

This is the first in a series of articles on the subject of project work in the Malaysian primary classroom.

In this first article, I will be discussing the rationale behind project work and the features of project work. Subsequent articles will deal with such themes as the role of the teacher in project work, methods of organizing pupils for project work, creating the right classroom environment, easy ways to collect materials for project work and, finally, examples of projects that can be tried out in the KBSR classroom. The latter will contain step-by-step procedures for various projects and will be accompanied by examples of finished projects.

I first began to think of project work in the Malaysian context when my own children would come home (mostly when they were in Standard 5 and 6) and say: 'I have to do a project on Frank Swettenham' or 'I have to do a project on all the different types of rice found in Malaysia.' They would then proceed to explore our extensive home library and copy out wads of notes on the given theme. I was never able to gauge what actually happened to these wads of notes. This led to the realization that so-called 'project work' in the Malaysian context, as far as I could see, meant (a) setting work to keep pupils out of mischief at the end of the school year or after the Standard 5 Assessment Examination; and (b) giving pupils written tasks which would involve as little work as possible on the part of the teacher. It also implied (c) that only children from homes with a supply of (often fairly specialized) reference books would be able to do the tasks, or (d) only children with parents who were willing to help their children locate the relevant material would be able to do the tasks. Furthermore, the majority of 'projects' set in Malaysian classrooms were meaningless, irrelevant and often too difficult for the pupils to do considering that in most cases pupils were not prepared for the task given. In effect, they were not 'projects'.

What is a project?

A project is a collection of activities based on a theme to teach, reinforce, and/or enrich a skill or concept.

There are several elements to this definition, all equally important: (a) the idea of 'a collection of activities' – not a single activity, and certainly not a single written activity; (b) the idea of 'a theme' or topic on which all the activities were based; (c) the idea of 'teaching, reinforcing and enriching a skill or concept'.

This definition alone should reveal the value of project work in the classroom but it is worthwhile, at this point, to specify its value more closely.

What is the value of project work?

1. We all know, or should know, that primary age children learn best by doing. Direct experience has been proven as the most effective method of learning. Too often in our classrooms pupils are passive learners. They are the victims of 'talk and chalk'. The great advantage of the new primary curriculum is that pupils have been, or are being, liberated from teacher-dominated learning situations. For the first time they are being given a chance to speak up, to assert their individuality, even to think! This is a time, then, when children should be given a greater chance to 'learn by doing', and at an earlier age. One way is through project work.
2. Primary age children learn best through individualized learning. Obviously, in large classes, total individualized learning is not feasible. However, I firmly believe that teaching and learning methods which focus on the total class should be supplemented by those which cater to individual differences. This is particularly true in unstreamed KBSR classrooms where there are large numbers of children of varying abilities.
3. If learning is to be effective, it must have significance and appeal to the pupils. It is my belief that if a project contains all the ingredients given in the definition above, children will learn, and learn with pleasure and insight.
4. Project work helps to develop the pupils' self-image. It allows children to grow in creativity and to express their identities, to develop their individualities, and to cultivate their talents.
5. Project work teaches pupils to work independently as well as to interact, cooperate and work as group members. These are all skills which will stand pupils in good stead in later life.

6. Most importantly, project work can develop pupils' mental abilities. It can teach them to think, an aspect of learning and teaching that seems sorely lacking in many Malaysian classrooms.

What are the desirable features of project work in the KBSR classroom?

1. The projects (and themes of each project) given to KBSR pupils should represent an integrated approach to learning. The topics or themes should cut across all subject areas — Bahasa Malaysia, Bahasa Inggeris, Maths, Science, Art and Craft, etc. They should not just be Bahasa Malaysia projects, for instance, but should contain elements from language, maths and science, etc. all linked by a common theme. Project work is, in fact, one way of pulling together a number of seemingly disparate disciplines.

2. The choice of project themes is best related to the topics of the basic readers and to the themes and activities set out in the various Buku Panduan Khas. In this way, teachers can 'reinforce and enrich the skills and concepts' specified in the syllabus. Indeed, they will not feel that they are teaching 'outside the syllabus'.

3. There should be a wide range of activities within each project so that the individual differences and preferences of pupils are catered for. This is most important when we consider that our KBSR classes are not streamed. By setting various activities at, say, three levels in a class, we can accommodate pupils who are bright, average and weak. By providing a variety of activities, we can also cater to pupils with particular talents or even to those less academically inclined but who shine at manipulative tasks.

4. Projects given in the KBSR classroom should be appropriate and feasible in the Malaysian context. Not only should the materials to be used for the projects be easy to collect, but the themes set should be appropriate for different types of pupils in different environments. There is no value in setting an obviously 'urban' project in a distinctly 'rural' environment if the tasks required are completely outside the pupils' realm of experience or if it is impossible for pupils 'to research' the theme.

5. There should not only be a variety of activities in each project, but also a balance between independent work and teacher-directed work, individual and small and large group work, indoor and outdoor work, factual and creative work, active and quiet work, etc.

6. Project work should not be the prerogative of pupils in upper primary classes. As early as the first term of Primary 1, pupils should be introduced to project work and should be given several projects a year throughout their primary schooling. This will lay a firm foundation for the more independent type of study required of pupils in the secondary school.

In the next article, I shall be giving suggestions on organizing pupils for project work and providing practical advice on creating a positive learning environment for project work in the classroom.

*(Editor's note: This article will also appear in the first issue of *Guru Pelajar*, a new teaching bulletin published by the Education Faculty, University of Malaya.)*