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Collaboration as a Foundation for the Project Approach in Family Child Care

Joan Youngquist with
Carolyn Pope Edwards and Ruth Heaton

March 15, Teacher's notes:

Last week Mallory (age four) brought her hamster Fluffy to visit. I remembered how much the children loved building real structures with blocks, so I mentioned the idea of a maze. Mallory thought it would be a good idea to make Fluffy a maze. She reminded us of the idea several times over the next few days, wondering if Fluffy would like it.

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Photos © Joan Youngquist.

The literature suggested many examples of successful projects at child care centers and preschools (Breig-Allen et al. 1998; Harkema 1999; Beneke 2000; Glassman & Whaley 2000). Our challenge was how to adapt the project approach to our home child care situation.

Family child care

Family child care homes provide out-of-home care for approximately one-fourth of children with working mothers in the United States (Smith 2000). Many parents of young children choose family child care because of the smaller group size, personal relationship with the provider, and individualized care they believe is offered in home settings (Kontos et al. 1995). These and additional characteristics we shared with other family child care operations could affect our ability to effectively implement the project approach. Can Do Kids family child care was located in a private home where space was partially shared with my family. There were only 12 children, age two to five, enrolled full or part time, as well as one part-time infant. We could allow for flexible use of time and space since there was no need to share resources with another group. The multiage grouping allowed children to experience diverse interests and ideas and to learn from peers.

Staff turnover was low. Deb worked mornings while I worked the full day. Christine supported us as a part-time infant caregiver. We developed close relationships with families, which enhanced the parental support and involvement so necessary for project work.

Just what is the project approach? What does it look like? How will it support children's learning?

The same characteristics that supported our adoption of the project approach were also sources of challenge. It could be difficult to acquire costly resources or provide space for storage. Most space was used for multiple purposes both by the child care program and my family. This made it difficult to engage in long-term projects and to save samples of children's work. Finding enough time, however, was the most difficult issue. I knew that project activities would take more preparation time than a typical curriculum approach (Beneke 2000). I was concerned that Deb and I would have trouble finding the time for observation, reflection, documentation, and planning. With our different work schedules and multiple tasks, it was hard to find time for mutual reflection and planning. These were some of the challenges we faced as we began

our inquiry into the adoption of the project approach.

Developing our understanding

Having identified our strengths and needs, our next step was to develop a base of common understanding. I invited a group of parents to a meeting to discuss what we wanted for the children. Since we lacked expertise in understanding the project approach, we invited Carolyn Edwards, a faculty member in early childhood education at nearby University of Nebraska, to meet with us. We assessed the program's strengths and areas we wanted to improve. We talked about the project approach and how it might meet those needs.

Through the questioning and knowledge-sharing process, we decided that successful implementation in our family child care program would depend on several factors: children asking questions, the availability of materials and resources to support firsthand investigation, development of observation and documentation skills, and effective communication among teachers, children, and families. Some of these elements were already present in our program, and others we struggled with. At the time, what we didn't realize was how important a founda-

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tion of collaboration among parents, children, and caregivers would be for effective implementation.

Collaboration among children

March 17, Teacher's notes:

Mallory brought Fluffy the hamster back to school. At planning time she suggested working on a maze.

Several children thought this was a good idea. Mallory and Griffith (age five) took the lead in planning and construction. As they neared completion, Mallory and Griffith worked on the problem of how to keep Fluffy from escaping from the maze. Mallory took on the role of the hamster to demonstrate what she thought Fluffy's reaction might be.

Griffith: Mallory, you'll have to be trapped. I'm going to close it.

Mallory: (*jumping over the walls*) Ha, ha! I got out!

Griffith: Do you think Fluffy likes bridges?

Mallory: No.

Griffith: Let's try it out—please.

Mallory: OK.

Teacher: How do we keep Fluffy from getting out under the bridge?

Griffith: It's OK if she gets out there.

Mallory: We could put a door there.

Griffith: I have an idea. We could put a block here.

Mallory: Yeah!



The theory

According to Vygotsky ([1962] 1986), learning is mediated through interaction with others. Children learn within a social system mutually and actively created by teacher and students (Steward 1995). In other words, collaboration leads to learning. Benefits include improved social skills, better understanding of task strategies, increased on-task focus, and reduced demand for direct teacher instruction (Azmita 1988; Malaguzzi 1993; Jordan & LeMetals 1997; McClellan & Kinsey 1999). Benefits are constant across subject matter, age groups, and abilities (Duran & Gauvain 1993; Fassler 1998; Davenport & Howe 1999). Interaction in a group allows children to communicate more frequently and effectively and to develop negotiation skills (Malaguzzi 1993). Learning within the context of the group is a characteristic of the project approach.

In practice . . .

I knew that the parents, Deb, and I already valued working together. We found that encouraging collaboration among children engaged in project work was not difficult. As projects developed, it became clear that a few children's intense interest in the topic would draw in others until nearly everyone was involved at some level. Even the two-year-olds who did not appear engaged in activities learned from the project work. Jack was a two-year-old who chose not to participate in many classroom investigations about sharks. But later, on a visit to Sea World with his family, his parents were astounded when he correctly identified every type of shark in the

shark tank! Unknown to Deb or me, Jack had paid attention to what the older children were doing.

Learning among children takes many forms: sharing, seeking, demonstrating, modeling, and questioning. Questions are important for fueling the direction of investigations, and questioning requires collaboration. Someone must hear what is asked! Children learn questioning skills from models provided by other children and adults. During our maze investigation, children repeatedly asked, "How can we keep Fluffy from escaping?" as they

Older, more capable children acted as teachers for younger ones, and children with prior knowledge about a topic shared that knowledge.

led to a mini-investigation of hamsters and other pets.

The collaboration among the children was in part the result of their multiple ages and range of abilities. Older, more capable children acted as teachers for younger ones, and children with prior knowledge about a topic shared that knowledge. Deb and I encouraged collaboration by suggesting part-

ners for children to work with. We modeled an attitude of inclusiveness, inviting anyone interested to join in an investigation or activity. Children's cooperative interactions during project work made the development of curriculum for a multiage group very workable.

As children developed the habit of collaborating, both my assistant and I began to view learning as a group process. Individual learning was still considered important, but we saw it occurring within the context of group learning during project work. Adults, as part of the group, learned much by observing these processes in which they also collaborated. I learned there was such a thing as a whale shark and that trains don't have cabooses anymore. As children explored

mazes, I saw an amazing application of road-building knowledge. I learned how to support children and establish routines that encourage inquiry. I realized that children are an important resource for the learning

Strategies to Support Collaboration among Children

1. Invite two or more children to work together or with a teacher.
2. Provide opportunities for a less experienced child to work with a more experienced child.
3. Refer children to peers for help in solving problems.
4. Invite children to share their knowledge and ask questions of others.
5. Invite children to plan an activity together.
6. Provide opportunities and time for children to develop friendships.
7. Demonstrate the value of children working together through display and documentation of the group's work.

explored different maze structures. When one child suggested building the maze in the doll bed, the idea was seized upon by others, and a collaborative solution to Fluffy's climbing skills was realized. Children's questions about Fluffy

Collaboration among adults

March 18, Teacher's notes:

I need to talk with Deb about what the children are trying to do with the maze. The children are predicting what Fluffy will do and brainstorming how to keep her from escaping. They have limited materials. How can we extend this activity? More building materials, books with mazes, and materials for a people-size maze might be of interest. We can put photos of the maze on the wall to share with families.

The theory

Supportive relationships between providers and others, including other educators and parents of enrolled children, provide resources of experience, information, and support that result in higher quality care (Weaver 2002). Edwards and Springate (1993) note that a teacher needs a partner in initiating and facilitating project work. Niemeyer and Cassidy (2001) describe three stages of coteaching: coordination, cooperation, and collaboration. *Coordinating* coteachers teach independently with individual styles. *Cooperating* teachers assimilate each other's style but implement independently. *Collaborating* teachers define goals and plan and implement strategies together. It is

Supporting Collaboration with Families

It is important to recognize that different parents have different comfort zones and abilities when participating in their children's child care program. Offer families the opportunity to collaborate in project investigations by

- asking for donations of project-related materials;
- encouraging them to share project-related knowledge or skills;
- inviting them to help organize or chaperone project-related field trips;
- soliciting ideas about topics for investigation and ways to provide hands-on experiences;
- suggesting that they encourage their child to share what he or she has done at school that day;
- inviting comment and reflection on project documentation;
- inviting them to participate on a planning or advisory committee; and
- soliciting their suggestions on how they would like to be involved.

one thing to recognize the importance of collaboration among adults but another to put this value into practice.

In practice . . .

Deb and I worked well together and had complementary strengths that contributed to a strong developmentally appropriate program, but we didn't talk together much. Each had a routine and/or times to be on duty, to plan, and to provide curriculum experiences. While we welcomed the involvement of parents and children in planning, we rarely invited it. We realized we were only at the

coordination stage! We needed to establish collaboration among adults both as a model for children and to facilitate implementation of the project approach.

We decided to form a projects committee comprised primarily of parents and caregivers. The parents who came to the original planning meeting were all willing to serve on the committee. Individual committee members brought a range of experience and knowledge in education, health, psychology, family systems, art, and culture. Meetings were informal and relaxed and often included sharing a meal. Carolyn was a mentor and resource, meeting with the committee to stimulate ideas and possibilities.

Knowing that her expertise was available was reassuring.

For the most part, committee members interacted well. As with any group of people, there were minor conflicts, most of which seemed to center around our lack of information. One woman reported feeling intimidated. Deb questioned how much parents actually contributed. Christine, the infant caregiver, felt she lacked the knowledge to contribute much. The commitment of committee members to establishing collaboration helped us overcome these minor difficulties.

The role of the projects committee

The projects committee played a crucial role in supporting new projects. At the first meeting, we discussed observation, information

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gathering, documentation, and reflection. I noted that some children had expressed an interest in skin color, so we decided to explore this idea for our first inquiry project. Investigations of geography, trains, sharks, and hiding places followed. Children's interest in mazes was an extension of their interest in places.

Parent and professional members of the projects committee were a resource for ideas, reflection, and collaboration. The group met monthly to review projects, reflect, and plan. Members could find time to meet once a month, and the schedule fit well with the length of projects. Committee members felt most comfortable with and effective at brainstorming new ideas. When we met to explore children's interest

in mazes, members speculated on how children's interests tied in with previous investigations and their interest in construction. They suggested ideas for different types of mazes, different animals to build for, materials to build with, and possible field trips. We used these ideas to generate a planning web that provided possibilities for curriculum development. Committee members provided incentive and support for us to collaborate on a daily basis.

By the end of the first year, Deb and I developed the habit of planning together informally by noting observations, making suggestions, asking for opinions, and working through constraints. During rest time we shared with each other. At drop-off or pickup time, we engaged families in project topics and invited

their ideas. This sharing not only strengthened the program but also developed our skills as teachers.

Expanding the collaboration

While pleased with the collaboration among parents and caregivers on the projects committee, I knew it was important to include all families in building our collaborative community. They needed to under-



stand the learning that was occurring in project investigations. Oken-Wright (2001) describes the role that documenting children's work plays in supporting collaboration between home and school, allowing parents to see how their children learn within the context of the group. Before adapting the project approach, I communicated regularly with families via newsletters, conferences, individual portfolios, and informal conversations. I used these established methods as the basis for communicating about project work. We also explored

displaying children's work in the forms of posters and class books.

We developed the idea of project books as a way to document and share a project from its inception through the culminating activity, with photographs, children's comments, and teachers' observations. In addition, members of the project committee shared their understanding and enthusiasm with other parents.

Our strategies must have been successful because all families were supportive of—and excited by—the learning they saw occurring with the project approach. Participation increased as parents took on the role of collaborators. They participated in different ways. Parents often talked with children about project activities at the end of the day. They helped during field trips, donated

resources and materials, provided community links, and took part in end-of-project celebrations. They were an invaluable resource in suggesting and donating materials. For example, during our maze project families donated blocks for hamster-size mazes and large cardboard boxes for a child-size maze.

It was during our investigation of sharks that I came to really appreciate our collaboration with parents. When children indicated they wanted to study sharks, I wondered how we could provide firsthand

Project books document a project from its inception through the culminating activity with photographs, children's comments, and teachers' observations.

experiences in landlocked Nebraska! Collaboration with families provided the answer. In addition to ideas, parents provided real shark teeth, books and models from home, and helped organize a field trip to the aquarium in Omaha, where children could view live sharks.

As families joined in more project activities, they developed an interest beyond just their own child. This interest in the community of children was expressed by one mother when she exclaimed about a project book: "It is really amazing to see how much the kids are learning. There has really been such a big change in the books. [The children] are doing so much now!! They are just getting older and are more capable, and that is reflected in the book." By working and sharing together, parents, children, and teachers established a learning community with a foundation of collaboration, allowing us to successfully implement the project approach in our family child care program.

Conclusion

March 22, Teacher's notes:

Work on the maze has continued and other have children joined in.

Griffith: Here is a ramp.

Mallory: Do you think Fluffy will like that?

Griffith: Yeah!

Amos: I'm making her another bed.

Christopher: Hey guys, I made another maze!

Mallory: Not for Fluffy.

Christopher: No, for trains.

We decided to hide some sunflower seeds in the maze to see if Fluffy would find them. When we put the hamster in the maze, the children were delighted to see that

Successful collaboration among adults and children in reflecting, planning, and learning processes provided the foundation for the successful adoption of the project approach at my family child care.

she found the food they had hidden. She climbed all over the walls, and the children laughed and giggled as they caught her and put her back in the maze. Christopher (age five) tried building the walls taller, but Fluffy found holes to get through. We put her back in her cage and moved on to other things. Perhaps another day we will discover a way to make a maze that Fluffy can't get out of. I wonder what else we can do to expand children's learning with mazes. I wonder if they would have an interest in working with maps.

Collaboration among adults and children was essential for the implementation of the project approach at Can Do Kids. We all learned to value collaboration and encourage it among the children as a means of effective learning. Our project activities stimulated collaborative learning among the children and effectively supported their curiosity.

Although positive relationships had been established among families and caregivers prior to the adoption of the project approach, collaboration among adults was not common, and curriculum planning had been an isolated task of individual caregivers. The projects committee proved effective in supporting collaboration among parents and caregivers. The participation of a knowledgeable mentor provided an additional resource and a catalyst for change. Monthly meetings of the committee allowed us to reflect on project activities and brainstorm ideas for new

investigations. Members provided support and incentive for my coworker and me to collaborate in daily observation, reflection, and planning and helped us find creative solutions to challenges such as limited resources or time constraints. Effective communication about project investigations encouraged parents who did not participate on the committee to collaborate in other ways. They helped with field trips, provided resources, and made community links.

Successful collaboration among adults and children in reflecting, planning, and learning processes provided the foundation for the successful adoption of the project approach at my family child care. But my work was not done. My next goal was to develop a better understanding of the role documentation plays in children's learning.

By the way, the children's interest in mazes did lead to an interest in exploring maps. A few weeks after they began building mazes, the children began drawing routes on a large laminated map of our city donated by a parent. This inspired the projects committee to develop a whole new web of ideas. The collaboration continued.

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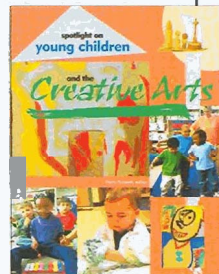
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