaching and demonstration of technical skills (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

Second, different learning styles are taken into account as well as level of complexity. Students are both challenged and supported (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose & Jackson, 2002). With the project approach, children can express themselves in a variety of ways. Children can express themselves by drawing, writing, performing a play, sculpting, or any other ways they choose.

Third, children are engaged in a variety of ways. Their interests are taken into account, and children are motivated (Council for Exceptional Children, 2005). Child interests are not simply taken into account; they are often the basis for topic selection. It is a dynamic process, and teachers respond to children's ideas throughout the project. Teachers determine children's interests and include them in the classroom.

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> "Assessment is ongoing. Projects provide a meaningful context for assessment and reflection in which teachers can use information to facilitate learning."

Teachers using UDL report increased comprehension, collaboration, and on-task behavior (Acrey, Johnstone, & Milligan, 2005). Teachers who engage in the project approach are in fact using UDL principles. This is significant because it reinforces the notion that the project approach is appropriate for children in inclusive and diverse settings. UDL is not about one teaching approach or technique. It is, however, a foundation from which a variety of methods can and should be used with the goal of developing children's understandings (Council for Exceptional Children, 2005).

Data-Based Decision Making

> The teacher observes throughout the course of the project that Mark responds to the other children and adults who initiate interactions four out of five times three times a week. The teacher has also collected photographs and dictation of his words. Mark does not, however, initiate interactions consistently. The teaching team sees this as a necessary component in communication as well as being a leader in the project and thus plans to provide opportunities for him to initiate interactions.

Inclusive environments do not guarantee that learning will occur for all children. Instructional decision making should be based on data (Wolery, 2006). In classrooms using the project approach, as in Reggio Emilia, teachers are seen as researchers who observe, document, and find ways to support learning processes (Malaguzzi, 1998). Assessment is ongoing. Projects provide a meaningful context for assessment and reflection in which teachers can use information to facilitate learning (Sloane, 2004).

When teachers keep up-to-date documentation of children's progress, their progress is greater (Council for Exceptional Children, 2007). Data collection provides information about children's strengths, goals, interests, thinking, understanding, and progress over time. Some forms of data may include writing samples, art samples, dictation, anecdotal records, video, and photographs. Teachers use this information to make decisions about topics, materials, and changes to the classroom environment.

In classrooms using the project approach, observation not only is documented for the teacher but is also shared with the classroom community in the form of a documentation panel. A documentation panel is not a record of cute things that children may have said in the course of their project but, rather, an illustration of the process of children's learning and thinking. The documentation panels serve both as a memory for the children and teachers and as data to help teachers plan and make adjustments as needed. Documentation panels often reveal the children's current thinking and understanding (Helm, 2003). This helps teachers make informed decisions, but also children can move to the next level of understanding by revisiting their former ideas. Documentation as a means of collecting data makes learning visible to everyone, adds to a sense of community, and helps to include parents and inform them about classroom experiences.

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> "The project approach is built on establishing a sense of community within the classroom as well as developing relationships with families and the community."

Increasing Meaningful Parent Involvement

Not only is there a sense of community within the classroom among children, but also parents and family members are a part of the classroom community (Helm & Katz, 2001). Positive relationships among family members and teachers are a common element in programs in which children with significant disabilities are included successfully (Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi, & Shelton, 2004). If parents become accustomed to participating in their child's education in the early childhood years, perhaps they will be encouraged to continue to participate as their child grows older. Involvement of family members affects children's development in a positive way (Quesenberry, Ostrosky & Corso, 2007). Meaningful opportunities for parent participation in children's education enhances the effectiveness of education for children with disabilities (IDEIA, 2004).

> In Mark's classroom, parents are encouraged to provide materials from home, such as cardboard boxes, paper plates for wheels, and toy trains. Some of the parents read the documentation panels with their children during arrival and dismissal. Some may take their children to the library after school to find books about trains and bring these books to the classroom. The teachers have noticed that more and more parents are beginning to spend more time in the classroom, coming just a few minutes earlier for arrival and dismissal to see what is going on. Some of the parents volunteer to go with the class on site visits and read project history books that teachers may send home with children. As parents see their children's engagement in their projects, parents begin to become engaged as well.

Building Classroom Communities

> Children gather in the block area during center time to make a train. They approach Mark as an expert, asking him what parts are needed. Mark selects materials and shapes as the children work together to build a train. The children are working together toward a common goal, and there are multiple opportunities for everyone to participate.

One integral part of using the project approach is building a classroom community (Helm & Katz, 2001). The project approach is built on establishing a sense of community within the classroom as well as developing relationships with families and the community. For the Reggio Emilia schools, for example, education is based on relationships. Teachers strive to provide a sense of belonging, opportunities for participation, and development of shared meanings (Rinaldi, 1998).

As children investigate topics of interest, they work together to develop knowledge. Building knowledge involves the creation of a classroom community in which children participate as intentional learners to construct and share knowledge (Messina, 2001). In a classroom community, all members make important contributions. Building a classroom community requires dialogue.

A goal of inclusive classrooms should be to create learning communities, which take into account each and every child's assets and interests. In classroom communities, everyone has responsibilities and everyone makes a contribution. Facilitating respect, understanding, and friendships among children with and

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without disabilities and providing opportunities for each child to take on leadership roles may foster positive attitudes allowing all children to be viewed as accepted members of the classroom community (Han, Ostrosky & Diamond, 2006). Creating such an environment begins with respect. It requires listening to children, trusting children, and allowing everyone's voices to be heard. Children have some control over and responsibility for learning. Acknowledging diversity as a resource and responding to children' experiences rather than dividing children on the basis of adult perceptions of ability are an essential component in creating a community of learners (Cheatham, Armstrong & Santos, 2009). Teachers engaging in the project approach conduct classroom meetings and provide opportunities for everyone to participate. Everyone has assets and skills and is included. Diversity is valued and diverse interests and abilities are used to meet the goals of the project. Teachers who use the project approach create an environment that sends a clear message that children's needs, interests, ideas, and work are important.

Naturalistic Interventions and Assessments

Earlier, using documentation panels for data-based decision making, the teachers set initiating interactions as a goal for Mark. With video documentation, photographs, and anecdotes collected for reflecting and revisiting learning, the teachers are able to assess how often Mark initiates interactions. They are also able to review the videos and photographs of other children with Mark as an intervention to model expected behavior.

The implementation of the project approach occurs in the classroom environment. Recommended child-focused practices advise serving children in the natural environment (Wolery, 2006). Naturalistic interventions involve using the least-intrusive interventions to meet desired goals in the most normal settings (Wolery, 2006). Classrooms using the project approach provide opportunities for meaningful and functional communication, representation, and engagement. There is an ongoing process of observation. Naturalistic teaching allows for data collection and provides repeated opportunities for prompting, learning, and feedback to promote development of skills in context (DiCarlo & Vagianos, 2009). Teachers may use documentation of children's language usage as a naturalistic assessment of their social interaction skills; then, teachers can use this information to individualize intervention strategies (Katz & Galbraith, 2006; Suárez & Daniels, 2008).

Naturalistic intervention provides opportunities to examine the situation and environment rather than to simply consider the behavior of the individual child, allowing not only for consideration of the context but also for use of skills in context (Stanton-Chapman, Kaiser, Vijay & Chapman, 2008). The interests and skills of children and teachers are essential components in designing naturalistic interventions. Interventions are grounded in natural routines and interactions. The documentation used in the project approach may assist with assessment of learning.

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“A key component in the project approach is to involve children in the process.”

Implications for Classroom Practice

Designing and implementing the project approach in the classroom takes time. This section presents five critical steps for teachers to consider when implementing the project approach in inclusive classrooms.

First, a key component in the project approach is to involve children in the process. Instead of designing the curriculum and asking what can be changed to make it culturally relevant and to meet the needs of children with disabilities, begin with what the children know, what they need to know, how they learn, what they can do, and where they come from. In the project approach, teachers allow children to take control, carefully observing their needs and interests. It is a dynamic, ongoing, reciprocal process. The need for deliberate observation to identify child interests is essential.

Second, collaboration is extremely important in the project approach. Teachers are not the sole experts; they distribute information to children and view themselves as members of a team. Teachers must have clear, effective, open communication with parents, family members, other teachers, paraprofessionals, and community members. Teachers can communicate in a variety of ways, such as through informal conversation, parent-teacher conferences, weekly phone calls, and letters and invitations to families and community members to visit the classroom. Teachers must let go of the idea of being completely in control and be willing to allow parents and visiting experts to provide input on a consistent basis. To build a sense of community, it is necessary to help children feel the connections among their classroom, their homes, and their community.

Third, the environment plays a significant role in learning. Classroom teachers must work to create an environment in which all children feel safe, valued, and able to take risks. Frequent and careful evaluation of the environment is necessary to determine what works well and what is missing as well as to evaluate accessibility, safety, aesthetics, responsiveness, and learning opportunities. Proactive planning is important to make all aspects of the environment accessible rather than “add-on” accommodations.

Fourth, teachers must have high expectations. In the project approach, teachers view children as capable and competent. Teachers must, therefore, provide quality materials and help determine how children can carry out plans. For example, rather than only providing Play-Doh, teachers can provide clay and other materials that real artists might use. The variety of materials is both available everyday and carefully chosen for specific activities within a particular project. Teaching practices must be based on both knowledge of individual children and evidence-based teaching practices.

Finally, documentation and data-based decision making are paramount. Teachers not only must document learning on a consistent basis but must also use the information gained to make decisions about the classroom environment, curriculum, and interactions.

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Table 1
The Goals of Inclusion in Comparison With Goals of the Project Approach

Goals of Inclusion	Goals of the Project Approach
Development of positive relationships and a sense of community (DEC & NAEYC, 2009)	Collaborative inquiry, cooperative learning (Helm & Katz, 2001)
Effective education that addresses social, physical, and academic needs (Downing & Peckham- Hardin, 2007)	Effective education that addresses children's knowledge, skills, dispositions, and feelings (Chard & Katz, 2001)

NOTE: DEC = Division for Early Childhood; NAEYC = National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Table 2
Additional Readings and Resources on Reggio Emilia and the Project Approach

Cadwell, L. (2003). *Bringing learning to life: The Reggio approach to early childhood education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (1993). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
Gandini, L., Etheredge, S., & Hill. L., (Eds.). (2008). *Insights and inspirations: Stories of teachers and children from North America*. Worcester, MA: Davis.
Helm, J. H., & Katz, L. G. (2001). *Young investigators: The project approach in the early years*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Hill, L., Stremmel, A., & Fu, V. (2005). *Teaching as inquiry: Rethinking early childhood education*. Columbus, OH: Allyn & Bacon.
Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative/Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting (Reggio section): http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/poptopics/reggio.html
North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA): http://www.reggioalliance.org
The Project Approach: http://www.projectapproach.org/
Reggio Children: http://www.reggiochildren.it

Practices necessary for successful inclusive programs are inherent in the project approach. See Table 1 for a comparison of the goals of inclusion and the project approach. The purpose of this article is to provide a bridge to understanding how the project approach may be designed and implemented to support the needs of children with disabilities in inclusive settings. For additional reading and resources, see Table 2.

At the culmination of the train project, children created a collaborative mural as well as a train constructed of cardboard boxes. All of the children shared information about trains with the parents at a final presentation. Mark, who used to direct most conversations to trains, has extended his interest beyond trains. Building on an exploration of the dining car in passenger trains, the children are now exploring restaurants. Mark is interested in cooking. His parents have used that opportunity to facilitate independent skills, such as making microwave popcorn at home. Mark has increased initiating interactions with peers in the classroom, using the documentation panels on the walls to begin conversations. He is also maintaining interactions. There are still various challenges in the classroom when it is too loud or overwhelming. Mark has the opportunity to work individually when needed. The participation in projects, however, has afforded meaningful engagement, family involvement, social interactions, and increased opportunities to use language with access to the curriculum from the onset.

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Note

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