

# GETTING BACK TO QUALITY THROUGH PROJECT WORK

by: Rebecca Wilson, Teacher, Van Meter Community PreKindergarten

This fall as a preschool teacher during the time of COVID, I felt a little overwhelmed and exhausted. My days in setting up the classroom in August were filled with worries about social distancing, *Return to Learn* guidelines, and separate sensory tubs for children's play. I was preparing for six students that I would be teaching in an online cohort as well as my in-person morning and afternoon classes. However, in the last few weeks, I felt that familiar sense of excitement, as a project began in my classroom. I was busily checking books out from three different libraries on cars and vehicles, arranging for field site visits, and webbing with children. If you are feeling drained this year, and want to bring excitement and enthusiasm back to your classroom, you might consider teaching through project work.

The Project Approach, as defined by Katz "is an in-depth investigation of a topic worth learning more about... The key feature of a project is that it is a research effort deliberately focused on finding answers to questions about a topic posed either by the children, the teacher, or the teacher working with the children." (Katz, 1994). Project work consists of three phases, in which children web about the topic of interest, generate research questions, investigate the topic through field work and represent their learning in a variety of ways. The flow chart of these phases is outlined by Helm and Katz in the text, *Young Investigators: Project Work in the Early Years*, 3rd ed. 2016.



What inspires me most about teaching through project work is that no two projects are the same, and no two years are the same. I feel challenged every year both as a teacher and as a co-learner, as I learn right along with the children. How does the steering wheel work? What are the gauges for? There are two bulbs within the headlight as we turn on and off the "brights" in our car! My knowledge of children also grows when I do project with children. Project work deepens my understanding of children's thinking in the classroom. We often don't know what children are thinking or wondering until we ask. Gathering children's questions enables me to provide meaningful thought-provoking research opportunities for field work for children. Project work enables me to be an intentional teacher, as both STEM concepts and learning standards are woven throughout the project work in my classroom.



In a time when you are struggling to connect with students in classrooms, adding project work to your curriculum might be just the answer! You can do wonderful project work during the time of COVID with a little bit of adaptation. For example, children can count and study vehicles or other interesting topics around the school. School employees can often serve as experts, or you can connect with experts via Zoom! During this time when parental access to the classroom is limited, project work can be a tool to connect with families at home through authentic experiences that teachers model for families. Early childhood teachers are strong and resourceful! We can and will provide meaningful deep learning experiences for children in our classrooms, even during a pandemic. Project work can provide both the focus and structure for engaged learning, while bringing back excitement and joy into teaching. Please see the attached flyer if you would like more information about an upcoming training opportunity in the Project Approach offered during the spring semester.