

Project-Based Learning in Early Development

WE DON'T SHAPE CHILDREN — WE SUPPORT THEM

It is easy to spark children's interest and motivation to learn when the approach is engaging and different. *"Children learn how to gather information from various sources. The twenty-first century is not an age of memorising information, but of finding and using it. Today, educated people are those who can synthesise facts and understand relationships between phenomena and people,"* says primary school teacher Gordana Josimov.

We often say that adults could learn from children rather than the other way around — and to some extent, this is true. At the same time, we frequently ask ourselves who is responsible when a child is not sufficiently motivated to learn. Is it Serbia's education policy, a lack of motivation among educators, teachers, and professors, or does responsibility lie with parents — or the child?

The foundations of an individual's personality are formed in early childhood, and to a great extent, future development depends on education at the earliest age. In their early years, before starting school, children show a strong desire to explore the world around them. Their motivation to learn is natural, and when their abilities, interests, and creativity are encouraged, they make significant progress. This support helps them face new challenges in everyday life with greater confidence.

For several years, Serbia has been implementing a project-based approach to learning — known in preschools as *project planning*. This approach includes various strategies for acquiring knowledge through research, play, imagination, problem-solving, experience, and structured learning situations. What makes it distinctive is the involvement not only of educators and children, but also of parents and experts from different fields. The core principle of project-based learning is listening to children's interests, which then become the basis for creating projects. Within these projects, each child contributes their own knowledge and skills, expressing creativity and abilities in the most authentic way.

PREPARING CHILDREN FOR LIFE

The *"Dečja radost"* nursery in Pančevo has been implementing project-based learning since 2017 as part of the *"Years of Flight"* programme, supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and UNICEF, which ran until 2021.

"It cannot be said that the old programme was bad, but the new framework places greater emphasis on long-term goals. The essence is preparing children for life — recognising their potential and supporting them in developing it to the fullest. Children are not something we shape; instead, their capacities must be recognised and supported through practice. They should not merely observe, but experience the joy of discovery themselves," said Ana Nenadić, a specialist at the *"Dečja radost"* nursery.

New working methods are also being introduced in private nurseries.

“The starting point of this programme is a belief in the capacities of preschool children and the conviction that they can actively participate in their own learning and development. The programme emphasises play and joint participation of children and adults in the learning process. All participants are important and, according to their competencies, are guided toward lifelong learning, with the child and their interests at the centre,” explained Vesna Zeng, expert collaborator at the “Kefalica” nursery, whose work is based on an integrated and thematic approach. According to her, the aim is for children to contribute their authentic experiences to the learning community through various forms of participation.

HOW PROJECT-BASED LEARNING WORKS

Project-based learning is implemented as planned learning in real-life situations through play and exploration, creatively connecting previous and new experiences. In nurseries, educators initiate and “provoke” topics by listening to children’s questions and ideas. They observe the directions in which exploration develops and plan further steps accordingly. Since topics can be explored in many ways, the learning environment often extends beyond the nursery, with the local community playing an important role. In this process, both children and adults participate, allowing children to become visible members of the community.

Over the past year, the “Kekec” nursery began introducing project-based learning into its work. Located in the centre of Pančevo, children frequently asked questions about the surrounding buildings — who built them, why some are old and others new, and who created certain monuments. This curiosity led to the project *“Exploring the City Together Through Artistic Activities.”*

“We decided to explore the city centre, starting with the Institute for the Protection of Monuments and the National Museum, where we were welcomed with great openness and support. We visited exhibitions, learned about the buildings, observed how green spaces are landscaped with the help of the public utility company ‘Green Spaces,’ and discovered historical figures whom we later discussed. For example, when talking about Mihajlo Pupin, we invited Dragoљub Cucić, director of the Regional Centre for Talents ‘Mihajlo Pupin.’ The children truly enjoyed the experience, and we received tremendous support from parents as well,” said Ljiljana Markov, a teacher at the “Kekec” nursery.

At the “Kefalica” nursery, children spent nearly a month exploring the theme *“Winter Fairytale.”* Through winter-themed activities, they learned about the North Pole and the Inuit culture, customs, and way of life. The final goal was to build an igloo — a task they successfully completed. Children aged three to five participated in the project.

“Thematic planning and project-based learning are essential in our nursery. All activities are aligned with the chosen theme. Carefully selected games support the planned content and encourage the development of children’s potential. Everything is interconnected and purposeful,” explained Vesna Zeng.

THE LITTLE PRINCE

Drawing holds immense value for children.

“It is crucial for children to express themselves. In preschool, pre-artistic activities such as scribbling and doodling are actually expressions of emotion through line. Later, children develop this expression through drawing. Often, children communicate more effectively through drawings than through words,” emphasised Emil Sfera, art educator at the “Dečja radost” nursery.

Teacher Ljiljana Markov highlighted that project-based learning is equally important for educators, as it motivates children to think, develop critical judgement, and prepare for both school and life.

“If we want to check whether children have acquired knowledge, we give them a test. But if we want to see whether that knowledge can be applied in life, we use project-based learning — where children connect what they have learned with real-life experiences,” explained Gordana Josimov, a primary school teacher at *Ruđer Bošković* Elementary School, who believes this method fosters critical thinking.

“Children learn to gather data from various sources. The twenty-first century is not about memorising information, but about finding and using it. Today, educated individuals are those who can synthesise facts and understand relationships between people and phenomena,” she concluded.

Children are clearly more motivated to learn when teaching methods are engaging, participatory, and meaningful — when their involvement genuinely matters to the outcome of a project.

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The “*Together for Children*” project is implemented by the CIP – Centre for Interactive Pedagogy, in cooperation with the Open Society Foundation, Serbia. The views expressed in this text do not necessarily reflect those of the CIP Centre or its donors.