

USING PROJECT-BASED LEARNING IN LOW RESOURCE CONTEXTS GLOBALLY: UNDERSTANDING THE CHOICES AND CHALLENGES



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A few years ago, WISE administrators, focused on several innovation in education initiatives worldwide, began to notice a trend both in their work and in data collected and shared by multiple sources such as The Canopy Project¹, The Learning Accelerator's study of professional learning at Lindsay Unified School District², and others. The trend was that project-based learning (PBL) was consistently—but not frequently—being used as an effective instructional model across a range of diverse schools that were innovating on conventional models of learning. Given a growing evidence-base that supported the effectiveness of project-based learning in a variety of learning environments, we wondered why PBL was not more widespread. Further, we wondered whether there were implementation challenges of PBL unique in low resource contexts.

This study set out to explore why project-based learning is implemented at such low rates overall, and whether the challenges and barriers to its implementation are different in resource-scarce settings across the globe as compared to settings in which resources are more readily available to schools. Broadly, we set out to determine:

- What are the challenges to implementing project-based learning in low resource contexts globally?
 - What decisions do educators in low resource/high need settings most struggle with when implementing or exploring implementation of project-based learning?
 - What can we learn from their decisions about potential paths forward that either support or inhibit successful, sustained implementation of project-based learning?

In order to answer these questions, we used an exploratory, descriptive, mixed-methods approach to understand and document educators' lived experiences as they navigated decisions and made design choices around implementing project-based learning in their own schools and classrooms. We conducted a total of 21 interviews (one with two interviewees from a single site), and received nine survey responses. Because both data collection formats were gathering the same information, interview and survey responses were combined into a single sample and data set. These 31 participants had a range of roles, from teachers (sometimes called guides, mentors, or facilitators), in-school heads of content or subject departments, school leaders and administrators, to school designers, and founders of independent schools, to heads of nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations. They discussed 24 distinct cases of PBL implementation in 17 countries from five regions of the world (Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Europe, North America, and South America and the Caribbean). One site provides humanitarian and educational services to a displaced community, and one program was designed for, and is being used by, over 70 countries worldwide.

Findings

We found that 18 of the 24 PBL cases were sustained and currently ongoing, with plans to continue in future years. The remaining six either didn't sustain PBL at their site, or considered but decided not to implement PBL at all. The majority of cases (16 of the 24) were self-described as occurring in low resourced contexts and eight as happening in high-resource settings.

¹ <https://canopyschools.transcendeducation.org/research>

² https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qHWgrU_1BaUBi-8dtj5b60kmi-ublHz/view

Finding 1: Social capital (networks, relationships, and trust—and the flexibility and autonomy they afford) is a valuable, often overlooked, resource. As we analyzed our interviews and survey responses, it became clear that social capital, or the networks, relationships, and trust a school has, gives more access to flexibility and autonomy in implementation. Such access is a highly valuable, yet often-overlooked contributor to the level of resources in any given implementation context. Participants mentioned that people and relationships were a far greater resource than money could ever be. As one participant said,

“...if you have a group of people, they can help you to draw money, facilities, and many, many other things. So that is the most important thing. If you get a group of trained teachers, you’ve got everything.”

Perhaps it is even the case that social capital may act to fill in the gaps created by the more well-known knowledge, motivation, and organizational well-known knowledge, motivational, and organizational (from the gap analysis framework of Clark & Estes, 2008) challenges to PBL implementation.



Finding 2: COVID-19 had both positive and negative impacts on PBL implementation or adoption in the 2020-21 school year. The uneven impact of COVID-19 on project-based learning from place to place was unanticipated. A handful of participants specifically mentioned the impact of COVID-19, either positively or negatively, on their implementation of PBL. Some stated that the pandemic had a more positive impact in that the PBL model was not competing against other instructional models. Others mentioned discontinuing PBL at least temporarily during the pandemic (whether or not they planned to continue using the model in the longer-term). Residential schools seemed to fare especially well at sustaining or starting PBL implementation during the pandemic. PBL cases that were sustained and unsustained, or in high- or low-resourced contexts, were equally likely to respond to the pandemic by using PBL as an opportunity, or by stopping it to focus on other instructional models.



Finding 3: There were six dimensions along which participants were making decisions, answering “how, where, why, when, what, and who” questions related to project-based learning. These questions focused on:

1. **Core instructional model vs. supplemental activity:** How should we use PBL? Will projects be the primary means for daily instruction or will they be occasional activities that supplement daily instruction?
2. **Community-driven vs. curriculum-aligned projects:** Where should our projects’ driving questions come from? Will they come from the needs of our community, or from our need to cover curricular content?
3. **Student agency vs. broad learning experiences:** Why should we implement PBL? Is our goal to advance learner agency, or enhance learner experiences?
4. **Academic vs. non-academic skills:** When in our students’ developmental trajectory should PBL be used? Will projects primarily focus on developing their academic skills, or their non-academic skills?
5. **Standardized vs. individualized:** What will our PBL model be? Will we use or develop a more prescriptive, guided model, or one that requires teachers and students to co-design a more flexible model?
6. **Concentrated vs. diffuse:** Who should we implement PBL with and for? Will PBL primarily support certain teachers and students, or all teachers and students across our school or system?



Distribution of these choices varied within each decision according to two contextual factors: whether the model was currently or was planned to be sustained beyond an initial pilot year or two of implementation; and whether the school or system considered itself to have access to a high or low level of resources for implementing PBL.

Finding 4: Resources like people, time, materials, and the flexibility stemming from governmental, administrative, policy, and community trust and support were universally helpful to implementation. Most noticeably, almost all participants mentioned students themselves, as well as the communities they operated in, and the networks participants had access to, as being key resources for sustained implementation, regardless of their contexts. Unequivocally, participants agreed that funding was not the only, nor a major challenge to implementation, even in contexts where funds were lacking. In addition, as mentioned above, many participants agreed that having “people” capital—whether in the form of relationships, trust, buy-in, or human capacity—outweighed having financial capital when implementing PBL.



Finding 5: Conversely, challenges like preconceived mindsets and cultures about the role and nature of school, inflexible regulations, policies, curricula, standards, and assessments, and a lack of time, technology, and other material resources were universal barriers to implementation. The single most commonly cited challenge by far was motivational: The culture and mindset that school only looks a certain way, or the prevailing perception that a teacher's role is to be a learning director, or the widespread existence of a school culture of "assessment" globally.



Recommendations

Four recommendations and a series of discussion guides stemmed from our findings:

Recommendation 1: Above all else, first consider all the various ways people in the learning environment can serve as resources or challenges, especially above financial resources and challenges. After all, as one of our participants put it, "You don't need a lot of funding to do this, you can do it for totally free, as long as someone, somewhere has the will to do it."



Recommendation 2: Explicitly consider social capital (or relationship) resources along with other available resources. The web of relationships that decision-makers, teachers, and students had was itself a valuable category of resources, in addition to being a resource that could fill gaps in knowledge, motivation, and organizational resources (as defined using the Gap Analysis Framework of Clark & Estes, 2008).



Recommendation 3: Benefits of either choice should be explicitly considered along all six dimensions when considering or designing a PBL model. We found participants making decisions along six familiar dimensions: how, where, why, when, what, and who PBL implementation would be in their school/system. For each of these dimensions, seemingly opposing decisions could be made. However, neither choice is clearly the right choice for all PBL, or for any given context.



Recommendation 4: Consider which of these distinguishing resources and challenges are most applicable to your context when making choices along the six dimensions. We found that some resources, and challenges were described more often when one or the other choice was made. Apparently, these resources and challenges distinguished one choice from the other. Considering the alignment between these and your own context allows for more intentional decision-making, and can help to predict and perhaps even reduce the risk of PBL's failure in your learning environment.



Finally, we encourage the use of the six discussion guides included in this report in conversations about PBL design and implementation, and to act on the final two recommendations. Using these guides will help you to be sure you are reflecting on all of the benefits, distinguishing resources, and challenges relevant to your context and learning environment. Awareness of these benefits, resources, and challenges will enable you to systemically focus your PBL resource allocation and design to maximize your resources and minimize challenges to make the most informed decisions about whether and how to implement PBL for your learners.

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