

Pink Cars and Lego Cities:

Using project-based learning in the early years



Explore, Create, Empower Conference
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The Beginning

At the end of February a big cardboard box was donated to the preschool. It was too shallow to make a good cubby house so we decided to ask the children what they thought we should use it for. We had lots of suggestions including a plane, a boat, a train and even a jumping castle! The most popular idea though was to turn it into a car.

To spark the children's imagination we cut the box into a basic car shape and left it sitting on the tables in the studio.



The children remembered our discussion about the box and were keen to start work on it straight away. The first job was to paint it and as we applied a coat of white paint as an undercoat it became clear that there were lots of different ideas about what colour the finished car should be.

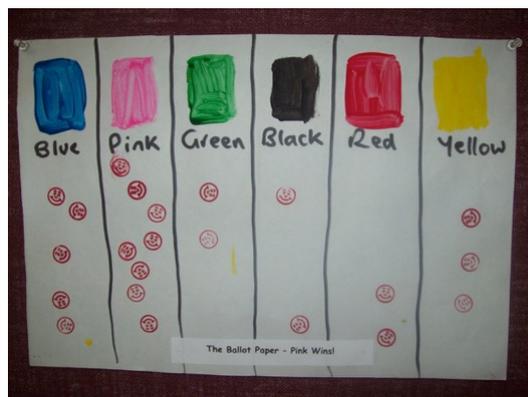


One group (mainly boys) insisted on blue. Another group (mainly girls) insisted on pink. Others wanted yellow, red, green or even black. The only solution was to put it to a vote.



At group time we used a ballot paper marked with each of the suggested colours. The children took turns to place a stamp underneath the colour that they wanted. When everyone had voted we tallied the results.

They were controversial - Blue had 5 votes; Yellow 3; Green, Red and Black 2 each. Pink had 8 and was the winner! Blue demanded a recount but no matter how many times we counted Pink still won. By the end of the day while not everyone was enthusiastic, almost everyone had come around to the idea that we would be painting the car pink.



As a group we discussed what features our car would need and the children came up with the following list:

- Wheels**
- Spare Tyre**
- Steering Wheel**
- Seat Belts**
- Boot**
- Engine**
- Horn**
- Shopping to go in the boot**
- Doors**
- Headlights and Taillights**
- A Fan**

We then sent a note home asking the children and their parents to have a look at their own cars and see if there was anything we needed to add to the list.

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Of course there was...

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| Booster Seats | Air Bags |
| Air Conditioner | CD/Radio |
| Bumper Bars | Spoilers |
| Windscreen | Rego Sticker |
| Windscreen | Bugs on the |
| Wipers | Windscreen |
| Number Plates | Sun Visors |
| Drink Holder | Glove Box |
| Map | Gear Stick |
| Keys | Mirrors |

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The next morning we started with the pink paint. The children were quick painters and by morning tea the job was finished. To help with gathering ideas of what else our car needed we also went outside to have a look at a real car. In small groups the children were able to have a look under the bonnet at the engine and also all around the car to see if there was anything we might have missed. The children drew pictures of what they saw so that we would be able to remember for later on.



That afternoon we used a drawing one of the children had made as the basis for the number plates and also began to paint some cardboard black in preparation for making the tyres.

At this stage, as we realised how interested the children were in the project, we decided that we would need to do some reinforcing of the original box if it was to survive. We added some wooden framing and cardboard bracing to give it extra strength.

Our car was well and truly underway!

What is a project?

- A project is an extended learning experience that continues over a period of time.
- It provides opportunities for planning, reflection and discussion.
- It can be child or adult initiated but usually has a focus or guiding question that provides direction.
- It may involve one or many children, and this involvement may change over the course of the project



How to build a pyramid



A Chinese Dragon



Pirates

What is the difference between a project and theme?

- There are some similarities between themes and projects. A theme however is usually a central idea or concept around which a whole series of experiences are organised. These may or may not be ongoing learning experiences in the way that a project is.
- A project will sometimes develop into a broader interest that may superficially resemble a more traditional “theme” approach but the key difference is the ongoing nature of the learning, and the way that a project develops a life of its own as it goes.

What’s so important about extended learning?

- When children reflect on what they have done previously; plan for what they are going to do in the future; and have the opportunity to discuss, rethink and change their plans as they go their learning and thinking becomes far more complex.
- When children only have the opportunity to participate in one-off experiences that stand alone they have limited opportunities to engage in this higher level thinking

“It is only through a process of re-reading, reflection and revisiting that children are able to organise what they have learned... Children [should be] encouraged to reflect on an experience rather than simply have an experience... not only to observe but to reflect on their observations”

George Forman, Foreword to *The fountains: From a project for the construction of an amusement park for the birds* (1995) Reggio Children



Opportunities for review and discussion

How do Projects fit with the EYLF?

As well as providing opportunities for extended learning, projects are also a great example of **holistic learning**.

The EYLF specifically argues for the importance of holistic learning – learning that is not skill based, or focused narrowly on one area, but instead combines a range of skills, developmental and curriculum areas and outcomes in the one experience.

As with extended learning, holistic learning provides for more complex and deeper understanding, as well greater transference of learning from one experience to another.

Projects also provide a great opportunity for **sustained shared thinking** – both between children and also between children and adults.

Sustained Shared Thinking

Sustained shared thinking was identified by British researchers working on the EPPE project (Effect Provision of Preschool Education) as a key factor in high quality learning environments for children.

Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford who led the EPPE research team defines it as:

an episode in which two or more individuals (children together, or adults and children) ‘work together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking, and it must develop and extend.

For more information see: <http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk>

Complex problem solving – the mirrors



The finished car in the car park



And a caravan too...

Project Myths

- That projects don't work with part time or variable attendance patterns
- That projects have to come entirely from children's interests
- That adults should intervene as little as possible and allow children to direct and lead the project
- That projects have to be political
- That projects won't fit with your regular program

Starting to use projects

Help your children get used to learning over longer periods of time

Ongoing learning doesn't always happen by itself, you need to structure your environment and your daily routine to support this.

Please Don't Pack This Away!



The importance of predictability...



Mud Puddles to Faces...



Drawing with practice



Encourage questions

At the heart of almost any good project is a good question.

Encouraging children's curiosity; asking questions that make them think about things in a different way; and encouraging them to ask questions in return is good preparation for doing projects

Look out for potential "projects in the making"

Get yourself into the habit of seeing potential projects when you are observing children's play.

- What are they interested in?
- How could that interest be developed further?
- What might they be interested in if it was presented to them?

But don't get so attached to your ideas that you can't change them or aren't prepared to abandon them when the children show no interest.

As an adult don't be afraid to be part of the project...

In early childhood we often seem to get stuck on the idea that anything that is child initiated and/or directed is intrinsically worthwhile.

Children's interest and involvement are important but they are not everything.

A successful project usually involves both adults and children working together.

"curriculum is [a] teacher's responsibility, not children's. People who hear the words emergent curriculum may wrongly assume that everything simply emerges from the children. The children's ideas are an important source of curriculum but only one of many possible sources..."

Elizabeth Jones

“children’s ideas and play... form an important basis for curriculum decision-making”

EYLF, p.15

... without taking over

As adults we need to judge when our involvement is needed and when it is not. There is a fine line between supporting and taking over.

Part of the beauty of a project is its unpredictable nature – but as teachers we need to be comfortable with the uncertainty of not knowing exactly where we are going.

At the same time we need to be confident enough in our own judgement to not be afraid to step in when needed – either to ask a question that spurs further thinking; or to make a suggestion that helps to break a deadlock; or even to guide the children’s thinking in a direction that we judge to be worthwhile.

Don't worry too much – you'll learn as you go

The first few times you try introducing projects things will probably seem awkward, contrived and even a little forced.

Don't worry – the first time you ever ran group time probably felt similar.

As you and the children get used to working on projects you'll find you all relax and the whole process becomes much more free flowing.

Traps to avoid

Don't let the project be the only interesting thing you are doing – you will be swamped with every child wanting to be part of it.

A project should be only one part of your program. While it should be interesting it shouldn't be too interesting unless you are prepared to work with the whole group on it.

As you get more confident with a project approach it will become easier to involve larger groups. Starting small is a good way to begin though.

Don't assume the children will know what they are doing – especially if it is their first experience of project work they won't know what to expect either.

Be prepared to give direction where needed, especially at the beginning. Even a quite directive project has value, and usually you will find that if the idea behind the project is a strong one then the project will soon take on a life of its own anyway.

Don't underestimate children's abilities

Projects often demonstrate the capacity of children to surprise us with what they are capable of.

Allowing children the freedom to develop a project over time often means that complex ideas develop in a way that would not happen otherwise.

A project approach fits well with the idea of "high expectations" from the EYLF

Don't rush!

Children who are not used to working over extended time frames will often rush to complete something straight away.

Yet the value of a good project is that it takes time – and gives the children time to plan, reflect and revisit what they are doing

Build in time for reflection, questioning and thinking – part of the teacher's skill is in slowing down the project, especially at the start as it is developing.

A Project Three Ways

The First Time – Where do I live?

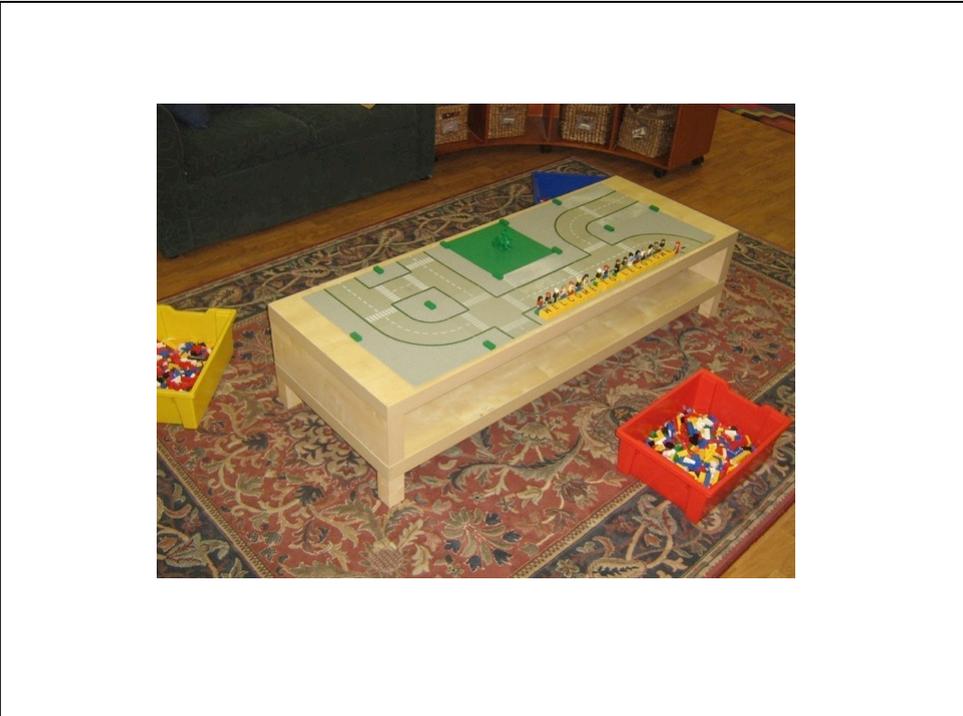
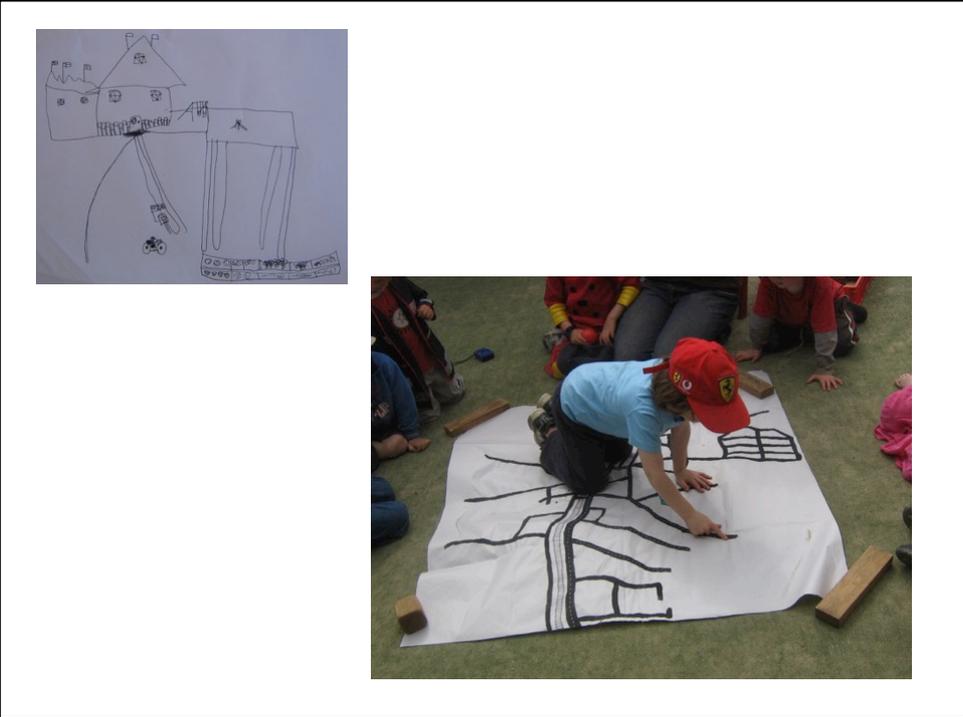


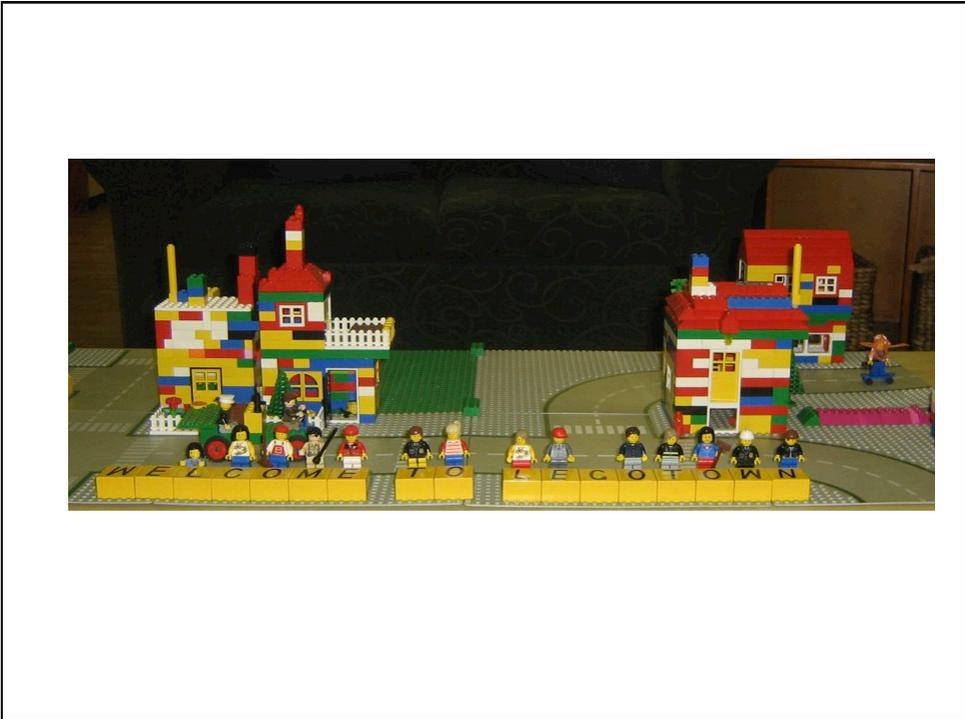
The Second Time – BusyTown



The Third Time – LegoTown

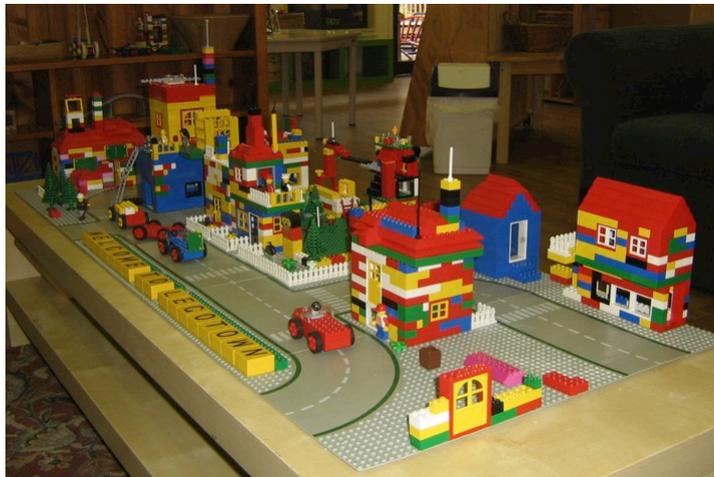












More Information?

www.projectapproach.org

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Helm, J. & Katz, L. (2011) *Young investigators: The project approach in the early years (2nd edition)*. London: Teachers College Press

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