

Influences on Cultural Identity and an Exploration of Project-Based Learning

Christine Ammirati

College of William and Mary

EDUC F11, Dr. Gail McEachron

Abstract

The author is a middle-age European American woman whose cultural has been immersed in international culture as a student, diplomatic spouse, teacher, and mother. Academic achievement and multicultural exposure characterized her youth and provided positive counterpoints to a negative home environment. Through her extended family and international lived experiences, the author has had access and exposure to non-White cultures yet needs to expand her familiarity with other ethnicities as well as with less affluent learning communities. Project-based learning was a curriculum emphasis at the culturally diverse elementary school the author's children attended in New York City. She adopted this methodology in implementing curriculum at the cooperative preschool she headed for ten years. This paper examines project-based learning and addresses its efficacy in integrating diverse cultures and abilities within an elementary school classroom and its ability to support mandated standards and curricula in the current environment of high-stakes testing.

Cultural Identity and Its Potential Influence on Teaching Identity

While happily and comfortably engaged in my adult life, I remain aware that my initial cultural identity was forged in an often-violent childhood home and was later impacted significantly by international experiences in young adulthood. I am now a married, upper-income 48-year-old European-American woman with two college-age children who aspires to re-enter the classroom as a teacher. In understanding the disparate influences on my cultural touchstones, I aim to better appreciate the reactions and predispositions with which I will filter and comprehend experiences in my future classroom.

My cultural identity is impacted by feelings of marginalization due to family alcoholism, a unique family structure, and a degree of academic ostracization prior to college. I am also grounded in my identification with an international community of predominantly non-American expatriates, lived experiences as a minority in a dominant culture, and shared experiences with family members from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Influence of Alcoholism on Culture in Childhood and Youth

My childhood culture is rooted and colored by my mother's alcoholism. I was raised in suburban Connecticut as the oldest sibling in a family of five children; my brother and I were adopted (separately) as infants and my three younger sisters are the biological children of our parents. As the oldest of five siblings with an eleven-year age span, I assumed significant responsibility for the childcare and housekeeping needs of the family during my father's business travels and my mother's frequent periods of heavy drinking (Veronie & Fruehstorfer, 2001, p. 54). I felt valued by my siblings and father for my "contributions to the stability of family members and the family as a whole" (Godsall, Jurkovic, Emshoff, Anderson, & Stanwyck, 2004,

p. 799) but segmented my school and social life outside of the home from the daily challenges presented by my mother's alcoholism. All cultural references from my childhood seem to be tinged by alcoholism if only as a hurdle to overcome or as a condition to hide. School awards and activities, friendships, rare gatherings of relatives, and family travel are all remembered with a reference to how we overcame that day's alcohol-related challenge. Alcoholism was the dominant cultural factor in my upbringing and remains an active family dynamic today.

As a European American child, I benefited from white cultural privilege in my economic status and educational opportunities. My prestigious public schools were a vital refuge where I could achieve tangible success and where my teachers encouraged my academic aspirations. I derived a significant level of self-concept and validation from my academic and community achievements. However, this socio-economic privilege did not assist me in the more fundamental life experiences of growing up with a physically abusive parent. In the early 1970s, the pervasive effects of alcoholism were not well understood and domestic violence was not generally acknowledged or acted upon. As a middle school student seeking help, I was repeatedly advised by school and law enforcement officials to "take a low profile" and "not provoke reactions." I feel that my identity with white culture was subsumed by survival in an alcoholic home.

External Influences on Culture in Childhood and Youth

International culture also impacted my childhood. My father worked as president of various manufacturing companies and traveled biweekly both overseas and throughout the United States. As a result of this travel, I was exposed from a very early age to an international viewpoint and as a child would track his travels to South America and Europe in an atlas. My interest in international cultures was bolstered by our family's regularly hosting of international

students in our (alcoholic, dysfunctional) home. After spending a summer in Belgium with the family of my father's business associate, I decided at the age of fourteen that my future would be focused abroad. To that end, I studied French and Spanish in high school. My father's 1978 travel to the Guangzhou Trade Fair in China had a profound influence on my decision to pursue Chinese at the University of Pennsylvania.

Cultural Identity in Adulthood

I measure much of my cultural identity through my lived experiences in other cultures. As college sophomores, my future husband and I were among the first foreign students to attend Beijing University. During our seven months of study in China in 1981 and 1982, we lived as minorities in a culture that was unaccustomed to foreigners of any nationality and were quickly "sensitize[d] to subculture status" (Brown, 2004, p. 333). In public and particularly beyond coastal Chinese cities, curious bystanders would touch our hair, pinch our skin, and without realizing we understood what they were saying, express opinions about our appearance as well as our smell. Years later when nursing my children in quiet corners of Beijing, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, I would invariably draw a crowd and would often need to fend off well-meaning but intrusive women who would try to touch me and observe the baby's breastfeeding latch. On all of these occasions, I was clearly aware of the fact that I was the "other" (Lewis-Charp, 2003) within a dominant, well-established, and generally homogeneous culture. I was "most aware of [my] Whiteness when [I was] in the minority racially" (Johnson, 2002, p. 162), living in a culture where I could not go unnoticed in a public place and was the constant impetus for finger-pointing and whispers.

I have experienced on a prolonged basis the daily challenges and insights of being a minority within a dominant culture. These experiences also consisted of living as a second-

language speaker (and reader of non-romanized Chinese characters) in a non-English world. Particularly in our first four years in China, I was also immersed in a socialist country with few cultural touchstones of the modern and often Americanized world. My prolonged international focus has raised my sensitivity to a culture beyond the United States and helped me “understand others by their standards rather than one's own, or 'cultural relativism'” (Hayden & Thompson, 1995). In addition, as a student of China and its culture, I appreciate the wealth of its art and literature and the breadth of its history and contributions to the world. I am proud of my American heritage but feel that living abroad has provided a context in which to weigh our impact and influence. I feel that my cultural identity as an American is tempered by the realization that our country is a member of an international community of nations that have valuable viewpoints beyond our own and that we Americans are one voice among many (Hayden, Rancic, & Thompson, 2000).

I feel that my cultural identity is grounded most in my experiences as an American living abroad and functioning within the local and expatriate communities. My husband works for the U.S. Department of State and we have been assigned outside of Washington to Beijing, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United Nations in New York. Altogether, I have lived eight full years in the Chinese cities of Beijing, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Due to my teaching and our children's enrollment in international rather than American Schools, we have created a close network with families from Europe, Asia, the Americas, and Africa and increased our awareness of an international perspective. We chose to expand our connections beyond the bounds of embassy life, to live outside of American housing complexes, and to avoid some customs of expatriate living (i.e., in-home domestic help) due to social justice reasons. In our role as a diplomatic

family, we aim to be “international” (Hayden et al., 2000) and feel that we can best represent the United States overseas by being active participants and listeners in non-American cultures.

Challenges for Growth in my Future Classroom

I feel very comfortable teaching in a culture where expectations for academic and life success are high. My experiences in the classroom have been centered on affluent communities where my students and their families were highly motivated to achieve academically and as participants in the community. My students at the International Study Group and International School of Beijing were the children of ambassadors and diplomats and represented countries from Africa, South and North America, Asia, and Europe. Country and familial expectations and resources to support success were extremely high. Both motivation and participation were great and I feel acculturated to a school environment where these attributes are the norm.

In addition, I recently worked almost ten years as a preschool director in an affluent suburb in northern Virginia. In this preschool, racial, socio-economic, and ethnic diversity was minimal. Again, the population was prosperous families where toddlers wore clothing emblazoned with the names of prominent universities. Parents fretted about their children’s entrance into what they perceived to be the most impressive and rigorous public elementary schools in order to ensure later opportunities for admission to the region’s prestigious but selective public high school for science and technology which would then advance the goal of entrance into a top-tier university.

I have little experience in engaging disinterested and unmotivated students. While I understand how to nurture an existing excitement in school, I lack familiarity about how to interact in a culture where present academic achievement and future university attendance may not be a family or individual goal.

I also do not have experience in an American multicultural or ethnically diverse classroom. At this transition in my career, I feel called to teach in less affluent communities in American public schools. In particular, I would like to build on my knowledge and comfort in early education and work in a pre-kindergarten or early elementary classroom. With these goals in mind and given population demographics of urban classrooms in the eastern U.S., I expect that I will be teaching in a predominantly African American classroom. I have limited cultural references within the African American community and view this lack of familiarity as a major challenge to my ability to function in my future classroom.

I have some familiarity with and access to the African American community through friends as well as my brother's former wife and their daughter. My sister-in-law, Pam, and my niece, Danielle, live in Bowie, Maryland close to our former home in Arlington, Virginia. Pam and I have known each other for almost thirty years and have a friendly, close relationship that we expanded during my recent years living in northern Virginia when we met for monthly family outings either in our homes or at cultural venues in Washington D.C. We rarely immerse ourselves in each other's dominant cultures and I realize that I refrain from broaching racial topics that might surface potentially uncomfortable issues (Lewis-Charp, 2003, p. 280). For example, while my children have queried my niece about her hair care routine, I myself have hesitated in asking questions about any hair care needs or offering assistance during her sleepovers at our home. Similarly, I have rarely engaged in cultural conversations that might challenge cultural perspectives with my sister's Ecuadorian husband and my brother's Mexican wife. I was highly attune to the cultural differences in our extended family when my daughter and I attended the funeral of Pam's mother. I was struck by the degree to which I felt like an

outsider. We were not only participating in a highly religious gathering, but also were the only non-African Americans present in a crowded church.

Areas of Cultural Comfort in the Classroom

My cultural identity is more stable now that I am firmly enjoying middle age. I have a high comfort level with who I am as an individual and where my assets and challenges lie. My familiarity and identification with an international perspective stokes an ongoing curiosity about other cultures and shapes a flexible perspective that is not rigidly focused on North America. According to research, individuals with an international perspective highly value “attitudes of mind: being interested in and informed about other people and parts of the world ... and attitudes which place the cultures and views of others on a par with one’s own” (Hayden et al., 2000, p. 120). My previous classroom and administrative work has drawn heavily upon such an international identification and I plan to maintain this perspective in either a homogeneous classroom or in a multiethnic classroom where we can apply each family’s experience and culture to academic tasks.

I feel that my “outsider” experiences as a child in an alcoholic home, target of physical abuse, and marginalized academic high achiever all may serve to heighten my awareness and empathy with students and parents who are feeling uncomfortable or disconnected in their school interactions. In my recent administrative role, I emphasized action to interdict relational aggression and now realize that this strong motivation may draw from my personal experiences (Meyer, 2008, p. 566). I am motivated to reach out to children and families in the way that my school community did for me. My teachers played a vital role in my healthy development and self-concept and encouraged me to move beyond the confines and obligations of my childhood home and to enroll in college. Most importantly, they provided a refuge of safety and happiness

to a child seeking affirmation and opportunity. I aim to fulfill this same role for my students. Positive energy and warm support can make a tangible difference.

Personal Experiences with Project-Based Learning

I first became aware of Project-Based Learning (PBL) when my children attended a public elementary school in New York City. This diverse school drew its student population from mixed demographics in western Queens, Roosevelt Island, and the Upper East Side of Manhattan. A large display inside the school entrance proudly listed the 45 languages spoken by P.S. 183's students, a reflection of the diversity afforded by the international faculty and staff of nearby research hospitals as well as the multiple ethnicities that populate New York City. P.S. 183 and the nearby Manhattan New School were among a small number of elementary schools in New York's District 2 to incorporate the Project Approach across the curriculum. As a parent volunteer, I observed the excitement in the classrooms and was particularly impressed that this method successfully engaged children who did not speak English. As PTA President, I was called upon to help introduce this learning approach to our new families and in preparation for this task, spent weeks in classes throughout the school observing a wide range of student-driven inquiry in science, social studies, literature, and even mathematics.

My positive experience with project-based learning in my children's classrooms influenced me to incorporate this teaching method when I began work as director of a cooperative preschool in northern Virginia. Over the next ten years, I worked with my staff to develop projects across our four age groups and observed toddlers and pre-kindergarteners participate in projects ranging from animal themes to restaurant studies to transportation projects. The demographics of this affluent suburb were certainly not as diverse as Manhattan and my preschool students were indeed younger than their P.S. 183 counterparts, but the children all

shared the same high level of motivation and excitement when collaborating on student-initiated projects under the guidance of a teacher. In project-based learning, the children are invested in their own skill building and acquisition of knowledge.

As I move into my future role in a public elementary school, I would like to recreate this level of engagement and initiative with my students. I intend to incorporate project-based learning into my lesson plans. The diversity of learners will certainly be greater in my future classroom than in my small generally homogenous preschool. I am unclear about how this collaborative and student-initiated approach will translate into a culturally relevant elementary classroom. Does project-based learning address the needs of a diverse classroom? Also, my Manhattan experience pre-dates No Child Left Behind and my preschool experience took place in a private school where I devised the overall curriculum. I am unsure about how a multi-week project can be meshed with state standards and mandated curricula. For the purpose of examining research on project-based learning in elementary school, I will shift from a first person reflection to a third person analysis and address two research questions: Is project-based learning an effective method to create a culturally relevant classroom serving diverse learners? In addition, can project-based learning be integrated into state-mandated curriculum standards and the current high-stakes testing learning environment?

Characteristics of Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning (PBL) is grounded on the principle that children are active learners who are most motivated to learn topics that are of interest to them. This approach capitalizes on students' intrinsic motivation and builds on their innate interests by structuring a project around an authentic real-life topic selected by the students themselves. In investigating these self-selected topics in small peer groups, students will strengthen their academic skills and improve

their language and social abilities. In this constructivist approach, the teacher forges and documents links to state standards and curriculum and also serves as a mentor, teaching skills in meaningful context and helping the children “develop discipline through the activity” (Glassman & Whaley, 2000, p. 4). Project-based learning focuses on real life investigations that address multiple content areas. Projects generally span several weeks of classroom investigation, large-group discussions, small-group research, and individual student contributions. Most project-based learning ends in a meaningful culminating event aimed at an audience beyond the classroom such as a hallway bulletin board, publication of a brochure, or a performance for parents or peers. Project-based learning is used at all educational levels from pre-kindergarten through high school.

Project-based learning has an established history in American education. By the late 1890’s, John Dewey was using projects in his University of Chicago Lab School (Diffily & Sassman, 2002). Dewey “was convinced that such an approach would create the highest level of learning among all children by tapping their interests, previous knowledge, and connection to their own world of meaning” (Lambros, 2002). In addition, this approach is “well grounded in the work of educational theorists” such as Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and Howard Gardner (Diffily & Sassman, 2002, p. 148) and is used in classrooms throughout the world. Recent research studies cite project-based learning in the British Commonwealth, Turkey, North America, and Israel.

Multiple variations of project-based learning exist in education. The Project Approach aims “to cultivate the life of the young child’s mind” (Katz & Chard, 1989, p.3) and generally targets early childhood classrooms. Project Approach topics should be relevant to children’s daily lives and their culminating events often consist of dramatic play, construction activities,

and investigative studies. The early childhood curriculum developed in Reggio Emilia, Italy in the aftermath of World War II includes project-based learning. The Reggio Emilia approach views children as “strong, rich, and capable. All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity, and interest in constructing their learning, negotiating with everything their environment brings to them.” (Cadwell, 2003, p. 4). In the Reggio Emilia curriculum, parents are integral partners in the project learning process and teachers collaborate with one another as a team and “see themselves as researchers preparing documentation of their work with children, whom they also consider researchers.” (Cadwell, 2003, p. 4). In the Applied Learning approach, “classrooms are child directed” and characterized by “authentic work, the sense of community, and children’s decision making.” (Diffily & Sassman, 2002). Finally, in Problem-Based Learning, a single student-delineated research question focuses investigation. Students organize their collaborative research around lists: Facts, Need to Know, Learning Issues, Possible Solutions, and New Learning Issues. The teacher plays the pivotal role as mentor and “expert resource” (Lambros, 2002, p. 9).

Research on Project-Based Learning

The growing body of qualitative and quantitative research on project-based learning provides evidence that this interdisciplinary and collaborative approach increases student motivation, enhances social interactions, and improves academic results. Case studies (Bell, 2010; Beneke and Ostrosky, 2009; Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel, and Rathkey, 2009; Helm & Beneke, 2003; Helm and Gronlund, 2000; Riskowski, Olbricht, and Wilson, 2010) dominate the research and provide rich descriptions from students, parents, and teachers about the motivating effects of student-initiated projects. One case study suggests that students’ intrinsic motivation was elevated as they “use resources that are appropriate for their individual reading levels and

compatible with their technology knowledge” (Bell, 2010, p. 41). In addition, teachers noted improvement in general academic predispositions. Students learned “active listening skills [that] enhance[d] collaborative ability as well as creativity,... productive communication, respect for others, and teamwork” (Bell, 2010, p. 41).

Empirical research (Doppelt, 2003; Doppelt, 2009; Gültekin, 2005; Hernandez-Ramos and De La Paz, 2009) highlights the motivating power of project-based learning. A quasi-experimental study of an eighth grade social studies project found that “students’ attitudes toward learning ... and toward working with others, were significantly more positively affected by the PBL experience” than students in a comparison group that was not participating in the treatment (Hernandez-Ramos & De La Paz, 2009, p. 167). The students engaged in project-based learning “rated the experience quite favorably, agreeing that the project helped their learning, that they enjoyed working on it, and that they felt they could apply the skills learned to future projects” (Hernandez-Ramos & De La Paz, 2009, p. 167). This same beneficial outcome was evidenced in a Texas quantitative research study of five middle school math classes (Riskowski,et al., 2010), a Turkish study of a fifth-grade social studies curriculum, and a three-year study of Israeli vocational high school students (Doppelt, 2003). Qualitative and quantitative research studies have investigated project-based learning across age groups and across the content areas and have agreed that project-based learning promotes active learning, nurtures social skills, and increases students’ investment in their own academic results.

Project-Based Learning in a Diverse Classroom

Research also suggests that project-based learning is an effective method for meaningful inclusion of diverse abilities and backgrounds in a classroom lesson plan. Diversity in the classroom encompasses differences in exceptionalities, English language proficiency, gender,

and socio-economic status as well as cultural differences in race, ethnicity, and religion. In project-based learning, the flexibility and breadth of the method allows for meaningful participation for all classroom learners. Each project spans multiple tasks over many weeks and allows children's individual learning styles and strengths to find a purposeful role within its framework. In project-based learning, "classroom 'experts' are developed and celebrated" (Diffily & Sassman, 2002, p. 49) and each child's ethnic origin, socio-economic status, and intellectual ability are valued by the class as a whole. Also, "because project topics are drawn from children's interests and familiar environments, the knowledge acquired can have real cultural relevance to" the students (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 49). Scientific interests spur inquiry, cultural expertise is tapped as an informational resource, artistic abilities are utilized for presentations in the culminating event, and mathematical strengths are used for graphs and charts.

In project-based learning, the teacher's role is to mentor and guide the students and thereby individualize instruction based on needs observed during the students' project work. In a recent case study of seven early childhood classrooms, teachers using the "Project Approach increased their ability to include diverse learners. [They] found increased opportunities to adapt classroom activities, and consequently children with a range of abilities were able to participate in project work" (Benekee & Ostrosky, 2009, p. 3). A separate case study of a veteran first grade teacher found that she used "collaborative learning groups as a mechanism for allowing individual success, group success, and accommodations (e.g., autism)" (Mitchell et al., 2009, p. 341). The focused individual attention of project-based learning allows teachers to tailor instruction to the broad range of classroom needs.

In addition, project-based learning expands the classroom beyond the confines of school to include parents in their children's learning. Parents are called upon to share their expertise in the investigation phase of project-based learning and to serve as the audience for the culminating event. For example, a teacher reports that "within my dual-language classroom, I noticed an increase in parental involvement since I started using the project approach. Twenty out of twenty-one families attended the Project Family Night [when] typically in our school, about 50% of parents attend events in the evening" (Helm & Beneke, 2003, p. 70). Regular participation by parents is a means to forge a significant bridge between the school culture and the home culture. In cases where the family is a member of a minority culture, this opportunity for meaningful home-school connection may enhance the child's educational experience and strengthen the family's bond with the school.

When exceptionalities exist, project-based learning affords each child the opportunity to take responsibility for a specific aspect of the investigation. The teacher may shape aspects of small group work to take advantage of a child's particular unique strength. "Project work allows children to demonstrate their strengths by applying their knowledge, skills, and dispositions in ways that are helpful to others" (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2009, p. 2). Advocates of the Project Approach assert that it "is especially useful to teachers of children with special needs, because it helps them respect children's development levels... [and] moves each child forward on his or her individual development continuum" (Helm & Beneke, 2003, p. 52). They also maintain that project-based learning is particularly suitable for integrating second-language learners into the classroom, enabling the teacher "to connect academic content to children's experiences and to integrate curriculum goals in meaningful ways" (Helm & Beneke, 2003, p. 65).

Integrating Project-Based Learning and Curriculum Standards

In this era of high-stakes testing and mandated curricula, researchers have found that many educators are reluctant to incorporate the long arcs of project-based learning units. No Child Left Behind and the resulting focus on test results have raised questions about the continued relevance of project-based learning. Is there room in the classroom schedule for a prolonged student-driven inquiry? Do the skills fostered by project-based learning correlate with mandated standards? Research has found that the “advent of the standards movement... presents a potential barrier for teachers who want to individualize instruction and tailor curriculum in response to diverse groups of students” (Benekee & Ostrosky, 2009, p. 3). In addition, many teachers are reluctant to adopt a project-oriented teaching method that lacks a commercial teaching manual or specific standards-based objectives (Mitchell, Foulger, Wetzel, & Rathkey, 2009).

In fact, research has shown that project-based learning is a flexible methodology that supports a wide range of academic and social goals. An Illinois case study of seven early childhood classrooms stated that project work was instrumental in helping “children meet age-appropriate standards including the Illinois Early Learning Standards and other readiness goals” (Benekee & Ostrosky, 2009, p. 7). A Turkish study of 72 fifth graders using a pretest-posttest comparison group design presented data showing that students engaged in project-based learning “showed significant positive difference for PBL” on standardized tests (Gültekin, 2005, p. 552). Multiple Israeli studies focusing on high school vocational students have demonstrated marked improvement on standardized tests after these students participated in project-based learning intervention program. On one measure, “69 percent of the pupils fulfilled the precondition for

admission to further education” in contrast to 28 percent in the previous year when the students in the same school had not received the intervention program (Doppelt, 2003, p. 269).

Data from a comprehensive quasi-experimental California study provides more concrete evidence of project-based learning’s effectiveness in supporting state standards. In this research, eight intact classrooms composed of 170 eighth grade students participated in a six-week history unit (Hernandez-Ramos & De La Paz, 2009). Seventy students continued with their regular instructional method and 100 students participated in an intervention centered on collaborative small groups and incorporating a student-initiated technology project. The intervention group’s unit concluded with two culminating events where students presented to the entire school and then to their families at an “open house.” The teachers of the comparison and intervention groups collaborated to create pretest and posttest assessments based on state content standards and drawing on released items from prior high-stakes tests. Using this pretest-posttest design, the researchers found that the eighth graders who studied the unit using project-based learning “did in fact learn more than students in a comparison group who received instruction in a whole-class form of social studies instruction” (Hernandez-Ramos & De La Paz, 2009, p. 162). Furthermore, statistical analysis showed that these students performed better than their comparison group counterparts on a state high-stakes, wide-ranging social studies exam administered two months after the completion of the intervention and covering sixth to eighth grade social studies material.

Project-based learning is intended to be a single element within a complete curriculum. Although students select topics for study, the teacher’s role is to link these student-driven experiences to the specific curriculum and to embed mandated standards and skills within the project work. One teacher explains how she shapes elements of a project to address standards

saying, “If you know the standards, then you can see connections.... You manipulate the standards, not the children. If you find ways to include the standards in the topics that they are interested in, then you will be teaching them how to use the skills instead of teaching them the skills” (Mitchell et al, 2009, p. 340). In her large group discussions with the children, this teacher also is explicit about her instructional goals, sharing that “one of the things we need to do in first grade is to understand the kinds of places animals live... I need to know if you want to focus on one [biome], or if you want to look at all of them” (Mitchell et al., 2009, p. 340). Including the students in the decision-making process is a fundamental component of project-based learning and a means to optimize students’ intrinsic motivation and academic performance.

The teacher is also responsible for documenting the expansive set of skills covered by project-based learning. Project-based learning addresses broad aspects of the curriculum, seamlessly incorporating reading, writing, mathematics, communication, fine motor, and research skills into the student-driven inquiry. Across this wide swath of curriculum, teachers are responsible for “integrat[ing] the standards into the children’s interests” (Mitchell et al., 2009, p. 345) and must also “plan, during learning experiences, to acquire documentation (or evidence) that will demonstrate the achievement of standards or curriculum requirements” (Helm & Gronlund, 2000, p. 7). Assessment of project-based learning can take the form of portfolios as well as formal tests and rubrics for oral presentations. With systematic documentation, teachers can connect students’ project work with state-mandated objectives and curriculum standards.

Future Classroom Use of Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning is a dynamic interdisciplinary method of instruction that can harness student motivation and sharpen academic and social skills while simultaneously

nurturing a diverse classroom climate and supporting state mandated curricula and testing. This collaborative technique requires the teacher to individualize instruction and to acknowledge and value each student's unique needs and contributions. With this flexible and responsive method, the teacher is able to scaffold individual students' learning styles, language abilities, and academic strengths and to shine a positive light on exceptionalities for peer recognition and praise. In addition, parents play a meaningful role in project-based learning and their diverse expertise and cultural knowledge is welcomed into the classroom in a meaningful and significant way. Project-based learning can contribute to a culturally relevant classroom, respectful of diverse abilities and backgrounds..

Project-based learning has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on the test-driven classrooms of today. Student ownership of projects creates a stimulating learning environment where children are excited about their self-selected topic of inquiry and where they are motivated to learn. The current climate of intense focus on high-stakes testing need not exclude project-based learning from the classroom. Systematic documentation of student progress will detail the link to broad curriculum objectives. By identifying skills attained and knowledge gained in the course of the students' inquiry and subsequent presentation of research findings, teachers are able to meld curriculum standards with project-based learning.

In observing the success of project-based learning in a diverse Manhattan public school, the author appreciated the educational and social possibilities of capturing students' innate interests and channeling them to desired academic and community objectives. Her recent administrative work in early education reinforced her view that experiential project learning is effective in embracing and extending diverse students from various cultural and language backgrounds and with differing learning abilities and styles. In her future elementary classroom,

the author intends to use this stimulating and effective technique as a means to meld diverse learners and cultures into classroom curriculum and to support the academic knowledge and skills that support high-stakes testing.

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