

PROJECT METHOD APPLICATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the project-based learning method in early childhood teacher education, addressing its alignment with modern pedagogical approaches. The study investigates how this practice-oriented method enhances future teachers' professional competencies through active learning experiences and active involvement in real-life problem-solving. Using a mixed methodology combining literature analysis and empirical surveys, the research evaluates current application practices and identifies improvement opportunities that may strengthen future implementation. Results demonstrate the method's effectiveness in developing creativity, problem-solving skills, and reflective practice while bridging theoretical knowledge with practical challenges encountered in professional life. Findings reveal significant benefits including improved student engagement, teamwork abilities, communication skills, and professional autonomy. However, implementation challenges emerge regarding assessment clarity, organizational structure, and workload management. The study highlights the need for clearer guidelines, interdisciplinary integration, and optimized evaluation criteria. These improvements would maximize the method's potential in developing comprehensive pedagogical competencies. Furthermore, the findings underline the importance of aligning project-based learning with broader institutional strategies to ensure its sustainability and long-term impact. The research confirms the project method's value in addressing contemporary educational demands, particularly in cultivating adaptable, reflective practitioners who are capable of navigating diverse professional contexts. Practical recommendations emphasize the importance of lecturer training, supportive institutional frameworks, and continuous evaluation for successful implementation and long-term effectiveness.

Keywords: *Deep learning, Early childhood education, Experiential learning, Pedagogical competencies, Project-based learning, Project method, Teacher training*

Introduction

The evolving nature of contemporary society, rapid technological advancements, and shifts in educational paradigms necessitate continuous exploration of new teaching methods or the refinement of existing ones in teacher education. Learning is perceived as

a constructive activity, in which students' ability to analyze, reflect, and apply acquired knowledge in practice is crucial (Jucevičienė, 2006; Targamadzė, 2015). The constructivist paradigm emphasizes that learning is not only about acquiring knowledge but also about its practical application and the construction of individual understanding (Targamadzė & Šimelionienė, 2015; Bubnys, 2012; Jucevičienė, 2006). Thus, contemporary education prioritizes learning processes that emphasize active participation and experiential education (Pocevičienė, Lukavičienė, Augienė, 2010).

Considering modern trends in teacher education, increasing emphasis is placed on the notion that knowledge is best acquired through experience – the primary source of learning. Experiential learning not only aids in information retention but also promotes reflection and practical application (Saulėnienė & Bagdonas, 2021). Innovative study process organization, based on practice-oriented projects, allows future teachers to develop creativity, critical thinking, teamwork skills, and the ability to integrate technology into professional activities. Moreover, this project-based approach aligns with contemporary societal challenges by equipping future teachers with collaboration and communication skills.

Competencies acquired during the study process not only help teachers adapt to a constantly changing environment but also enhance their ability to collaborate effectively with families and address children's educational needs (Monkevičienė et al., 2018). General competencies extend beyond professional skills, significantly influencing personal and societal aspects of life (Costea, Crump, Holm, 2007; Jakubė & Juozaitis, 2012).

Although pedagogical interaction and learning-oriented methods are significant, research shows that they are not widely implemented and their potential remains partially untapped (Jucevičienė, 2006; Žydyūnaitė et al., 2006). Teaching and learning methods are often applied in a fragmented manner, without integrating instruction, learning, and assessment processes. While students are receptive to innovative learning approaches, educators do not always fully exploit their potential.

One of the most effective ways to develop students' competencies is the practice-oriented project method. This method not only facilitates the implementation of theoretical knowledge but also enables students to plan and organize their learning process, ensuring that projects are not only conceptualized but also executed in real-world settings (Adomaitienė & Zubrickeinė, 2016; Pocevičienė, Lukavičienė, Augienė, 2010). Participation in project-based activities allows students to deepen their knowledge while enhancing practical skills and professional competencies. The significance of this method in the study process continues to grow, particularly in light of the integration of artificial intelligence into education.

To optimize the application of the practice-oriented project method in the study process, an empirical study was conducted. The results contribute to the improvement of teacher training and the enhancement of learning effectiveness.

Research Aim: To explore how the practice-oriented project method is applied in the preparation of early childhood education teachers to strengthen their pedagogical competencies, collaboration skills, and creativity.

Research Objectives

1. To discuss the significance of the project method and its application in the study process.

2. To assess students' and educators' perceptions of the project method and determine its impact on future teachers' preparedness for professional practice.

Research Object: The application of the project method in the study process of future early childhood education teachers.

Research Methods: Document and scientific literature analysis, written survey, quantitative data analysis.

The article consists of two parts. The first part examines the significance and application of the project method as a teaching and learning approach. The second part presents survey results that reveal students' and educators' perspectives on the project method and its impact on future teachers' readiness for professional practice. Additionally, insights for improving this method are provided.

The findings of this study contribute to the enhancement of early childhood and preschool education programs, strengthening the readiness of future educators to work in constantly evolving environments.

The Project Method, Its Significance, and Application Possibilities in the Study Process

Modern studies should provide more opportunities for learners to actively engage in the learning process, recognize the natural connections between learning and everyday life, and understand the influence of change processes on professional development (Pocevičienė, Lukavičienė, Augienė, 2010). In the educational process, priority is given to deep learning, which is oriented not only towards objective learning goals but also towards the authenticity and personal significance of the acquired knowledge (Jakubė, Juozaitis, 2012). According to Jakubė and Juozaitis (2012), deep learning is a process that fosters the active role of learners, making knowledge, skills, and attitudes an integral part of their identity. By analyzing information, solving problems, engaging in activities, and reflecting on their experiences, learners focus not just on facts but on key ideas and interconnections between them. They discuss insights and construct their own reality. It is emphasized that the project method is particularly suitable for this approach, as it encourages independent learning, initiative, active participation in all stages of learning, acquisition of knowledge, and development of necessary skills through exploration and independent discovery of scientific and life truths (Pocevičienė, Lukavičienė, Augienė, 2010; Jakubė, Juozaitis, 2012; Žibėnienė, Indrašienė, 2017).

The term "project" originates from Latin, meaning "to throw forward," implying movement. The scientific literature offers numerous and diverse interpretations of the project method. Tamošiūnas (1999) identifies ten key characteristics:

- The project method emerged as a response to social and pedagogical issues in contemporary society.
- It becomes necessary when routine solutions are no longer sufficient.
- It is an open-ended method, focusing on the unknown, research, discovery, and learning.
- Its goal is to develop skills and strategies for addressing social and pedagogical issues.

- It is based on collective decision-making and collaboration.
- Participants must be active throughout the process.
- The method requires educators to take on an advisory role, supporting student initiatives.
- It is one of many learning methods.
- The quality of a project is assessed based on predefined criteria and outcomes.

A review of the scientific literature highlights five key developmental stages and educational objectives addressed by the project method.

Table 1 Developmental Stages of the Project Method and Educational Goals (prepared by the article authors based on Adomaitienė & Zubrickienė, 2016; Pocevičienė et al., 2010; Žibėnienė & Indrašienė, 2017)

Stages	Key Concepts/Educational Goals
Stage I Initial Development In the late 16th century in Italy, the project method was employed at the art academies of Rome and Paris for instructing architects and artists. The term “project” as a teaching methodology was first formally used in 1702 at the Accademia di San Luca (Rome Higher School of Fine Arts).	Educational goal – knowledge transfer. Three characteristics of projects as a teaching method: Learner orientation – autonomous knowledge acquisition during project work. Object orientation – application of interdisciplinary knowledge domains. Practice orientation – tasks performed under real-world simulated conditions.
Stage II of Project Method Development The project method, having been widely adopted in Europe, migrated to the United States. By the late 18th century, it began being implemented in technical colleges for the practical training of future engineers.	The project method is applied not only in designing projects but also in their practical implementation. Learning should be grounded in the learner’s interests and experiences, with creative work serving as the foundation of project initiation.
Stage III of Project Method Development This phase is attributed to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, characterized by significant expansion of project-based methodology in education.	Experience gained through practical activities becomes an acquired value in the educational process. The educated individual must solve problems posed by the real environment. A project constitutes a complex activity where students themselves plan, set goals, and seek solutions. The outcome of the project method is comprehensive education.
Stage IV of Project Method Development The project method achieved global dissemination, with projects reintroduced into European schools by 1920. In both the United States and Europe, the project approach served as the foundation for numerous educational movements, including the Dalton Plan and Jena Plan.	1920–1930 European schools were characterized by learner individualization, while simultaneously promoting their activity, autonomy, group work, and integrated learning of subject matter.
Stage V of the Project Method Development The final stage of the development of the project method began in 1965 in Germany and continues to this day. This period is associated with a rethinking of project ideas and their further dissemination in the field of education.	Goal – Interdisciplinary Integration and Socialization. Children learn by observing, exploring, analyzing, and summarizing, and their cognitive activity has the greatest impact on personality development. Education is based on the continuous development of inner potential through new experiences.

Teresevičienė and Adomaitienė (2000) define the project method as possessing unique features that distinguish it from group learning or traditional teaching methods. These features include openness to new ideas and concepts, learner initiative, independent selection and evaluation of information, engagement with real-life problems, integration of theoretical and practical learning, responsibility for decisions and actions, and the instructor's role as an advisor or partner. The final product may take the form of a presentation, thesis, or exhibition.

According to Jakubė and Juozaitis (2012), learning projects are self-directed learning initiatives that include a defined learning task and a set timeframe. Typically, learning projects last a semester, but they can be shorter, even as brief as one week. These projects must have two essential features: a clear task and a specific duration. The authors emphasize the method's universality and adaptability to different learning contexts, whether individual or small-group learning. Properly organized, this method supports lifelong learning skills and fosters a positive attitude toward continuous education. It encourages students to reflect on their learning experiences and acquired knowledge.

Currently, the project method is experiencing a resurgence and is recognized as a valuable supplement to traditional learning methods, applicable across various educational levels and age groups. In the study process, a project can be viewed both as a means of achieving concrete results and as a method for attaining broader study objectives (Pocevičienė, Lukavičienė, Augienė, 2010). Scholars note that the project method integrates learning theory with practice and the learner's real-life experiences, unrestricted by rigid rules and norms (Adomaitienė, Zubrickienė, 2016).

The project method is widely applicable in the study process, across different subjects, study levels, and both compulsory and elective courses. Thus, it is necessary to highlight the specific features of its application.

The project method enables students to acquire practical skills, develop creativity and independence, enhance problem-solving abilities, and improve collaboration skills. It also promotes active participation in the study process and fosters a positive attitude toward continuous change. Three key prerequisites for the successful application of the project method in the study process are: understanding learners, possessing strong didactic and managerial competencies as an educator, and creating a conducive learning environment (Pocevičienė, Lukavičienė, Augienė, 2010). Each of these aspects is discussed in detail below.

When applying the project method, it is essential to understand students' experiences and capabilities in project-based learning. Before starting a project, educators should assess students' skills and interests. According to Pocevičienė, Lukavičienė, and Augienė (2010), a project should begin only when students are familiar with the concept of projects and group work dynamics. During the first project, more time should be allocated to each activity than usual. Teresevičienė and Adomaitienė (2000) note that project-based work is characterized by student initiative, engagement, enthusiasm, commitment, and satisfaction with their contributions and results. Therefore, students should be given the freedom to choose topics of interest, experience satisfaction from meaningful work,

Table 2 Characteristics of the Application of the Project-Based Method (compiled by the article authors based on Pocevičienė, Lukavičienė, Augienė 2010)

Application of the Project Method	Content of the Application of the Project Method
At the beginning of a course	As an introduction to the study of a specific field
As a continuous method	A method used throughout the entire course of study
According to the nature of the task	Oriented only towards activity planning; oriented towards practical activity
According to the orientation of the task	Oriented towards problem-solving; oriented towards exploring areas and ways of applying a new method, approach, or tool
According to the forms of task organization;	Individual; carried out in pairs; carried out in groups
To purposefully use learning methods for learner engagement;	Brainstorming; Analysis of information and facts; Arguments “for” and “against”; Group discussions; Mind mapping; Six thinking hats method; Searching for examples; Visualization of the “big picture”
Methods to be used when planning activities	Structural decomposition method; Schematization; Discussion.

conduct research, generate ideas, independently study new literature, gather information, make decisions, and solve problems. Project-based activities foster qualitative personal growth, creativity, self-confidence, self-esteem, and communication skills.

Smooth project implementation depends on the educator’s didactic and managerial competencies. Pocevičienė, Lukavičienė, and Augienė (2010) emphasize that educators must carefully plan projects, effectively communicate project details, consider involving experts, teach students how to find information from various sources beyond the internet, guide them in using technology appropriately, and be prepared to make necessary adjustments during the project. Jakubė and Juozaitis (2012) highlight that instructors should clarify learning objectives, discuss deadlines and assessment criteria, plan interim evaluations, provide learning support, and address students’ concerns regarding resources and schedules.

The development and implementation of practice-oriented projects pose additional challenges for both educators and students. The educator’s role shifts to that of a facilitator, mentor, or guide, while students take on more responsibility for gathering information, conducting observations, and conducting surveys. Each team member fulfills specific commitments, presents findings, and documents reflections on each activity. Project-based learning often takes place outside the traditional learning environment, utilizing external contexts. Therefore, continuous coordination, adherence to a well-structured schedule, and balanced student autonomy are crucial (Pocevičienė, Lukavičienė, Augienė, 2010).

In conclusion, the project method is an effective approach to fostering deep learning, where students actively engage in analyzing information, solving problems, and reflecting on their experiences. Applicable across various study stages and disciplines, it integrates

theoretical knowledge with practical skills, encouraging creativity, independence, and lifelong learning. The successful implementation of the project method depends on educators' didactic and managerial competencies, careful planning, and a supportive learning environment. By addressing contemporary educational challenges, the project method contributes to the holistic development of students and their ability to navigate real-world problems.

Research Methodology and Organization

To assess the perspectives of students and educators on the application of the project method and to determine how this method influences the preparedness of future educators for practical work, an empirical study was conducted from December 1, 2024, to January 10, 2025. The authors of the study, drawing on theoretical assertions presented in the literature review, adhered to the premise that one of the effective ways to develop students' competencies in early childhood education training is through the project method. This approach allows students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, plan and organize the learning process, and engage in the full cycle of project implementation. Participation in project-based activities enables students to deepen their knowledge, refine practical skills, and enhance professional competencies.

The study involved 177 final-year early childhood education students and 10 faculty members from the Department of Pedagogy. All final-year students actively engaged in the relevant courses were included in the sample, ensuring full exposure to the project-based learning approach. The primary objective was to examine how this practice-oriented approach is integrated into the training of early childhood educators to enhance their pedagogical competencies, collaboration skills, and creativity.

The chosen research method was a written survey. Two questionnaires were developed: one for faculty members and another for students. The questionnaires were designed based on the principles explored in the theoretical section of the study, which emphasize that the project method is an effective tool for fostering deep learning. This method actively engages students in the learning process by encouraging them to analyze information, solve problems, and reflect on their experiences. The project method is applicable across various stages and disciplines of study, supporting both individual and group learning. Its versatility lies in its ability to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical skills, helping students develop competencies and strategies essential for solving real-world problems and adapting to an ever-changing environment.

Furthermore, the project method addresses 21st-century educational challenges by fostering creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills. To evaluate the effectiveness of the project method in pedagogy modules, it was crucial to collect students' and faculty members' perspectives on its benefits, the skills acquired, the challenges encountered, and overall satisfaction with the approach. The collected data will contribute to assessing the effectiveness of the project method in early childhood educator training.

Both questionnaires consisted of 16 structured questions and one open-ended question, inviting suggestions for improving the project method. The questions for students and faculty members were identical, with adjustments to emphasize the specific activities, experiences, and competencies relevant to each respondent group.

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of voluntariness, informed consent, and anonymity. The collected data were used solely for aggregate analysis and scientific purposes.

Results

The survey conducted among students and lecturers revealed that the project method is widely applied in the learning process. All participating educators (100%) indicated that they use the project method in their teaching. Half of the surveyed lecturers (50%) reported frequent use of this method, one-third (33.3%) applied it occasionally, and a small portion (16.7%) used it rarely. All lecturers (100%) and nearly all students (96.6%) confirmed that the project method is implemented in the learning process.

Lecturers reported that they most frequently employ the project method to develop practical skills (100%), foster creativity (100%), and enhance teamwork abilities (100%). Half (50%) of the surveyed lecturers also use this method for acquiring theoretical knowledge. Most educators assessed the project method as effective for both transmitting theoretical knowledge (67% effective, 33% highly effective) and developing practical skills (50% highly effective, 50% effective). Their opinions on its impact on student motivation varied: half (50%) considered it effective, 16% viewed it as highly effective, while one-third (33%) regarded it as more effective than ineffective.

The majority of students (79.6%) evaluated the influence of the project method on acquiring theoretical knowledge positively or very positively, while 18.6% regarded it as more positive than negative, and 1.7% assessed it negatively. Students rated the impact of the project method on developing practical skills particularly favorably (91.6%). A very small proportion (5.1%) expressed no opinion, while an even smaller group (3.4%) evaluated it negatively. Regarding teamwork skills, students assessed the method very positively (45.8%) or positively (37.3%). A large majority (79.7%) affirmed that the project method helped them better understand the course material, while 11.9% considered it insignificant and 8.5% claimed it did not aid their understanding.

Most lecturers (66%) provide consultations very often or often, while a small portion (16.7%) do so occasionally or rarely. Students evaluated the usefulness of consultations positively: 45.8% found them very useful, 44.1% useful, 8.5% neutral, and 1.7% entirely unhelpful. Lecturers rated students' teamwork skills positively (67%), though some noted room for improvement. When evaluating group work organization, most students (47.5%) described it as good, 28.8% considered it very well-organized, 16.9% remained neutral, and 6.8% viewed it as poorly organized.

Additionally, 20.3% of students reported high stress levels during project work, while 59.3% experienced moderate stress.

Table 3 Challenges Encountered When Working with the Project Based Method

Statements	Lecturers	Students
Lack of time	33%	55.9%
Task complexity	0%	–
Lack of clarity	–	40.7%
Lack of student motivation	50%	1.7%
Coordination of group work	16.7 %	55.9%
Objectivity of assessment	66.7%	–
Lack of critical thinking and information evaluation skills	16.7 %	–
Project scope management	–	30.5%

**Does the Project-Based Method Help Improve the Following Skills?
(Select All That Apply)**

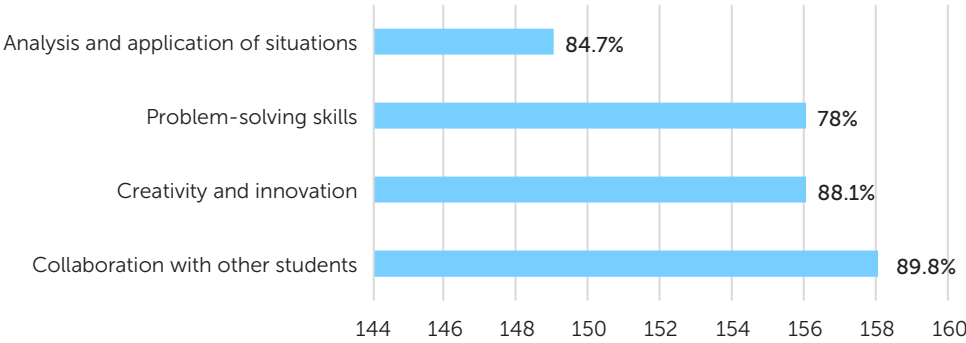


Figure 1 Results of the Student Survey (conducted by the article authors)

Lecturers identified key advantages of the project method: strengthened teamwork (100%), enhanced communication skills (50%), leadership development (50%), fostered creativity and critical thinking (34%), and integration of theory and practice (34%). Students highlighted skill-specific benefits, including improved peer collaboration (89.8%) and enhanced creativity and innovation (88.1%). A significant proportion of students also noted that the project-based method enhanced their ability to analyze and apply knowledge in practical situations (84.7%) and improved their problem-solving skills (78%) (see Figure 1).

Overall, the data show that the project method is effective in developing the most important skills, particularly collaboration and creativity. The majority of students (72.9%–81.4%) state that project activities help prepare for practical tasks in areas such as planning educational activities, observation, identifying individual children’s needs, and collaborating with colleagues and parents (see Figure 2).

**Which Aspects of the Project Method Were Most Beneficial in Preparing for Practice?
(Select All That Apply)**



Figure 2 Results of the Student Survey (conducted by the article authors)

The data analysis reveals that the majority of students acknowledge the benefits of the project method in preparing for practical training. A significant proportion (78%) of students indicate that generating creative ideas was most helpful, while a considerable number (66.1%) emphasize the importance of individual responsibility distribution within teams. Other key aspects include teamwork (57.6%), analysis of practical situations (55.9%), and post-activity reflection (49.2%).

In open-ended survey questions, students suggested improvements: increased application of the project method (35 students), clearer guidelines and objectives (27), more time for projects (24), more efficient team organization (9), promotion of interdisciplinary projects (6), and smaller-scale projects (2). Lecturers also proposed improvements: refinement of assessment criteria (4 lecturers), implementation in smaller groups (2), interdisciplinary collaboration (2), more support in initial stages (2), and clearer definition of the project method (2).

Discussion

The findings indicate that both lecturers and students perceive the project method positively, particularly in relation to the development of practical and teamwork skills. Students strongly emphasized that this approach improved their comprehension of course material and better prepared them for professional practice.

The results reveal both similarities and discrepancies between lecturers and students. While both groups acknowledged time constraints and group work coordination as significant challenges, students reported these issues more frequently, suggesting a greater sensitivity to workload and organizational demands. Interestingly, lecturers identified lack of student motivation as a major barrier (50%), whereas only 1.7% of students agreed.

This discrepancy suggests that motivational challenges may stem less from intrinsic attitudes and more from external factors such as unclear tasks or organizational issues.

Lecturers highlighted assessment objectivity and insufficient critical thinking skills as difficulties, whereas students pointed to lack of clarity and workload management. These differing perspectives indicate a need for clearer assessment frameworks, structured task guidelines, and better workload distribution.

The stress experienced by students further highlights the importance of optimized project planning, improved time management, and enhanced lecturer support throughout the process. Both groups expressed interest in more interdisciplinary projects, which could foster cross-disciplinary competencies, although this would require additional time and resources.

The open-ended responses also underscore complementary perspectives: students requested clearer guidelines, more time, and better team organization, while lecturers called for refined assessment criteria, smaller groups, and more initial-stage support. Together, these suggestions emphasize the need for transparent methodological definitions and structured processes.

Overall, the discussion confirms that the project method effectively develops key pedagogical competencies, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving. The results validate the study's assumption that the project method serves as a valuable educational approach. Nevertheless, challenges related to assessment, workload, and organization highlight areas requiring refinement.

The limitations of this study include its focus on a single institution and reliance on self-reported data, which may reflect subjective perceptions. Future research could expand to multiple institutions, explore longitudinal effects of project-based learning, and investigate strategies for balancing workload and assessment transparency.

Conclusions

Literature analysis has revealed that the project-based method promotes active student engagement, problem-solving, and reflection. It is applicable to both individual and group learning, bridging theory with practice. The method fosters independence, creativity, and self-confidence. Its successful implementation requires high lecturer competence and a supportive learning environment. The project-based method addresses contemporary social and pedagogical challenges by developing the ability to solve real-life problems.

Survey results indicate that both students and lecturers acknowledge the benefits of the project-based method, yet see opportunities for improvement. Key common areas requiring attention include clearer guidelines, better organization, promotion of interdisciplinary projects, more balanced workload distribution, and more objective assessment. These findings demonstrate that the project-based method has the potential to become an even more effective component of studies if the proposed improvements are implemented. Despite challenges, the project-based method should be more widely adopted in

teacher education, as it significantly contributes to the development of personal, social, and professional competencies.

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