

Project Approach and Parent Involvement in Taiwan

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As in most other Asian countries, compulsory education in Taiwan, Republic of China, begins at age 6 with a child's enrollment in elementary school. More than 90 percent of Chinese children, however, attend some form of pre-elementary education prior to their formal schooling. Such education includes full-day child care programs, which accept children from infancy through school age and primarily serve children of working parents. Children from age 3 can attend full- or half-day pre-school programs, which the Chinese call kindergarten. The kindergarten curriculum in Taiwan is very similar to the pre-school curriculum in the United States.

Educational approaches used in Taiwan's preschool program vary from the traditional Chinese Confucius philosophy to the Montessori, Dewey and Froebel

philosophies. In recent years, the thematic webbing approach, the project approach and the Reggio Emilia approach have been introduced in many Chinese preschools.

Traditionally, Taiwanese culture places great value on academic excellence. Academically abled students are more likely to pass high school and university entrance examinations and attend the elite schools. They are more likely to hold prestigious positions after graduating from an elite university. Parents (particularly mothers) are willing to sacrifice a great deal to find their children a good education, because a diploma from a prestigious university is one of the keys to political and economic success.

In Taiwan, preschool is an increasingly common solution to the problem of how to educate and socialize children before formal schooling. Preschools play an increasingly important role in helping children grow up in a rapidly changing country. Since the 1970s, demographic and cultural changes in Taiwan have led to profound changes in the Chinese family. As more mothers enter the workforce, more young children are being cared for at child care centers and preschools. These changes have influenced the way Chinese think about preschool education.

Parent Involvement and Project Approach

Parental participation in classroom activities traditionally has not been a part of Chinese culture. Generally, parents leave teaching responsibilities to teachers. Many parents feel that they have neither the training, knowledge nor expertise to provide appropriate learning activities for their children.

Furthermore, Chinese educators tended to exclude parents from the classroom, partly because of their belief that children need to establish independence from their parents. Some teachers feel that parents' presence in classrooms might negatively affect children's behavior. Teachers may also believe that some parents' methods for disciplining their children may not be appropriate. Therefore, some teachers are

concerned that the presence of parents could harm the classroom culture that they have so carefully created (Lewis, 1995).

In the last decade, the preschool curriculum has undergone a significant change in Taiwan. The integrated approach to curriculum planning is much more accepted and implemented more often than in the past. Early childhood teachers now place emphasis on developing the whole child. Dramatic play, constructive play and outdoor play are used to foster children's cognitive, social and physical skills. In a preschool classroom, children use construction toys to play "store," "hospital," "hairstylist" and other real-life situations or occupations.

Such curriculum changes are not always popular with Taiwanese parents, who often expect teachers to use the traditional 3 Rs approach when planning the curriculum. Many parents believe children will be more prepared to take tests if the teacher uses the traditional approach. Consequently, many early childhood teachers believe that the academic examination system has

dren advocated developmentally appropriate practices (Bredenkamp, 1987; Spodek, 1991). Early childhood educators have responded to the trend. Katz (1994) resurrected the use of project work in teaching. Early childhood educators began to rediscover children's receptiveness to the holistic project learning approach (Hartman & Eckerty, 1995).

In February 1993, Chu-Ying Chien, one of the authors of this article, and a preschool program director, Rei-Sun Mei, from Hsinchu, Taiwan, traveled to Italy to observe the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. They were very impressed with the group projects conducted by children in Reggio Emilia. They were also impressed with the amount of community support provided for families and the degree of parental involvement. Although project work is not a new concept to early and elementary education in many Western countries, it is a novel approach for many early childhood educators in Taiwan.

Shortly after returning home from Reggio Emilia, Chu-Ying Chien started to incorporate the project approach into her teaching at the National Hsinchu Teachers College. Chien offered workshops to train preschool and primary level teachers in the project approach and modeled the process of preparing an integrated curriculum. She also demonstrated the project teaching approach at the lab school. Under her supervision, several teachers started to experiment with project work in their classrooms.

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The Benefits of Parental Involvement in Children's Learning

Research suggests that a close connection exists between the development of children's IQ

applied undue pressure on parents of preschool age children. Therefore, involving parents in project work is a challenge to all early childhood educators in Taiwan.

In this past decade, more Taiwanese early childhood teacher educators received education and training in the United States. Those educators brought back to Taiwan fresh ideas, based on current research, about how young children learn, the integrated approach to curriculum planning and the renewed idea of parent involvement in children's learning.

The project approach is rooted in the progressive education theories from the early years of the 20th century (Hartman & Eckerty, 1995). More recently, the National Association for the Education of Young Chil-

scores and learning potentials. Children's IQ scores are also associated with their opportunities within the home to learn, explore and use language, and the positive reinforcement of these learning activities (Gestwicki, 1987).

Why is parent participation considered an important component of an early childhood program? Studies confirm the assumption that young children's early experiences, including their interactions in the home environment, have lasting effects on their cognitive growth, educational achievement and psychological development (Gestwicki, 1987). A substantial amount of research on specific factors in the home that influence children's behavior found that maternal warmth, high levels of emotional involvement and interaction,

and parental interest are positively associated with children's achievement (Bing, 1963).

After implementing the project approach in several early childhood classrooms in Hsinchu, Taiwan, for one year, the authors noticed the change in parents' perceptions of their children's learning. The level of parent participation rose and communication between parents and their children deepened. The following observations have been documented from this clinical teaching experience:

■ *Parents changed their perceptions of children's learning.*

The project approach is an in-depth investigation of a topic worth learning about. The goal of a project is to learn more about the topic rather than to seek right answers to questions posed by the teacher (Katz, 1994). This new concept of active learning is quite different from traditional rote memorization. Often, we discovered that Chinese parents did not know how to help their children in the investigation of a topic. Teachers encouraged children to ask parents to take them to bookstores, libraries and shops for reference information and materials. During the leisure time project, for example, the children wanted to make lanterns. They made a list of materials necessary for making lanterns, such as glue, bamboo and a saw. The children also needed to investigate the historical background of lanterns. During the dinosaur project, the children wanted to make models of dinosaurs and fossils, and to study the lives of dinosaurs. They needed their parents' help in locating resources and materials to complete this project.

Parents who were involved in the projects knew *why* their children were asking for specific reference information and materials. Therefore, they responded much more positively to their children's requests. In contrast, parents who had not participated in the program often complained about the expenses, the burdens and the troubles associated with the projects.

■ *Parents increased their involvement in their children's learning.*

Implementing the project approach in Chinese early childhood

programs led to a renewed concept of parent involvement. In the making salted food project, for example, parents were invited to teach their children how to make salted food and sausage. At first, parents did everything by themselves, and the children just watched quietly by their sides. Later, the teacher directed the parents to explain clearly every step and its purpose—adding salt to the vegetables, mixing it, draining the water to keep the vegetables crunchy, etc.

While demonstrating the process, parents were encouraged by the teacher to explain the step-by-step procedures to their children. Meanwhile, the children were allowed to participate and practice those procedures. In a project activity, children are active learners. Through this learning-by-doing process, parents learned the appropriate way to teach and interact with their children. Such activities, in turn, motivate parents to become more involved in their children's learning.

■ *Parents enhanced their communication with their children.*

The parent-child relationship in traditional Chinese culture is very clearly defined. Children are trained to respect parents and other elders. Most of the time, children listen when their parents talk; often, they are not allowed to talk back. Even though communication between parents and their children has improved dramatically over the last two decades, parents often feel that there are few meaningful topics they can discuss with their children.



Photos courtesy of authors

Parents were invited to the classroom. Children explain their projects to their parents.

Fathers are getting more involved in various teaching activities with their children, and mothers are very pleased with the fathers' involvement in their children's learning.

Early childhood teachers who espouse project work often encourage children to initiate conversations with their parents. In the Christmas project, for example, the teacher invited Santa Claus to the classroom. The day before Santa Claus came, the teacher asked the children to discuss with their parents how to express their affection to Santa. The next day, children brought wonderful questions from home that the teacher then reviewed.

In the orphanage project, the teacher asked the children to study with their parents the life of orphans. In the leisure time project, the teacher asked children to discuss and plan their weekend activities with their families. The response from parents was very positive. They felt very happy and excited about their relationships with their children, stating that they had more things to discuss and share with their children. The quality of communication between parents and their children had improved drastically.

■ *Parents established support networks among and within themselves.*

Traditionally, parents of children in the same class have very casual relationships; usually, they only exchange greetings. Communication among families was very limited. After implementing the project teaching method, however, the teachers dis-

covered that parents from different families spent more time with each other. Parents began to discuss and exchange their resources and experiences. They soon became good friends and formed a support network.

■ *Fathers' participation has gradually grown.*

Generally speaking, Taiwan is not a gender-neutral society. Men and women have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The father, for example, earns a living for the whole family, and the mother takes care of

the house and the children. Therefore, when early childhood educators invited parents to get involved in school activities, mothers usually came alone. It is very difficult to get fathers' involvement. Since the mother has been more involved in children's learning, she may understand current educational concepts that the father does not. The traditional role-differentiation situation and the discrepancy of understanding about children's learning often has produced disagreements between mothers and fathers. Parents may quarrel with each other about their opinions on teaching methods and expectations for their children.

Since the implementation of the project learning method, teachers have noticed that the fathers' par-



Parents and children work together.

ticipation in project work has increased. They appear to be very intrigued by certain activities, such as model building, woodworking and sports. Fathers are getting more involved in various teaching activities with their children, and mothers are very pleased with the fathers' involvement in their children's learning. One family indicated that the relationship between the parents has improved.

The Project Approach Fosters the Development of a Whole Child

Advocates of the project approach do not suggest that project work should constitute the whole early childhood curriculum. Project work should not be viewed as a separate subject or as "add-on" work to the basics. It should be an integral part of the early childhood curriculum (Katz, 1994). Through implementation of the project approach, Chinese teachers observed the benefits of teamwork among children in the development of social and interpersonal skills. Project activities provided children with the opportunities to apply learned skills, make decisions and choices, and pursue their personal interests (Katz & Chard, 1989).

For example, children worked on a health project, for which they discussed, researched and explored various health-related topics. One day, the discussion centered on food. During the hot summer days, Chinese people like to eat "icee," a dish made from crushed ice with a flavored topping. (The most popular toppings are red bean and green bean.) Children decided to set up a shop to sell icee. The project activities in which children participated included:

■ Designing and setting up an icee shop.

In this project, children actively discussed naming the icee shop, finally settling on "The Big Elephant Icee Store." Most of the 4-year-olds in this class knew the word "big," but did not know how to write the word "elephant." One child remembered that in the previous leisure time project, they played Chinese checkers. The name for the "Chinese checker game," Hsiang Chi, includes a word, Hsiang, that means "elephant." They went to the toy shelf and copied the word

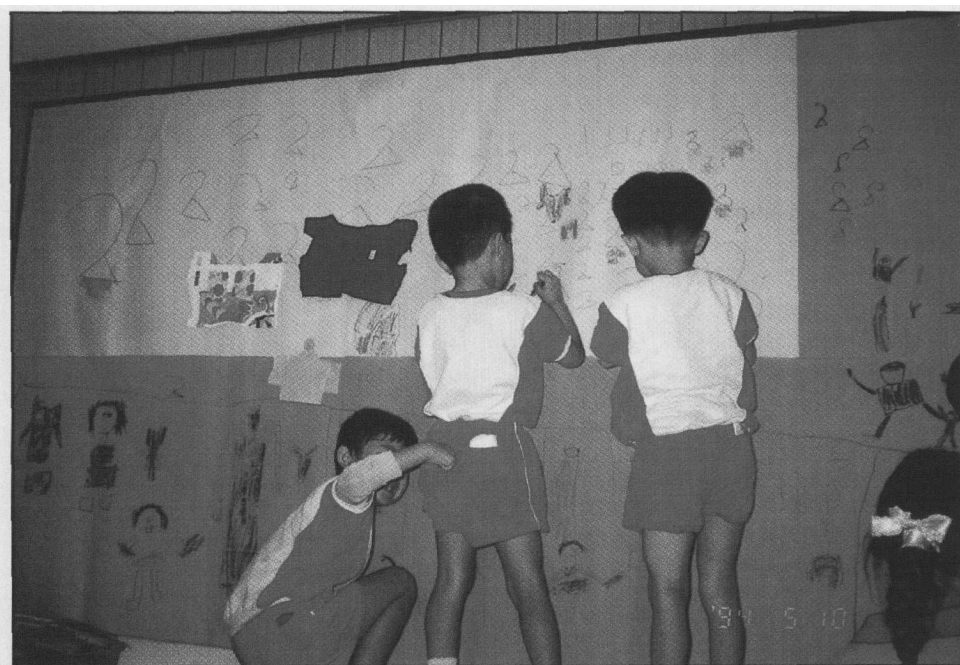
Hsiang on a piece of paper. Then, they realized that they did not know how to write the words "Icee Store." A couple of the children remembered that they had read a story about an icee store. They found the book on the bookshelf and copied the words "icee store" on a piece of paper. Finally, they used a piece of cardboard to make the store sign, which they hung on the wall. Then they worked on the price lists. The children spent much time discussing what prices they should list for each flavor and the words they should put on the list. They also discussed the ingredients they should use to create different flavors.

■ Preparing the ingredients.

This process gave children an opportunity to learn how to prepare different ingredients, such as cooking the green beans, the red beans and other ingredients to add as toppings on the icee. Children discovered that the length of time it takes to cook red beans is longer than the time it takes to cook green beans. One child asked why red beans require a longer cooking time. The children discussed the question, and concluded that the red bean requires more time to cook because it is harder than the green bean.

■ Opening the icee shop for business.

Parents and teachers from other classrooms were invited to the grand opening of the icee store. They used play paper money to purchase icees. Two



Children are making wall decorations for a department store.

children sat at the counter: one was in charge of the cash register, and the other was the host. When a teacher approached the counter, the host gave the teacher a child-made business card. The child told the teacher to place the business card in a handy

children's cognitive, creative, social and interpersonal skills.

Strategies Used in Promoting Parents' Involvement

In the leisure time project, the teacher asked children to discuss upcoming weekend activities with their parents. The next day, the teacher asked children to share their weekend plans in class. Children who worked with their parents on the planning of the weekend events received high compliments. The teacher encouraged children who had not done the planning with their parents to continue to work on this project.

On the third day, one mother came to school, and told her child's teacher that her daughter was very anxious to discuss weekend plans with her all of the time. The mother said, "My daughter told me that the other

classmates' parents were very responsive to their children and have discussed their weekend plans." The mother said that she would not ignore her daughter's request about doing the project together any more. Cases like this happened very often, because the children took the initiative to invite their parents' participation.

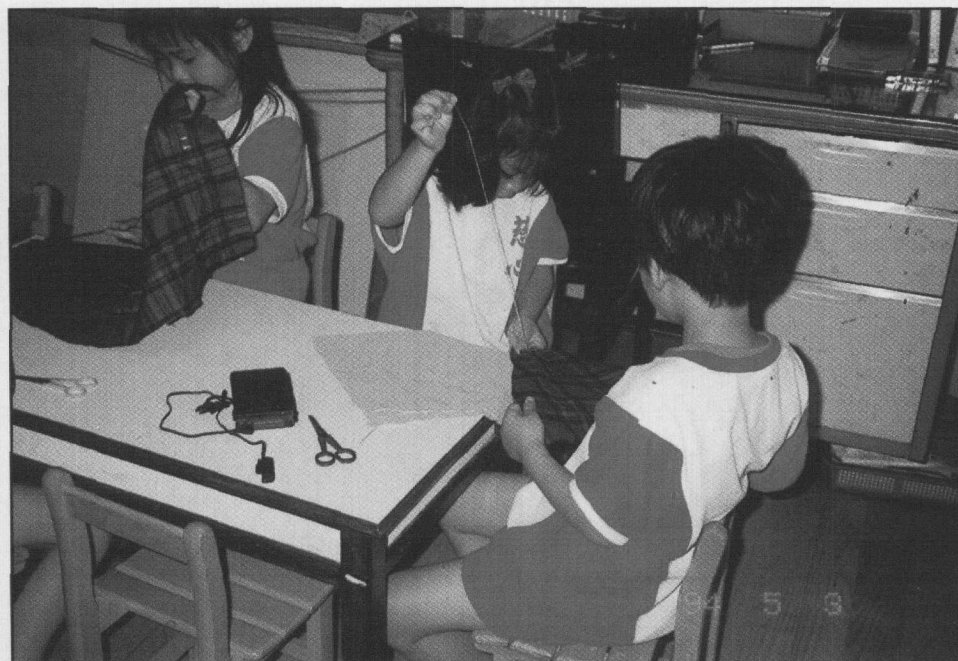
In addition to pressure from the children to motivate parents' participation, we found other strategies that could be used to promote parental involvement in a preschool program.

place and use it the next time to place an order by calling ahead. The teacher thanked the child for giving her the business card.

One parent came to the shop and ordered a green bean and red bean mixed icee. The parent put a lot of cooked green beans and red beans on a bowl of icee. When this parent approached the cash register, the child said, "You put triple the amount of beans on your icee." The child turned back to look at the price list. He whispered, "Red bean icees cost 50 cents. Green bean icees cost 50 cents. Since you put triple amounts of beans, I will charge you for one dollar and 50 cents."

Later, when most of the topping ingredients were gone, the children decided to close the shop. They divided the remaining amount of icee into two bowls for themselves.

The examples above show how project activities can develop



Children are making costumes for different cultural groups.

In addition to pressure from the children to motivate parents' participation, we found other strategies that could be used to promote parental involvement in a preschool program.

■ *Establish parents' professional and hobby files.*

Parents possess different levels of knowledge, skills and expertise. At the beginning of the school year, teachers should conduct a survey to gather information on parents' professional and avocational interests, from which teachers can set up files. Depending on their interests, parents can often provide the resources and/or information for a project.

In the leisure time project, for example, the teacher planned to introduce the topic of scuba diving. To help children understand the topic, the teacher planned to show them scuba diving gear. She had a difficult time finding scuba diving gear until she referred to the parents' professional and hobby files. The teacher easily found a parent whose hobby was scuba diving. The parent not only had a complete set of diving gear, but also was very knowledgeable about scuba diving. The teacher found an expert to discuss scuba diving with the children and got the parent involved, as well.

■ *Use descriptive evaluation instead of checklists to help parents understand children's learning.*

Assessment is always needed to provide some feedback to teachers and parents on a child's growth and development. Many teachers use checklists to assess children's progress. One of the reasons teachers like to use checklists is that they save time. Chinese teachers who adopted the project approach used systematic observations of children's behavior and provided qualitative and/or descriptive evaluations. We noticed that descriptive evaluations helped the parents develop a better understanding about children's learning and the underlying learning objectives. Consequently, parents not only have shown greater support for the integrated teaching approach, but also have become more involved in their children's education.

■ *Select projects that fit children's and parents' interests.*

We noticed that if the project's topic interests parents as well as children, parents are more willing to get involved. The visit to the orphanage and the design of a masquerade for the Christmas project received great interest and support from parents, and participation in these activities was very great. Other activities that drew parents' participation involved making different clothes, cooking ethnic foods, building house models of various styles, and visiting historic landmarks.

■ *Use the project activities assignment to expand parents' involvement in children's learning.*

Working parents often lack the time to participate in children's learning during school hours. Chinese parents are no exception. Teachers should not place time or space limitations on parent involvement. Since project work encouraged children to do some investigation, exploration or information gathering at home, this provided opportunities for parents to be involved in their children's learning during times other than school hours. Therefore, parents' participation in teaching and interaction with their children was not restricted by either space or time. One family indicated that homework assignments have provided opportunities for them to work with their children and be involved in their learning. Children began having fun doing their homework, and home activity assignments expanded parents' involvement in projects.

Conclusion

Implementing the project approach in a traditional Chinese society never has been an easy task. Although the implementation of the project approach requires tremendous amounts of time and energy from the teacher, positive results motivate teachers to continue. Several early childhood teachers commented that they could not recall ever having seen the children as enthusiastic as they were during the projects.

The project approach requires the teacher to take an active role in encouraging and helping children to explore and investigate a wide range of topics. It benefits children by encouraging their thorough involvement in a topic. Furthermore, parents who participate in the program have a better understanding of child development and learning. Communication among teachers, parents and children improves drastically. We are pleased with the experiment, and we plan to expand the project.

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