

Master Capstone Project
Project Based Learning in Kindergarten
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Graduate School of Education
City University of Seattle
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master in Teaching

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Abstract

This was a professional development study aimed at understanding how project-based learning (PBL) can be applied in a kindergarten classroom. A review of the available literature indicated that while continued research is needed around PBL there are many techniques for successfully implementing the practice in a kindergarten classroom. The reflection is comprised of my experiences teaching in a kindergarten classroom with a mix of English language learners and students with IEPs. The experience illustrated the importance of PBL as a tool for teachers, but it does not mean that it is the best approach for every student. Finally, the paper outlines my plan for continued exploration of PBL and development as an educator.

Introduction

Educators help open their students to new ideas and new ways of doing things. My perception of this relationship is that it has been traditionally a one-way street. The educator has knowledge to impart to the student. The educator tries to make the lessons as relevant as possible, but largely has to rely on their perception of the relevance of their lesson. Project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching technique that applies real-world context to the standards being taught in the classroom. PBL also calls for students to use their own interests to guide their learning. The intent of PBL is to teach critical thinking skills and center the student in the learning process. Project based learning is appealing because it provides a student with the opportunity to apply their learning to something relevant or of interest to them. Since our students come to the classroom from all different backgrounds and experience it is on the teacher to ensure that the instruction is differentiated, culturally responsive, and equitable. Project based learning helps educators ensure that their instruction is fulfilling those goals by asking students to take what they are learning and apply it to their interests or culture. Here we will specifically focus on project-based learning in a kindergarten classroom. Kindergarten provides unique challenges for project-based instruction but also provides opportunities to simplify the idea of project-based instruction to investigate how it helps to support learners as they develop the skills necessary to unlock their natural ability through project-based learning.

Problem Statement

Students demonstrated a lack of engagement by not paying attention, distracting themselves and others, being in other parts of the room, and speaking out of turn or off topic. The students are most engaged across all different groups when they were given a problem to

solve. Most recently in science we have been investigating why butterflies left space when the habitat changed. The students engaged in critical thinking and used reasoning to draw conclusions.

Rationale

My goal as a teacher is to be the most effective instructor I can be. Once I am a fully certified classroom teacher my time will be divided in innumerable ways. PBL requires a significant amount of preparation on the part of the educator. If PBL is effective and creates better outcomes for the students I teach, then the extra effort will be worth it. In this investigation I explored the current best practices and theories around project-based learning. My goal is to understand when and how to apply PBL. I have been implementing PBL strategies in my internship to experience administration of PBL in a classroom setting. PBL is complicated to implement, and if I am going to try and use this technique in my classroom, I will need to understand the topic, experiment with what works and what doesn't. I also want to see how it impacts the students I am working with. Finally, I want to discover my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. I believe that learning how to implement PBL into my classroom will help me be a better teacher.

Question/s

1. What are the best practices for implementing PBL in kindergarten?
2. What are the pros and cons of project-based learning? How can PBL be used in whole class and small group work in a kindergarten classroom?
3. How can I recognize what PBL I am most effective at teaching? How will I adjust if something doesn't produce the desired result?

4. How do I ensure that my students are gaining the knowledge they need regardless of the efficacy of the PBL?
5. How has implementing PBL benefited my practice?
6. What further questions do I have about how to improve the understanding of PBL best practices and how can I implement them in the future?

Methodology

Professional Development Study

A professional development study seeks to understand a particular aspect of the teaching profession. The goal is to deepen knowledge and solve professional challenges through self-assessment and reflective practice.

I researched different PBL interventions for kindergarten. My choice was informed by what the class needed and what worked best given my knowledge of my student population. I implemented PBL and then kept notes to reflect on the success and struggles I experienced while implementing PBL. I also kept notes about any adjustments or deviations that were made from the prescribed intervention. Taking notes helped to inform the professional development portion of my project.

Change and Growth

Change and growth were measured by my observations, reflections, and feedback I received from my field supervisor, mentor teacher, and other professionals around me. One of the things I was interested in is how PBL improves my teaching, and how PBL impacted student engagement. Specifically, how much time do the students who had trouble engaging and/or paying attention spend learning and working in the group (whole group and small group). For

our children with an IEP, did project-based learning help them engage more? Are students more on task, are they engaged with the material and discussing it appropriately when prompted by the teacher? Were students able to maintain their attention throughout the lesson? Were students wandering off physically or mentally? Will PBL give them an exciting reason to stay in the classroom and learn with their peers?

Population of Students

The observations in this paper are the result of work with students at a school in North Seattle. The population of students included English language learners, but most students' primary language was English. The group of students also included neurodivergent learners including multiple students on or being evaluated for IEPs. Finally, the population of students in the classroom was majority white.

Literature Review

Research has shown that more investigation is needed around implementing PBL in a classroom setting. In a meta-analysis comprising data from 722 different students representing countries from around the world the researchers found mixed results regarding the efficacy of PBL (Torres-Maqueira, et al., 2020). They concluded that PBL may not be as effective for kindergarteners because they do not possess the critical thinking skills to undertake group base PBL tasks. Moreno (2004) conducted two separate experiments with 104 college students where they tested the effectiveness of exploratory feedback and corrective feedback. They found that groups presented with exploratory feedback scored higher than those only provided information about the accuracy of their answer. In contrast, Saavedra, et al. (2021) studied 6,000 high school students over 2 years and found a positive correlation between students taught using PBL methods and those who were not. They found that students scored up to 8 percentage points

higher. Additionally, they found that PBL also had a positive impact for lower income students. Efstratia (2014) researched PBL in Greece. In this study they found that project-based learning had strengths and drawbacks; namely, that with PBL there are many variables to successful implementation. Both Efstratia (2014) and Zhang & Ma (2023) found that PBL improved learning outcomes for students when implemented in an effective way. Harte, et al., (2013) implemented project-based learning in a classroom of 13 pre-kindergarten students and found that the students were engaged, but experienced issues in the *culminating event* (final project).

PBL in Early Childhood Education

There are numerous ways to use PBL in the classroom. Parwoto, et al., (2024) conducted a study with 30 Indonesian kindergarten students. In their research they found that project-based learning was adaptable to early-childhood education. They used computers in conjunction with real-world projects and found that play-based PBL conducted in groups aided by technology significantly increased students' creativity (Parwoto, et al., 2024). They found that emphasizing peer interaction in PBL and encouraging students to think critically and collaborate contributed to their success.

PBL and Classroom Culture

PBL impacts classroom culture and how students interact with each other in the classroom. A meta-analysis of PBL has shown that students' creativity improves by 31% and their critical thinking skills by 34% (Yu, 2024). In a study conducted over 5 years with researchers and teachers in the United States and Finland, He, et al., (2023) found that the design principles for PBL were driving questions, exploring and explaining observations, development of projects, collaboration, and constructing models. Almulla (2020) that PBL generally asks students to work together to solve a particular problem, develop a solution/project geared

towards an audience (peers, teachers, parents) and evaluate their process as a team. Their study was conducted via a questionnaire which 124 educators responded to. The educators reported that PBL impacted learners in all different facets of their academic life from social-emotional learning to cooperative learning. They described that this, in turn, improved the learning environment in the classroom (Almulla, 2020). The instructors included in the questionnaire employed a combination of collaborative learning, disciplinary subject learning, and iterative (repetition and improvement of the process) learning.

Roles and Responsibilities

There is evidence of a challenge with clearly defined roles and responsibilities in project-based learning. Based off of their experience using PBL teaching strategies in middle schools in China, Chen (2024) saw that one of the issues with implementation of PBL in classrooms came from teachers failing to effectively prepare to facilitate PBL. A case study conducted by Pan, Seow, Shankararaman, and Koh (2021) in Singapore brought together 26 students across 4 different focus groups. These focus groups reported that PBL was most effective when the teacher was the designer, facilitator, and manager of a PBL classroom, and the students took on the role of self-directed learners. Wing-yi Cheng, Lam, and Chung-yan Chan conducted a study of 1,921 Hong Kong secondary students in 367 project-based learning groups. These groups were organized in 4 different configurations. Some groups allowed for student autonomy, and some were formed based on student skill and ability levels. The study found that a group having clearly defined processes and an equal distribution of responsibilities was more predictive of success than group make-up in PBL driven classrooms (Wing-yi Cheng, et al, 2008). In their study of teachers from the United States and Finland, He, et al., (2023) found that the years of experience a teacher has, and the time it takes to implement PBL can create challenges as well.

Much of the research conducted around PBL has been done with older students. In a meta-analysis comprised of data from 722 students Ferrero, et al., (2021) found that there were many variables that impacted the ability to get reliable data specifically around students with different learning needs (Ferrero, et al., 2021). In their time researching and implementing PBL for the Buck Institute for Education, Lenz and Larmer (2020) highlighted the importance of scaffolding PBL for students through guidance and direct instruction from the teacher helps younger students. Based on their experience as a coordinator of PBL in the Maine public school system, Marzilli (2017) outlined 4 elements of implementing PBL in a kindergarten classroom: set high expectations, be realistic about the way students are thinking about the project and the quality of their cognitive process, scaffold for students by providing direct instruction, and give students feedback to help guide future learning. As a curriculum writer for pre-kindergarten-5th grade with a focus in PBL, Garcia (2014) also recommends facilitating kindergarteners participating in purposeful play or play that is meant to support or reinforce learning objectives. Garcia (2014) highlighted the importance for having a place for students to experiment with age-appropriate materials that they may use in future projects.

Reflection

Working in a kindergarten classroom has been an eye-opening experience. Initially, I underestimated the amount of explicit instruction required to ensure the students were learning. Coupled with the relative inexperience of the learner and the rudimentary nature of their ability for complex reasoning made engaging in authentic project-based learning difficult. However, just because something is difficult does not mean it is not worthwhile and beneficial to teachers and students. Experiencing this has shifted my thinking about project-based learning.

It has been important for me to recognize that PBL, as it is typically understood, is challenging in a kindergarten classroom. There are a few specific areas where using PBL as the primary instructional format gives me pause. When I first tried to implement PBL, I struggled with calibrating a project's complexity while making it a lesson that held educational value for the students. So much of kindergarten is learning how to be in school. Routines and explicit instruction are staples of early education. Kindergarten students are generally very bright and have a unique way of viewing the world. I believe that kindergarteners have the curiosity for PBL. They lack the fundamental skills required for PBL. PBL asks learners to leverage their interests to deepen their learning. It also asks the learner to be able to ask questions and investigate to deepen their understanding of what they are curious about and, by extension, their learning. I found that being prepared with engaging questions helped deepen the students learning. Many of these questions were answered in short turn-and-talks or whole group discussions. Science and math have emerged as topics that have made it more feasible to implement PBL. These subjects lent themselves to PBL because they allowed me to employ physical manipulatives to center discussions and helped encourage higher-order thinking. A specific example of this is an experiment we did with exerting force. We provided the students with different manipulatives. They got to test how things moved when a force pushed or pulled on them. Doing this allowed us to introduce more complex vocabulary. It also allowed us to have students observe what happens when a force acts on an object. When we engaged in a class discussion, everyone was on the same page and had the opportunity to see how exerting force applies to the real world.

Student Example 1:

When I undertook my first PBL lesson, I thought this student would be the student who validated PBL as the foundation of all my future instruction. This student is highly intelligent; they can read and write, and what I perceived as a creative streak. This student draws rainbows on everything. This student is usually first in line whenever there is an artistic endeavor. I thought artistic PBL was going to engage this student on a whole new level; I could not have been more wrong. This student became a cautionary tale about assuming what would work for different students. When I finished explaining the project and asked the students to start drawing their sea creatures, this student froze. Drawing something out of their comfort zone stopped them dead in their tracks. To be clear, this student is competent. They can read and understand math concepts. This student struggles with being challenged. Project-based learning challenges students to investigate and try new things. This student taught me that not only do I need to explicitly teach the skills required for PBL, but I also must get students comfortable with trying new things. While this result may seem negative for PBL, it highlights the importance of exploring this approach. Throughout this process one of my goals was to help my students build resilience and confidence. PBL has allowed me to encourage students and engage them in conversations about their learning that I might not have otherwise been able to have. This experience taught me a lot about this student. Their strength in traditional classroom tasks covers up an discomfort that may have a negative impact on their future learning. PBL helped me see this in the student, and I have sought to address this throughout our continued work.

Another benefit of project-based learning I have experienced is that it forces me to be deliberate and calculated about teaching. PBL helped me ensure that the project I ask students to do teaches the targeted standard. In kindergarten, I have found that I need to be much more explicit in my project design. The project design helped me build in choices for the

students. PBL is based on student driven investigation, the challenge I experienced was facilitating the administration based on the choices they made. I had to be prepared to facilitate by asking questions that focused on helping the students arrive at the learning target rather than open-ended. The exerting force project I mentioned earlier illustrates this. Each student had the opportunity to carry out their own investigation. The project's design ensured that most, if not all, students generally had the same experience and would be able to relate to the group's observations. Designing the project this way allowed us to ask questions that helped the students connect to the learning target. Specifically, we highlighted the difference between a person exerting force and gravity exerting a force. Each question I asked lead directly back to the learning target. This ensured that no matter how the students used the manipulatives, I was always facilitating the project through tying it to what I wanted them to learn.

Student Example 2:

Project-based learning had an interesting impact on this student. This student demonstrated ability to learn, but at times they seem like a bouncy ball that has been thrown at the wall too hard. To stop a mind like that from moving, I needed a task that genuinely engaged the student. In math we did a small project where students built their own coral reef. Each student was asked to draw a specific number of animals on the coral reef. Then the small group would present their reef to the whole class. This student was as engaged in this activity as I have ever seen them. This does not mean that all projects will engage this student, however it does lend credibility to differentiation and the power that using projects as a foundation for learning can have a positive impact.

Helping students learn is a complex task and project-based learning may not be successful across the board with this student, or any student. The interest in the project or the

subject influences the student's engagement. What the story of this student illustrates is that PBL is effective in differentiating how the student can interact with the subject. The fact that it can work for a student like this means that a cognitively responsive teaching practice that helped me gain a deeper understanding of my students. Using PBL allowed me to work with all my students. It gave me insight into how they learn and allowed me to calibrate future projects to their abilities. I found that PBL allows students to work together in a more interactive way. This promoted a positive classroom culture and helps students learn to work together and communicate effectively with each other.

Learning How to Ask Questions:

I found that asking questions to be essential to the process of learning. Relying solely on questions to guide learning could lead to inequitable outcomes and would be limited by the knowledge of the people asking the questions. To remove variables, education systems rely on things like Common Core. Common Core and other standards essentially boil down to what do we expect students to be able to know and be able to do at the end of any given grade. As a teacher Common Core provides me with a tool to show me what my students need to learn. Project-based learning boils down to helping students learn by investigating topics, by asking questions, and applying what they learn to a Common Core standard. Kindergartners know how to ask questions, sometimes they can be unintentionally profound (one student asked me why we have weather). I have found that kindergartners are naturally curious. PBL helps teach student to practice asking meaningful questions that promote learning and understanding. For kindergartners, they need explicit instruction in asking questions. Not only do they need to learn to ask questions, but they need to learn how to ask follow-up questions that will lead to further the depth of their understanding of a subject. The exerting force project previously discussed is a

great example of how to teach students to ask questions, look for the answer, and ask more questions. When we did that project, we asked students questions about how force impacted the object. Then we asked follow-up questions. The next step for the kindergartners is to ask them what questions they have. Once we answer those questions, we ask the students if they have any further questions. The idea is to promote the process of inquiry and research.

I believe that it is important for me to focus on the fundamental skills that support PBL early on because one of the dilemmas I continue to have as an educator is how to reconcile my teaching style with the fact that PBL may not be used by teachers my students will have in the future. I believe the answer is to try and distill the skills needed for PBL down to a kindergarten level. Skills like being able to ask effective questions will be useful regardless of the learning environment the student finds themselves in.

Limitations

This study relates to my experience in a kindergarten classroom. While some of the experiences highlighted in this paper may be informative to educators in higher grades the take aways may not be applicable to every grade. At the time of typing this, I am a student teacher. My experience is limited to a handful of classrooms and may not apply in a broader context.

Recommendations

This is an investigation that will continue into my professional practice as a teacher. This is a snapshot of my experience in PBL as the time of writing this. For any teachers who are interested in PBL I recommend that we try and continue to develop our understanding of project-based learning in the context of early elementary education. Additionally, I believe that researching the impact that teacher collaboration has on the efficacy of PBL. Finally, is PBL more effective when a whole school is aligned with implementing the practice.

Professional Growth Plan

The first and most important aspect of my professional development is continuing to understand how much I must learn. I came into this capstone project thinking that project-based learning would be the foundation of my practice from the start. I am extremely interested in integrating project-based learning in my teaching regardless of grade level. I am going to be learning so much throughout my first full year in the classroom. Ultimately, slowly building PBL into my practice seems like the most worthwhile way to implement project-based learning. As I have discussed above, implementing PBL asks educators to be prepared to facilitate learning and have the confidence to let our students explore while keeping them on track. As a new teacher, I want to make sure that my students are getting the best learning outcomes first and foremost. Additionally, each academic year presents variables in student population and the type of teaching that is effective. I hope to be a responsive educator who can use multiple different techniques to get the most out of my students. I have learned that focusing on one way of teaching may not be the best course of action for me as I start out. Teaching PBL will require me to become the best teacher possible and slowly fold more PBL into my practice. At the time of writing this paper, I do not know what grade level I will be teaching.

Goals for Future Growth

I would like to be able to facilitate PBL throughout my practice. Studying PBL has shown me that learning how to proficiency facilitate the practice in a classroom is not something I can do effectively over one year of teaching, especially my first year. My initial goal is to continue to deepen my knowledge and experience lesson planning. I also want to learn how to properly time projects throughout the academic calendar so that projects provide the best outcome for students. In concert with this effort, I want to build at least three projects into my lesson planning for my

first year of teaching. This will help me have a reference point for my continued learning. If I am working with students who are already experienced in PBL I will adjust to my students accordingly.

Desired Outcomes

The desired outcome of my professional development is to become an expert lesson planner. Specifically, I want to be able to create well thought-out lesson plans, have contingencies in case things don't go as expected. As part of being an expert lesson planner, I want to become exemplary at knowing when to use different pedagogical techniques, including PBL.

Activities to Accomplish the Goals

The first and most important step to improving my skills is talking to the professionals around me. As a new teacher I need to rely on the experience of veteran educators. Second, I will talk to high school shop teachers about how they lesson plan. These teachers are a well of knowledge when it comes to planning and executing PBL. I will also seek out as many professional development opportunities as I can. Specifically, professional development that deals with lesson planning. I will continuously reflect on my practice and adjust my teaching based on my students' needs. To aid my reflection I will keep notes in a journal. Specifically, I will reflect on what worked, what didn't and other things I noticed throughout the lesson like I did with the student I discussed in the reflection section.

Evidence or Assessment of Growth

My evidence of growth will come from my assessments of the students I teach. This will also act as evidence of my continued development. Assessment of my growth will also come from discussions with the professionals I highlighted above. I will solicit feedback about lesson

plans and teaching techniques. Finally, I will speak with my students after finishing lessons. I will specifically ask for feedback about what they feel went well and what could have been clearer.

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Appendix A

Professional Growth Plan

WASHINGTON STATE EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH PLAN (PGP) TEMPLATE FOR EDUCATOR PREPARATION PROGRAM COMPLETION

Educator information

First name: Dean

Last name: Ervin

Preparation program: City University

Academic year: 2024/25

Self-assessment and goal selection

1. **Self-assessment.** Use a self-assessment to identify an area of focus that will lead to your professional growth. You might choose to assess yourself using the [pre-service standards for your role](#), or you might choose to use another self-assessment.

- What is the name of the self-assessment you used?
Pre-Service Standards

2. **Personalized area of focus.** Based on your self-assessment, what area or topic will you focus your learning on that will lead to your professional growth?

- What is your area of focus?
Learner Development

3. **Standards.** The area of focus for your professional growth goal needs to align to at least one standard from at least one of the following:

[Pre-service role standards](#)

- To what standard did you align your area of focus (include name of standards used and standard number or another identifier):
D | The teacher understands how learning occurs--how learners construct knowledge, acquire skills, and develop disciplined thinking processes—and knows how to use instructional strategies that promote student learning.

4. **Professional growth goals.** Professional growth goals are goals that you set for your own professional growth, not for the growth of your students (although your own professional growth will have an impact on the growth of your students). What would you like to learn this year? In what specific area would you like to grow?

- What is your goal for your professional growth?

My professional growth goal is to become the best lesson planner I can be. I am at my best when I have a plan. I am also able to be more responsive to the needs of those around me when I am confident in what I am doing or teaching.

- Describe how this goal relates to your self-assessment:
This goal relates to my self-assessment because I have started to gain experience in my student teaching placement, but this is an area I think needs to continue to be an area of focus throughout my first few years in the profession.
- Describe how this goal relates to your focus area identified in question two:
My students matter the most to me. I want to do whatever I can to be the best teacher possible for every student in my classroom. Understanding how they develop as learners and ensuring that my instruction responds to their development and needs is of paramount importance.

Intended outcomes

5. **Educator outcomes.** Professional growth creates outcomes. Educator outcomes refers to some new skill or ability that you, the educator, are able to do or some skill or ability that you can improve based on your learning.
 - What will you be able to do as a result of attaining your professional growth goal that you are not able to do now? What skill or ability will you have improved upon?
As a result of attaining my professional goal I will be a confident teacher with a clear understanding of what I want the students to learn. No matter how proficient I become at lesson planning, I will always have room for growth and development. As a result of this I will improve my planning and organizational skills.
6. **Student outcomes.** As noted previously, students are impacted by educator learning and growth.
 - What impact will attaining your professional growth goal have on students?
My students will have a well-organized classroom with clear learning goals and a teacher who can help effectively guide their learning.

Professional growth action plan and evidence

Complete the two-column chart below.

In the *left column*, list the professional growth activity you plan to complete.

In the *right column*, list at least one piece of evidence you plan to collect for that activity.

You do not need to use all the available rows. Additionally, if you need more rows, complete and attach this [supplemental chart](#).

<p>7. Activities. List your professional growth activities (one per row).</p> <p>.</p>	<p>8. Proposed evidence. List the evidence you plan to plan to use to verify your engagement in your professional growth activities.</p> <p>Evidence may include, but is not limited to: professional learning reflections, professional learning community (PLC) notes, certificates of completion, programs implemented, videos of lessons, and other adult data. If desired, you may also plan to collect evidence regarding the impact of your professional growth on students. Evidence of your professional growth impact on students may include, but is not limited to: student work, student reflections, notes from observing students, student test scores, attendance rates, and other student data.</p> <p>The same evidence can be used for multiple activities.</p>
<p>Professional Development Training</p>	<p>Professional learning reflections.</p>
<p>Read books about teaching best practices</p>	<p>Take notes on books and apply to classroom</p>
<p>Work with my PLC</p>	<p>Create and work with a PLC.</p>
<p>Observing other educators</p>	
<p>Keep relying on former mentor teachers.</p>	
<p>Maintain relationships with cohort members</p>	
<p>Reach out to past instructors</p>	
	<p>Reach out monthly/quarterly.</p>