



Early years curriculum materials

Negotiating curriculum

A project approach



**Queensland
Government**



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Partnership and innovation

What is a negotiated project approach?

In the Preparatory Year setting, project work involves extended investigations of topics of personal interest negotiated between children, teachers and other partners. Negotiated projects may focus on local, real-life investigations in response to children's own personal experiences and participation in community events. Investigations may include the whole class and be collaboratively planned and enacted during contexts for learning, such as focused learning and teaching situations. Other projects may be created independently and spontaneously by children during outdoor and indoor play. Some possible project focuses may include investigating or creating:

- bridges, e.g. in response to a walk through the local area with children, where they count the number of bridges, make comparisons about materials used to make bridges, and discuss the purposes of bridges
- waterways – such as canals, e.g. in response to children's interest in boats, floating objects and water play in the sandpit
- various craft-making techniques, e.g. in response to children's and their families' involvement in a community multicultural fair
- the life of a lizard, e.g. in response to borrowed Queensland Museum educational resources on reptiles (such as the live exhibit, "Zeeky" the blue-tongue lizard)
- bubble-making, e.g. in response to a children's conversation about "soapy bubbles" while washing hands before morning tea
- artists' techniques, e.g. in response to an art gallery visit
- a puppet theatre, e.g. in response to children's conversations after participating in an Arts Council performance
- a movie cinema play space, e.g. in response to children's discussions about holiday activities during dramatic play in the home corner
- a theme park or ride in response to the local Exhibition or Show
- a class garden plot, e.g. in response to parents/carers' sharing of particular gardening skills/interest with children
- a class birthday party or other celebration
- a class web page for the school's website, as part of a whole school program on technology
- a class stall for the upcoming school fair
- an environmentally-friendly strategy that addresses a local environmental issue, e.g. a recycling rubbish program, or building a frog pond in collaboration with a community expert to encourage growth in numbers of a local endangered species of frog.

Why use a negotiated project approach to learning and teaching in the preparatory program?

The benefits of this type of negotiated curriculum include:

- acknowledgment of children as agents of their own learning, whereby they make choices about and begin to take increased responsibility for their learning
- *co-construction of learning* and shared understandings between relevant partners
- purposeful *curriculum co-planning* with children, building on their interests, questions, queries and wonder
- *authentic participation* by other partners, such as parents/carers, family and community members, acknowledging and using their diverse understandings and capabilities
- *promotion of learning* as ongoing, contestable and changing

- *authentic assessment* of children's learning, i.e. assessment practices that engage with children's personal understandings, capabilities and dispositions in purposeful contexts for learning
- *integration of meaningful real-life learning* across the early learning areas and a range of contexts
- extension of children's learning leading to *engagement with deeper understandings* about topics and issues
- *challenging thinking* to engage children in alternative ways of explaining and representing the world
- *sustained and focused interest* in learning by children
- *making connections* between prior and new understandings and experiences
- enhancement of children's *self-expression, oral language and creativity capabilities*
- increased and uninhibited *generation of ideas* that foster connections in learning within and across project focuses.

How can teachers use a negotiated project approach?

Negotiated learning begins with observing children's interactions in a range of learning contexts. In the role of "researcher", the teacher records and analyses children's conversations to identify their understandings and beliefs about specific topics. In collaboration with other partners (including children, teacher aides, parents/carers), the teacher writes a possible program plan that stems from children's interests. While anticipating children's choices and thinking about where these may lead, such a program should show possibilities and connections to learning statements from the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines or core learning outcomes from the KLAs.

When collaborating with partners on a whole-class project, the teacher needs to think about the sustainability of children's interest in the topic, including other possible related topics for investigation and available supporting school and community resources. It may be useful at this planning stage of negotiated project topics to create a concept map to identify learning possibilities. To encourage children's ownership of the planning of a whole-class negotiated project, the teacher may model for, and create with children, a simpler, less-detailed concept map of decision making during small group or whole-class focused learning and teaching.

Appendix 1 is an example of a concept map that displays potential project focuses stemming from one child's initial discussion about her family's participation in the community's "Clean Up Australia" activities. The highlighted boxes indicate the topics that children were interested in before and after this child's "Show and Tell", as observed and recorded by the Preparatory Year teacher during outdoor/indoor play sessions. This concept map demonstrates the connections between possible focuses to aid planning future projects and curriculum decision making.

When planning for learning through negotiated projects, the teacher should also consider allowing children to have more time to investigate topics of interest independently and spontaneously, e.g. through a timetabled "project" session (see support material on *Learning and teaching using a multi-age approach*, and *A day in the life of a Preparatory/Year 1 multi-age class*). By being flexible with time for investigations, you are encouraging children to build deeper understandings, make connections and sustain engagement in the learning. With the support of the teacher and other partners, children may work together in pairs, small groups or individually on projects, in both indoor and outdoor settings.

How can teachers "scaffold" children's learning through investigations?

Negotiating curriculum with children is more than providing a variety of learning experiences stemming from children's interests. A simplified inquiry-based approach to learning provides a framework for planned and spontaneous investigations.

In collaboration with children and other partners, the teacher may:

- select a topic by inquiring (e.g. what is a ...?), asking questions (e.g. what if...?), wondering why (e.g. how come...?) and commenting on new understandings (e.g. I didn't know that ...!)

- identify what is already known about the topic, and what it is that we want to find out
- brainstorm ways to find out more information about a topic, including checking, clarifying and modifying understandings, e.g. information sources could include local people in the community, print and electronic texts, objects and collections, materials, tools and equipment, and places and events
- discuss and record plans, e.g. use simple mind maps, lists, checklists, drawings
- acknowledge any obstacles to learning that may emerge and, with assistance, brainstorm and test possible ways to solve the problem/s
- explicitly model cooperative learning strategies, and encourage and assist children and other partners to mentor each other in using alternative ways of knowing, thinking and doing
- reflect on and share with others understandings, plans, actions and problems encountered during the progress of the project, e.g. through a range of representations such as mind maps, concept maps, demonstrations and simple oral and visual reports that may include painting, drawing, models and constructions
- document and display with children the completed project in a designated part of the classroom, including information about the project such as who participated, why this topic was chosen, how it was investigated, and what was learned.

Examples

Ian and Shiro investigated how to make bubbles. Shiro wanted to find out what special ingredients you need to make the best bubbles.

Paolo's big sister, Eli, sent along a book for Ian and Shiro about science experiments, including how to make bubbles. Ian and Shiro decided to do some bubble-making experiments.

Ian brought along his sister's old baby bath. Shiro used eight buckets of water to fill up the bathtub half way. Ian added one of the bubble ingredients. They whipped, whisked, swished and swirled the water using their hands, beaters, whisks and wooden spoons. Ian asked Mr Lamb to help them to empty the bath after each test, and refill it again.

They learned that soapy water, washing-up detergent and bubble bath oil made bubbles. Ian found out that you have to whisk the water hard and fast to make bubbles from soapy water. Shiro reported that it was easy making bubbles from bath oil. He said, "This was the best bubble-making stuff ever!!!"

Look at these photos that show how Ian and Shiro made lots of bubbles...!!

Appendix 1

Concept map to guide selection of negotiated project topics for investigation and curriculum planning:

Possible focuses created by children’s personal experiences and interests

