Innovations

In Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange

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Introduction

The topic of this third peer-reviewed issue of Innovations is “Exploring the Relationship Between Educational Research and Professional Development.” Educational research as professional development is one of the most crucial concepts for breathing life into schools. The role of educational research is described in the publication Indications: Preschools and Infant-toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia as:

Shared research between children and adults is a priority practice of everyday life, an existential and ethical approach necessary for interpreting the complexity of the world, of phenomena, of systems of co-existence, and is a powerful instrument of renewal in education. (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010, pp. 11-12)

In the first article of this issue, written by atelierista Vea Vecchi, many themes from the exhibit and atelier “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” are explored. “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” is an added focus for this issue because it acts as a professional development resource and guide to educators both in Reggio Emilia and North America. In her article, Vecchi writes about the working phases and the thoughtful preparation involved in conducting research for the exhibit. In doing so, she intertwines professional development with research – again connecting back to the theme of this peer-reviewed issue.

The exhibit is an opportunity to study both the children’s and teachers’ research strategies. Vecchi states:

The size and structure of the exhibition “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” make it easier to define concepts that go beyond those strictly connected to the contents displayed and illustrate a way of working in the Reggio Emilia Approach where research, staff development, and collective and social exchange proceed together.

The editorial staff of Innovations view the process through which educational research among and with children and educators in Reggio Emilia develops over time to be of paramount importance. Further, strengthening the reciprocal relationship between educational research and professional development systems as a contribution to excellence in early education, as evidenced by the educational experience in the preschools and infant-toddler centers of Reggio Emilia, Italy, offers infinite possibilities.

Vecchi also delves into the power of professional development:

[…] the work progresses if the eyes and ears of the teachers are engaged in listening and if the observations and documentation of the individual centers and schools are organized so as to enable exchanges between colleagues. These exchanges... are precious pauses of reflection where the points of view of others broaden the horizon for examining the work carried out.

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Following Vecchi’s piece, we are pleased to publish a peer-reviewed article that investigates the relationship between educational research and professional development in a North American school setting. “Teaching and Learning Alongside Teachers: What is essential for positive change in a Title One school?” written by Pam Oken-Wright, tells the story of Oken-Wright’s work as a pedagogical consultant over several years at a Title One school. The course of both her research and the teachers’ professional development are woven throughout the article, and salient observations are made. At one point, Oken-Wright notes, “Invitations for children to express their thoughts, opinions, and imaginations, and a teacher who is listening, are essential.”

Innovations consulting editor, Eileen Hughes, takes a deep dive into Oken-Wright’s article. She reflects on the different strengths she encountered while reviewing the piece, including the “incorporation of active learning, collaboration, and inclusion of models of effective practice, coaching, and reflection.” Hughes discusses the idea that professional development is a gift for educators, and encourages all of us [readers] to consider, “how can professional learning be a systematic inquiry?”

The next article is a reprinted Innovations article “School-Wide Research as Professional Development” by Carol Bersani and Terri Cardy. This article, originally printed in 2015, serves as an excellent example of the relationship between educational research and teacher professional development, the 2019 peer-reviewed theme. Innovations consulting editors Jeanne Goldhaber, Eileen Hughes, and Gigi Yu, reflect on the relevancy of Bersani and Cardy’s article to this peer review issue, and more importantly - its relevancy to supporting research conducted within classrooms as a form of program wide professional development.

Coming full circle back to Vecchi’s piece on the exhibit-atelier “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material,” some of atelieristas, teachers, and pedagogistas that facilitated atelier sessions at the 15th NAREA Summer Conference contribute reflections about their experiences working with Reggio educator Marina Mori, each other, and with conference attendees. Atelierista Kym Cook writes:

Working with Marina was an amazing professional development experience. I saw first-hand the thinking and action of a Reggio educator with many decades of experience and roots that ran very deep, while these thoughts and actions were so current and progressive.

The title, Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material, is also a catalogue authored by Reggio Children. In a book review written by Christie Colunga, a residential early childhood faculty member at Paradise Valley Community College in Phoenix, AZ, she discusses how the book “create[s] for the reader the ability to focus on the children, their images, and their words.” The review is a joyful exploration of this particular book’s positive influence on Colunga’s work as a teacher-educator. She shares many ways that the book has inspired teachers in their own professional growth.

Finally, this issue closes with an invitation to Innovations readers to participate in a teacher research project in collaboration with Reggio Inspired Vermont Early Education Team (RIVET) 2.0. The group is requesting others join them in their study of “children and trees in relationship,” as they “recognize the need to broaden our scope of study beyond our personal experiences and limited contexts.”

REFERENCE
A Fascinating Profession: For a Democracy of Knowledge

by Vea Vecchi

Going far back in memory, back to the 1970s, I believe that in the municipal preschools and infant-toddler centers of Reggio Emilia certain approaches to education and certain social objectives are part of an identity that has been maintained over time. Though it has evolved over the years, it has never been betrayed to the point of being distorted or having its DNA modified. This continuity is due to the constant reference to certain cultural, educational, and social convictions that I will try to highlight by making reference to the themes of the exhibition-atelier “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material,” which is on display in Atlanta along with the exhibition “The Wonder of Learning - The Hundred Languages of Children,” concurrently with the publication of this new issue of *Innovations*.

Vea Vecchi, atelierista of the Diana Municipal Preschool of Reggio Emilia, Italy, from 1970 to 2000 and head of the exhibitions, publishing, and atelier area of Reggio Children until 2015. She is currently working in research and professional development for Reggio Children.

The exhibition-atelier “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” at Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool of Atlanta
The size and structure of the exhibition “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” make it easier to define concepts that go beyond those strictly connected to the contents displayed and illustrate a way of working in the Reggio Emilia Approach where research, staff development, and collective and social exchange proceed together. There are always many different topics that we might wish to explore in depth with the children, but there are so many of them, too many, and thus we have to choose. We do this each time by listening to the cultural climate in which we are living and in which the children and schools are also immersed.

There were a number of motivations for choosing an investigation like “Mosaic,” which focuses on drawing and narration, for example the visual language and the verbal language. First of all, there was a desire to go deeper into and reignite interest in the powerful language of drawing, which risks becoming weakened in the everyday repetitiveness. In this case, the graphic language was approached from an unusual point of view already explored and verified with the children, according to which drawing is invigorated by words, and words are invigorated by the marks of drawing. The idea was to examine the extent to which drawing, and the materials and instruments used, are nourished by words and mental images, and the extent to which the words and images are nourished by visual, tactile, bodily, and auditory perceptions.

Drawing and telling stories means imagining, analyzing, and exploring spaces, forms, colors, words, metaphors, emotions, rhythms, and pauses; entering into a narrative dimension that is both internal and external to the self, playing on reality, fiction, and interpretation. Though drawing and words are autonomous languages, for the children, words and stories, silent or spoken, almost always go hand in hand or intertwine with the drawing, creating an intelligent and often poetic mosaic. (Vecchi & Ruozzi, 2015, p. 15)

This investigation highlighted the sensitivity and refinement of the hands, but while it was taking place, research on the technical and expressive possibilities of digital technologies also continued in the infant-toddler centers and preschools. This experimentation underscored the idea that traditional expressive techniques and digital techniques can complement and nourish each other when both are approached with adequate attention and knowledge.

The “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” project followed others in which the topics to be developed were always confronted from different points of view and using different languages. One of these was the exhibition “The Human Figure Multiplied,” which investigated the human figure by interweaving drawing, clay sculpting, and photography, in hopes that working with multiple media would foster an approach to the subject that was richer in possibilities and in tune with our contemporary culture, which thrives on interconnection and cross-pollination.

It was a difficult creative exercise for the adults, requiring unexplored mental and practical training, an approach already experimented with many times back in the ’80s and
'90s (but these approaches must always be reviewed and updated), as evidenced by this photograph of the atelier of the Diana preschool in which a single subject was being investigated simultaneously by means of sound, drawing, and painting.

Naturally, what is shown in the photograph is just one of the possible strategies of approach. The difficulty derived, and still derives, from the fact that we need to be very familiar with all the languages involved, and this is not easy. Yet I continue to believe that a proposal by the teachers that may be somewhat lacking or somewhat improvised in regard to certain languages still conveys an important message to the children, because it enables them to see that the same subject can be investigated in many ways, using different languages. And it is also because the possibility of analyzing any complex situation through the filter of multiple languages supports a natural biological capacity of our brain. When you attentively observe the strategies by which children learn, you realize that they do so by means of a multidisciplinary and multisensory modality and a multimodal approach, for example by interweaving and connecting different languages together.

Needless to say, this multimodal construction of knowledge is not accepted or developed by traditional schooling, which tends to separate and specialize the languages into non-intercommunicating disciplines. In a less explicit way, also in “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material,” a multi-language approach continues, where the teachers are looking in multiple directions, naturally trying not to get lost, and this is easier if you know the subject well and listen to and respect the children’s strategies.

The graphic language, with its powerful cognitive and expressive processes that are so often undervalued in schools, was investigated in the preschools of Reggio Emilia for three years from different conceptual angles. The graphic language, with its powerful cognitive and expressive processes that are so often undervalued in schools, was investigated in the preschools of Reggio Emilia for three years from different conceptual angles. The first year, in the project “Graphic Traces of the Children in the City” (2011), all the infant-toddler centers and preschools chose a place in the city center open to the public that could host a graphic work designed and drawn by the children that would have a special relationship with the chosen site. This project involved developing a process of environmental listening that became a declaration toward the citizens of Reggio Emilia, in particular that children have their own culture that should not be undervalued or discredited by adult stereotypes. In the second year, the investigation was carried out for the exhibition “The Human Figure Multiplied” (2013), and “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” was developed in the third year (2014).

I hope that it is easy to guess the reason for this lingering on one language, albeit with different points of view. On one hand, there are the extensive cognitive and creative possibilities of drawing, and on the other hand, there is the lack of consideration given in teacher education to learning this language. Hence the need to keep alive a visual culture that does not often find educational contexts that enable it to evolve, and this in order not to lose something that has such a precious and important place in the cultural history of our country.
These experiences of in-depth investigation on different languages and themes constitute a choice that traditionally belongs to the Reggio schools. The themes range from mathematics to dance, to working with clay, to “border crossings between nature and the digital world,” and others still. These topics are always confronted with an attitude of research that allows the teachers to advance their own knowledge and to experiment with didactic inventions.

In order to attempt to understand a language, it has to be frequented with sufficient constancy in everyday life and over a long period of time, and to do this, those who work with children need to live and breathe in a context in which they continue to invent and experiment, inevitably also making mistakes. What is vital is the collective exchange.

In 1994, the French philosopher Pierre Lévy proposed the idea of “collective intelligence,” a condition that would allow people to join their intellectual forces, their imaginations, their creativity, their knowledge, and so on, to then attain a large “collective brain,” a “hypercortex” (1996). Lévy was referring primarily to the possibilities of the Internet, but in the educational philosophy of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, the concept of the richness that comes from thinking and working together is one of the foundational elements that give the educational practice its vitality. This is not always easy to do, but it is exciting when it succeeds.

In the “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” investigation, as well, a small group made up of pedagogistas, teachers, atelieristas, and Reggio Children staff worked together to coordinate the project in the seven preschools and four infant-toddler centers involved. At the beginning of the project, the group met with all the institutions involved to discuss the theoretical aspects and agree on the initial working phases, preparing the context for presenting the project to the children and the instruments and materials to be used. They also identified a number of focus points for observation:

What relationships are established between the drawing instruments and the supports? Are the children’s graphic explorations accompanied by words? How are words and drawings interwoven? Do the children talk about what they are doing while they draw? In what way? With words, facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures...? How can we describe the words that accompany the marks? Descriptive, metaphorical, allusive, humorous, etc.? What relationships are established between the children? (Vecchi & Ruozzi, 2015, p. 17)

Other focus points always arise as the work progresses if the eyes and ears of the teachers are engaged in listening and if the observations and documentation of the individual centers and schools are organized so as to enable exchanges between colleagues. These exchanges, which may at times also be lively, can take place at different stages along the way and are planned for from the beginning. They are precious pauses of reflection where the points of view of others broaden the horizon for examining the work carried out.

At this point, we should reflect on the observation and documentation tools and media developed by the teachers that make possible the exchanges within the work group. As has been described many times, to document our research in Reggio Emilia we have adopted a

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3 The exhibition-atelier “Bordercrossings: Encounters with Living Things / Digital Landscapes” was inaugurated at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center in 2015. The catalogue was published by Reggio Children in Italian and English versions.
structure, both written and visual, composed of notes, photographs and videos, which, when properly organized, makes it possible to construct more complete and complex communication. While there are effective examples for the organization of written notes, it is more difficult for the images, because they are part of a visual writing that teachers have to learn how to read and produce, confirming that the visual language, like the musical language and the language of the body, are not usually part of teacher education.

The study notebooks produced by the teachers contain systems of observation and documentation developed by the various staff groups that we think are very interesting to examine, which is why we put them on display in our exhibitions.

Having an attitude of research changes your way of looking at things. The children’s products displayed in the “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” exhibition-atelier might be viewed distractedly, with the risk of not completely grasping the intelligence and sensitivity of these works; instead, we believe they are interesting because they speak to us and they give us information, sometimes new information, on the basic perceptions of our species. “The basic senses are our window on the world,” said Jack Goody (2002). And Maurice Merleau-Ponty stated that perception is not simply the result of the union of sensory data but is incorporated in the body and is constructed in the dialogue between the body and the external world, in a deeply intertwined and very complex interaction (1965).

In the works displayed in “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material,” we find a sensitivity to perceptual stimuli that is immediate and fluid, that moves with great receptivity and resonance from the tactile to the auditory to the visual, constructing mental images that intertwine with ease with the verbal language and the graphic language. A true and extraordinary synesthesia of the senses.

The “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” project is based on these continuous transfers between body perceptions, mental images, graphic marks, and words. Perhaps it is fitting, then, to recall Stephen Ullmann’s consideration that the sensory modalities include not only the five senses but also color and dimension, elements that should be considered very important in this project (1977).

In the investigation, various types of drawing instruments were proposed to the children that leave very different kinds of marks, and they were provided with sheets of paper or other materials with different surface textures and sizes. This is because each instrument has a different mark-making identity, which is in turn differently received by the material support and further varies in relation to the author’s exploratory and expressive intentions. We believe that the context is an important generative element, and for this reason, certain details were discussed in terms of how to present the proposal to the children that could seem irrelevant, but this was because we were aware that children are extremely empathic toward the contexts.
I have observed that the way instruments and materials are offered to children is often undervalued. How many times in visiting many countries have I seen tables covered in plastic with a flower print or some other very evident pattern that were offered to children as a work surface, without thinking whatsoever of the perceptual cacophony and the interference that such evident figurative elements can create, not to mention the unconscious proposition of simplistic models! Added to this, there is often a scarce supply of markers in a limited range of colors, and just a few pencils often not properly sharpened, and we believe that no lack of money can justify the lack of attention, the carelessness too often found when a context is offered to children.

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The environment that holds the work of the children and adults should be well thought-out, cared for, and welcoming. I am absolutely not talking about luxury, but simply care and attentive choices for the environment. The concrete adventure of the children and adults together starts here, and the investigation may unfold correctly but in a detached sort of way, or it can ignite curiosity in the eyes and ears of those who observe, take notes, photograph, and videotape the curiosity and the intense emotion of the children as they work. How can we not be enchanted by the seriousness and tenaciousness with which even very young children explore the possible relationships between drawing instruments and their support surfaces?
For all the different ages – from 20 months to 6-year-olds – we found confirmation, which actually exceeded our expectations, of the effect that the type of support that receives the graphic mark has on the children's imagination. They showed an extraordinary sensitivity, and in the end the competence of a skilled artist, or a capacity for empathic listening with regard to the quality of the materials. Observing the children at work, there was an almost palpable impression that the material and the characteristics of the support were the first and important generators of the process of graphic narration; contributing to the rest of the work, in addition to the imagination, were the characteristics of the instruments used and the movements involved in the mark-making. And again, how can we not be enchanted, along with little Diego, by how the pastel moves over a soft sheet of paper, leaving traces that are constructing, as Diego himself said, “a kind of delicate story”?

In the works displayed, how can we not see the process of morphogenesis, in other words, how the forms are constructed, and verify that in some of them the process is more evident, as in the case of the corrugated cardboard used as the support? With its strong connotation, this material generated many interesting visual stories like the one shown here, in which the vertical pattern of the cardboard, along with the sound produced by the fingernails sliding over the surface in the upper part, is transformed into a cloud which then becomes rain.

Diego, 3.6 years

It’s a bunch of clouds that turned into rain. Samar, 5.5 years
The drawing also tells us of the musicality of the water, which from an initial density in the upper part is gradually transformed into marks that evoke the varied pattering sounds caused by the surface on which the rain falls and bounces.

Sometimes unexpected things happen, which we call "creative accidents," like the example we published in the catalogue. We observe the following sequence: in the first image, the child’s pleasure is evident; in the second frame, there is surprise, curiosity, and also amusement; in the third frame, his face is a sort of question mark with an expression somewhere between bewilderment at what happened and his interest and curiosity to understand, and then eventually to consciously repeat the same gesture and its result.

I am well aware that many people may think I am exaggerating in my interpretation of the children’s works, but I am simply applying the same criteria I use when I go to art exhibitions. Why should we behave differently toward the works of children? Those who work with children know their intelligence and creative potentials. As confirmation, it is sufficient to view the works displayed or browse through the catalogue of the “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” exhibition with a curious gaze willing to see the intelligence and the poetics of the narration that permeates the children’s products. Here, the most obvious aspect that we grasp, with attentive and tender observation, is a poetic “transdisciplinary fertilizer,” rich in vitality.

Among all the forms of communication used over the years by the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia, the organization of exhibitions and the publishing activity have shown to be the most effective testimonies to the Reggio Emilia Approach.
When it is possible for us, it is a joy to be able to communicate an investigation or a research project conducted in the schools by creating a new atelier, an exhibition, and a catalogue.

It requires courage and critical clarity to communicate the work carried out to an audience outside the world of school, remembering that exhibitions are not the final phase of a completed process but aim to stimulate reflections, thoughts and discussions. And over time, as I said, they have shown to be the best tools for disseminating ideas and fostering intra-cultural exchange.

Each of our exhibitions is accompanied by an atelier, a place where it is possible to explore concretely, individually or in a group, the theme proposed by the exhibition. The atelier is frequented by children and youth of different ages, also along with their families, and by adults with different professions. In the atelier, the theories, the materials, and both traditional and digital techniques materialize in visible products through hands-on exploration and experimentation. In this work, it is possible to develop artisan and artistic processes, even sophisticated ones, in which the hands and perceptual sensitivity are very important, just as it is important for the teachers to personally explore the instruments and materials before proposing them to the children, as this sharpens their own attention, making their observation of the children’s work more attentive and sensitive and their documentation of the processes observed more effective.

Public communication, in addition to being a right of the families and the community to know what type of education is carried out in the schools, is also an act of self-assessment that we believe is invaluable.
I thought I had finished the article here, but then I had an encounter at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center that gave me joy and hope for the continuity of high-quality education, and I want to relate this experience because it gives a concrete and vivid face to my previous reflections. This encounter, by chance, was with the atelierista of the Bruno Munari Municipal Preschool of Reggio Emilia who had in hand the publication that her school had given to the families of all the children at the end of the school year, a gift that included a portfolio in which some themes dealt with during the 2018-2019 school year were documented. I made a list of them, which I provide here:

- **Manual of Clay**, a project that all municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia worked on this school year. The atelierista of the Munari Preschool is also part of a staff development project in which a small group of atelieristas, along with some of the pedagogistas and Reggio Children, worked together on this publication, a Manual of Clay designed according to the educational philosophy of Reggio Emilia. A small exhibition and an atelier on clay are currently present at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center.

Each infant-toddler center and preschool then decides whether to publish a more extensive version of their own part of the project. The books and materials produced by the single schools are very high-quality publications that are distributed to the children’s families.

A copy of these publications is also given to the Documentation and Educational Research Center of the Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, located in the Loris Malaguzzi International Center, thus contributing to enrich a substantial and precious archive to testify to the competencies that have been developed through an educational system that views the work environment as a true “laboratory of research.”

Does all this unfold in a simple and linear manner? No, the work schedules, the day-to-day labors, and the lack of competency in certain areas are concrete obstacles, but a collective intelligence and a system that supports it culturally and organizationally is able to overcome many difficulties. It requires courage, curiosity, passion, and competencies, which are all indispensable qualities for working with children and youth.
and Reggio Emilia. This research was also translated into an exhibition currently on display at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center for which we are preparing to publish the catalogue.

**Mathematics and writing**, a work that documents how the 3- and 4-year-old children approach the alphabetic and numerical codes, a project aimed at producing staff development documentation for teachers who will be working with the 3-year-old children.

Project and summary for the workshop, *The Hundred Languages*, held on the occasion of the 2018 edition of the *Fiera Didacta Italia* [a national education fair with conferences and an exhibit area].

Research project, *The child’s body and the development of the aesthetic experience*, in collaboration with Reggio Children and the Neuroscience Department of the University of Parma.

*Architectures in play*, an investigation on how the children interpret the spaces of the city with their body, including the construction of a box for collecting the ideas for new games invented by the children.

*The paper inside*, a project carried out thanks to the collaboration of an intern working with Reggio Children on a scholarship, which features paper, a material to which a small exhibition and an atelier are dedicated at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center.

Here we show the cover and a few pages of the publication created by the Munari Preschool that was shown to me. In the publication, which as I said was given to each family, the hand binding and the overall editorial structure weave together the skillful and painstaking work of artisan culture with competence in graphic design.

The co-author of the publication is a young Japanese woman with an arts background who is making use of a two-year scholarship at Reggio Children and alternates her time between the ateliers of the Loris Malaguzzi International Center and the Munari Preschool. During her time spent in Reggio Emilia, she has learned to observe and document the children, as the publication testifies.

I have not yet had a chance to read the contents of the publication, and perhaps we will have to discuss certain didactic aspects,
but to me the overall result is quite extraordinary, especially if we consider that the publication is designed for a limited edition within a small school. Equally interesting is the list of projects carried out during the year, alongside a rich and varied everyday life. The foregoing is not a simple list. In its titles we get a glimpse of the choice of working with multiple languages and the great curiosity to confront new themes, but we also see the interest in going deeper into traditional topics with the optimism that the attitude of research affords to those who put it into practice. To this I would also add appreciation for the teachers’ generosity in giving a memory to the children, the families, and themselves.

Do all the Reggio schools have this rhythm of working? Perhaps not all, but in addition to the projects in which I am involved over the course of the year with other infant-toddler centers and preschools, I see that they all choose other topics to explore in depth; they all produce one or more publications to give to the families; and in all of them good work is being done in which, despite the generational change, we see their pride in the results. “Hard work and pleasure can coexist,” was a phrase I heard Loris Malaguzzi say many times. It was addressed to the children, but I believe it can also regard the teachers, and I think that the attitude of research, the progettazione, and the perception that your work is continuously evolving, can make the teacher's work interesting and, especially with certain projects, exciting and fun.

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North American Reggio Emilia Alliance

REFERENCES


English version –


English version –


English version –


Teaching and Learning Alongside Teachers: What is Essential for Positive Change in a Title One School?

by Pam Oken-Wright

Pam Oken-Wright has a master's degree in education, is an author, and pedagogical consultant. She was a pre-k and kindergarten teacher for 37 years and has studied the Reggio Emilia philosophy since 1990. Pam enjoys supporting teachers and schools as they explore this most joyful (and complex) way of teaching and learning. She has contributed to many Reggio-related publications and maintains a blog for educators, The Voices Of Children: Lessons Learned While Listening. Pam lives with her husband and three dogs in Richmond, VA.

Background

This article reflects the multiple perspectives of many people and highlights the work of two participating teachers. As the story in this article opens, Pam Oken-Wright had just begun a second career as a pedagogical consultant. After more than a decade as a primary teacher and a reading teacher in public schools, Jennifer (Jen) Miller was beginning her first year teaching kindergarten at a Title One school and Kelly McDougald was beginning her tenth year teaching kindergarten at the same Title One school. Kelly has a special education certification and is the team leader for kindergarten.

The children were the central protagonists in this research from the beginning. They brought intelligence, provocation, challenge, and joy to the project. Though the parents were not physically present at the school for various reasons, we communicated with them about the children’s experiences through periodic blog posts during the first two years of the project.

The administration of the school changed after year one of the project. Both principals and both assistant principals were supportive of the project, as was the district superintendent for the project’s first two years.

Introduction: Seeds of a Research Project

During the decades that I (Pam) taught 4- to 6-year-olds at an independent school, I loved being witness to the awakening of young minds. I ascribed this awakening in large part to the children’s engagement in experiences inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach. Children who came to us as intuitive movers through space and time learned to articulate a plan ("We are going to build a castle in blocks!"), sustain engagement over long periods of time (sometimes for many weeks), and follow their curiosity through shared and long-term investigations. They formed strong relationships and communities characterized by compassion and responsibility and helpfulness. Children found their voices early in the year and exercised them with each other, with adults, and in public. They knew how to feed their intellects and became proficient at representing their ideas in multiple media.

An example of a child’s writing for her own purposes
“Academic” learning became a natural process to those awake minds. Without “drill and kill” or pressure to perform, the children surpassed typical academic expectations through endeavors important to them such as writing books and messages and performing mathematical tasks needed to move forward in an investigation while challenging themselves in big ways (for example, collaboratively creating a Unifix “snake” that spanned the classroom and continued out the door and then challenging themselves to count the hundreds of cubes).

For years I’d wondered: What about children who had fewer resources at home and at school whose teachers were held accountable for the children’s acquisition of discrete skills and concepts, but not expected to explore other domains of learning? What would it take to introduce Reggio principles into heavily mandated public schools?

The Kindergarten Reggio Project: Early Days

Jen Miller, the parent of two of my former students, was about to start teaching kindergarten in a local Title One school and wanted to explore Reggio principles in her classroom. I had recently retired from the classroom and was looking to shift my professional focus from classroom teaching to consulting. So, when Jen asked me to meet with her periodically to talk about the intersection between what she had read about the Reggio philosophy and her own practice, I agreed with enthusiasm. I saw Jen’s proposal of collaboration as an opportunity to continue my action research in a new context, and to include the possibilities and constraints of a new role.

1 More than 90% of the children at the school are eligible for free breakfast and lunch. A large percentage of the children speak English as a second language, and several of the kindergartners speak only Spanish. Trauma is a fact of life for many of the children, and many families experience considerable stress. There are 18-20 children in each kindergarten class with a single teacher. Instructional assistants and reading teachers help with reading instruction and sometimes with specific academic tasks. The school consistently earns accreditation status based on state-mandated testing.

I expected that our work together would involve questions, investigation (hypothesis, action, and reflection), sharing, and would be an iterative process.

I had so many questions! How do you create time and space for exploration and inquiry when the day is segmented into half hour increments of instruction? How do you create a culture of conversation when what happens in class meetings is district-prescribed? How can you create a responsive plan for learning when the curriculum is set by those who have never met the children? How do you support children’s development of a sense of agency when nearly every moment of the day is teacher-directed? How could we accomplish any of the above when so much of the day was scripted?

Arching over all, the primary question emerged: If everything cannot change, what changes are essential so that children in more restrictive environments can reap the benefits of a Reggio-inspired education, including the development of dispositions to collaborate, co-construct, and follow curiosity with inquiry; the development of executive function; finding and using one’s voice (in spoken, temporal, and graphic languages); and recognizing the self as a part of the learning community?
After the conversation, we analyzed the transcript together and observed that the children’s comments gave us a window into the children’s thinking about snow previously unknown to us and, possibly, to them.

“You can touch [snowflakes] on your tongue.”

“The grass. It will be white.”

“Our tree we have outside our house, it’s gonna freeze up and it’ll turn into snow, and it will be white. Also our roof.”

“It comes from the earth. Like when it rains and it’s so cold. The little pieces of water freezes up and it turns into snow. And then it’ll start falling down.”

This experience offered Jen an image of how a teacher can facilitate meaningful dialogue with children and how the study of documentation can offer a window into children’s thinking. We were so pleased with the clarity and possibilities for learning that happened when we were together with the children that we arranged for me to be at school part-time with Jen and the children beginning in January.

Once we were all together in the classroom, we collaborated to address sticking points Jen had been experiencing. We made changes to the environment to shift the focus from “centers” to helping children build a relationship with materials.

We made changes to the environment to shift the focus from “centers” to helping children build a relationship with materials. We met frequently to talk about learning theory, the nature of 5-year-olds, and Reggio principles. We soon learned that out-of-context mentoring was not sufficient. For example, during one of our meetings, Jen asked, “How do I support a class conversation for the co-construction of theory?” We agreed that talking about such a complicated process was not enough. “I need to see what you’re talking about,” she said. We decided that I should go to school and that we should have a conversation together with the children.

While Jen observed, I facilitated and recorded a conversation with the children before a forecast nighttime snowfall. Some of the children had experienced and remembered snow, but others were new to the Northern Hemisphere and had only seen snow on television or in books. After the conversation, we analyzed the transcript together and observed that the children’s comments gave us a window into the children’s thinking about snow previously unknown to us and, possibly, to them.

We know from research that learning in early childhood happens best through supported play (Zosh et al., 2017). Carla Rinaldi describes this learning as “a creative process.” She continues, “By creativity, I mean the ability to construct new connections between thoughts and objects that bring about innovation and change, taking known elements and creating new connections” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 117). But teachers reported that play had been discouraged in this school’s kindergarten before our project began. One of our first efforts was to negotiate with the principal for one hour of daily “Playful Exploration” in a partially altered environment. During “Playful Exploration,” the children were self-directed, worked with materials to make their ideas visible, and engaged in small group and individual research through play and investigation.

Jen and I set up her classroom environment to offer opportunities for learning through play. Throughout the first semester, we tweaked it as she discovered what worked and what did not. We met frequently to talk about learning theory, the nature of 5-year-olds, and Reggio principles. We made changes to the environment to shift the focus from “centers” to helping children build a relationship with materials.

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I began to appreciate the value in working alongside the teacher in context. Embedded in the classroom three mornings a week, I observed, listened, and supported children’s
play, negotiations, and representation alongside Jen, who paid attention to my interactions with the children and carried the disposition toward listening into her own practice. She “borrowed” the language I used to support children’s intent and learned how the wording of her invitations to the children could extend their thinking and help sustain their interest (Oken-Wright & Gravett, 2002). She also learned that sometimes it is best to wait and observe, and that intervening in children’s research should be an intentional decision.

During this first year, Jen watched me document attentively, invite children to elaborate on their ideas, and solicit their theories about shared phenomena. In time, I noticed that she began to interact with the children more during play, in a form of pedagogical responsiveness, which provided us an opportunity to explore the role of questions in supporting investigation.

Jen and I met after “Playful Exploration” each day when the children went to an enrichment class. We deconstructed the morning, proposed hypotheses about the children’s intent, and made plans for the next day’s observations or provocations. It didn’t take long before we observed an uptick in the children’s confidence and sense of agency. They began to propose ideas for investigation, to challenge themselves in new ways, to become more observant, and to use their voices to make their opinions and theories known.

While I was accustomed to seeing children similarly engaged in my previous work as a classroom teacher, I was surprised that we were seeing it with only 14% of the day spent in “Playful Exploration!” What’s more, it was hap-
The Kindergarten Reggio Project: Year Two

In the second year of the pilot, more teachers joined the project and Jen began with a different lens. She understood the importance of children’s dialogue with materials and the importance of listening. She knew more about how to use the environment as another teacher. Jen’s reflections on her first year reflect the enormity of what she had undertaken:

"The first year, I just remember almost like going through a buffet line. Sampling a little bit of trying to work on the environment, a little bit of small group work, a little bit of documentation... Just getting a feel for how to integrate it into a public-school setting.

The second year my lens shifted more toward the image of the child. And for me, that was learning to listen to [the children] more, trying to figure out their intentions… It’s hard to honor the child… but not impossible… in a standardized curriculum. And I think it was the second year that I trusted the process. … [I was able to] dive deeper into the kids’ passions and interests. What drove them? What sparked their curiosity?"

Starting the second year in a Reggio mindset seemed to lead to an even earlier onset of the children’s disposition toward collaboration, inquiry, and important work. The children in Jen’s class explored materials for making from pening despite the fact that Jen was both new to kindergarten and a bit ambivalent about doing something different from the other kindergarten teachers’ practice. In a sense, she was both motivated and afraid. Tipping the scales for Jen, I think, was the surprise and joy she reported feeling when given a window into the children’s insightful and symbolic thinking. For Jen, I think, was the surprise and joy she reported feeling when given a window into the children’s insightful and symbolic thinking. It seemed that with those emotions came inspiration to expand the scope of the project to other parts of the day. She began using what she was learning from “Playful Exploration” to amend typically scripted curricular moments and using transitions to grow relationships.

We liked what was happening so much that we began to construct a vision to formalize and expand the project. With the support of the principal of the school, we submitted a grant proposal to the district superintendent of schools to fund the project. The superintendent approved the grant, making it possible for me to continue working as a pedagogist in Jen’s classroom. We had an official pilot program.

Looking Forward

Our vision grew and evolved during that first year as we began to see glimmers of interest among other teachers. They noticed that the children in Jen’s class seemed unique in their disposition toward collaboration, and in the pleasure and skill they brought to their narratives and investigations. Jen reported that teachers started dropping in to ask about what she and the children were doing. They talked about the differences they observed between Jen’s children’s ideas and follow through, and the diffidence of the children in their own classes. As interest grew, Jen and I wondered if we could expand the project to include more teachers. What would it take for others to become awake to the moments of brilliance children offer every day? To see the joy and to feel (and act on) an urge to share stories of those moments with colleagues?

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Starting the second year in a Reggio mindset seemed to lead to an even earlier onset of the children’s disposition toward collaboration, inquiry, and important work. The children in Jen’s class explored materials for making from
day one. By October, a small group, inspired by a box they found, made the first of a series of robots, each representing the children’s growing ability to plan, collaborate, represent, fail, and try again.

The three other teachers who chose to participate in the project in year two had witnessed the intelligence and joy – and academic growth – of Jen’s students during the first year.

The three other teachers who chose to participate in the project in year two had witnessed the intelligence and joy – and academic growth – of Jen’s students during the first year. But they were not ready to re-assign an hour of the day for “Playful Exploration.” They did agree to incorporate “Writers Workshop” into their daily schedules (Calkins, 1987). I will admit to being disappointed at first. “Writers Workshop” is compatible with the Reggio philosophy in that it is important work initiated by the children, representation of their ideas, and supported by teachers. But I had hoped that we could begin with “Playful Exploration” and transforming classroom environments into places of possibility. I worried that we would not get to work on collaboration or relationships among children and that we were forfeiting the wonderful sense of agency that Jen’s students developed the year before. How wrong I was!

The Writing Museum

On a day I was in the classroom with Kelly, as the children were transitioning into “Writers Workshop,” I overheard 5-year-old Antony say, almost under his breath, “I wish we could have a Writing Museum.” I shared Antony’s comment with Kelly, and she agreed that, with Antony’s permission, we should start a conversation with the class before “Writers Workshop.” The children had never collaborated on an investigation, nor did they have experience with this kind of conversation, but their enthusiasm took them far on this day.

“Yes!” they said. “Everyone in the world should come!”

“It should be downtown, and everyone could take the school bus there!”

When prompted, the children realized that we did not have enough buses for everyone in the whole world. So, when one child suggested they have the museum in their classroom, everyone agreed.

“But we will have to tell them not to let the door be open, or the writing will get wet and blown off!”

“We should have games.”

“And food. Super-hot chicken and dessert! My mom can make the dessert!”

While I helped get this project started with this first conversation and continued to stay engaged peripherally, Kelly kept the investigation moving forward. Over the next two months, Kelly patiently supported the children’s process, registering the children’s ideas and bringing them back to the group periodically so that the children could enact them. Kelly sometimes asked me to collaborate on class conversations. In one of those conversations, the children unpacked their understanding of museum:

“I drew something really neat. I went to the park. Should I put that in the museum?”

“No! There’s just science stuff in a museum.”

“You could have a writing museum in a gym.”

“There should be nice writing that don’t look scribble scrabble.”

“You could draw a picture of a museum on paper and look at it so you can make your own museum.”

“Or we could draw a map on a piece of paper for it.”

“Is it gonna be real or fake?”

These conversations gave us a window into the children’s thinking. For example, they believed that museums are large (thus, the suggestion of a gym), display important artifacts, and honor significant experiences. They revealed their understanding that drawing their ideas could help them with their research. They also had a sense of the importance of the event that the Writing Museum promised to
be, and they took the perspective of the visitor when planning for it.

The children held high standards for the quality of work befitting a museum. I had thought that they might choose the best writing from their “Writers Workshop” folders to display in the museum, but every child chose to start again, to make his best writing.

Through dialogue, the children had first experiences in the give and take of group conversation and in honoring the intersection of ideas. Those ideas accumulated and, held in memory by Kelly and me, became part of what turned out to be, indeed, a “real” museum. In subsequent conversations, Kelly facilitated negotiations among the children until all the decisions were made and responsibilities claimed. Together they chose a day for the museum opening. They wrote and delivered invitations. Kelly’s student, Mariana, proposed that there be a sign-in sheet for the visitors. She painstakingly drew lines on both sides of two pieces of paper for the sign-in, and on the museum day, she stood outside the door to direct every child and every adult to sign in before entering the room.

The children invented games for the museum, including a drawing game (drawing was a big element of the children’s writing process); a game they called “Don’t Let Your Friend Draw a Tiger,” a variation on Hangman, and Word Wall Bingo. They negotiated how the games should work and dictated instructions for Kelly to put on posters for display.

The children were concerned about visitors following protocol, so Kelly invited them to make signs to communicate the museum rules:

- “Please keep the door closed.”
- “Don’t bring strawberries or peanut butter into the room.” (allergies)
- “Please don’t run.”
- “Don’t hit the chef.”

On the day of the museum opening, the children and Kelly prepared the room and decided who would lead the games and who would greet and guide the visitors. The pride and enthusiasm with which the children welcomed each adult and child made our hearts soar.

At the end of the year, Kelly reflected:

[This year] the children were able to find their language and way of expressing themselves. This is important because sometimes we stifle their language if [they don’t communicate in] the traditional way...

My students were more proud of themselves than ever before, because they had a sense of ownership and leadership, and not only in “Writers Workshop.” I think that my students made more gains academically than they have in the past, in all subject areas, especially in Science and Social Studies. We would have these conversations that developed organically, from something they found on the playground or
saw outside at home. The children learned all these vocabulary words so naturally! They all thrived in that area.

Many public schoolteachers are held responsible for the academic successes of the children in their classrooms. Rarely are teachers’ other accomplishments, such as fostering children’s intellectual growth beyond academics, nurturing positive dispositions toward learning, and promoting deep relationships and a strong sense of agency in each child valued as much as the data measuring academic proficiency.

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as much as the data measuring academic proficiency. However, while Kelly celebrated the children’s academic accomplishments, she was aware that their progress came from a place of inquiry, pleasure, and circularity, rather than from the limiting experiences of worksheets and drill. Kelly was delighted by the children’s thinking, imagination, and language. Her awakening to the children’s thinking turned her toward them, listening for more, and turned her attention bit by bit from curriculum to child. In informal conversations with colleagues, Kelly talked about children’s moments of brilliance often, relating small “learning stories.” I considered these learning stories a first step – recognition and sharing – on a path toward more intentional and consistent documentation practices.

Reflections After Year Two

Jen often recalls being amazed at the way the children engaged in inquiry spontaneously and everywhere: in the hallways while in transit, on the school bus, on field trips. Parents, particularly those with older children who had had different kindergarten experiences, expressed appreciation and delight at the way the children carried their dispositions and habits of mind to learning at home.

The three teachers who explored Reggio principles that year observed that the children in their classes developed awake minds and a sense of agency that led them to pursue their curiosity, engage in inquiry, and engage in collaborative research. In addition, teachers noticed that academics came more easily to the children. Teachers who had learned to focus on data and testing discovered that children can meet and exceed benchmark in academic areas without having to endure the hours of closed-ended drill that they used to do.

Teachers, newly untethered, had begun to pay attention to (and be excited by) children’s observations, problem-solving, and creativity. With a different lens about teaching and learning, they were listening to the children more and learned things about the children that surprised and delighted them. Their relationships with the children shifted in positive ways. In facilitating conversations and research connected to children’s ideas, they found a window into the children’s thinking that re-energized them and helped them rediscover the reasons they went into teaching in the first place.

The Kindergarten Reggio Project: Year Three

During the summer after year two, Jen, Kelly, and I met several times to discuss readings related to the Reggio approach, and to plan the coming year. We negotiated with the principal to carve out an hour for “Playful Exploration” every day for every kindergarten class. We planned for weekly team meetings dedicated to study of documentation. We held an “Introduction to Reggio Principles” evening for all five of the kindergarten teachers (three teachers in the third year would be new to the project). All the kindergarten teachers committed to including “Playful Exploration” in their day, to encourage children’s relationships with each other and with materials, and to consider limiting whole-group assessments and closed-ended “activities.” All the teachers renewed their environments, clearing much of the clutter from their classrooms and creating opportunities for children to engage with open-ended, provocative materials. Everyone had a “Making Space.” Everyone committed to “Writers Workshop” in some form.
As we moved into year three, my questions continued to evolve and finally distilled to one primary query: How can I help teachers in a setting with strict mandates become teacher-researchers? To become teacher-researchers, the teachers must reconnect with their own curiosity, listen, engage children in conversation, document, share with colleagues, and become learners in the classroom again (Edwards & Gandini, 2015).

As a forum for teachers to support each other’s research, we instituted weekly “documentation huddles,” loosely following the Collaborative Assessment Conference protocol (Project Zero, 2003). At each huddle, one teacher presented documentation for everyone to study and discuss. These conversations around children’s process, intent, and thinking are a particularly effective professional development opportunity (Little, Gearhard, Curry, & Kafka, 2003). In pulling together documentation, sometimes from disparate experiences, the presenting teacher constructed for herself connections and patterns in children’s interest and thinking. The other participants responded with observations, questions, and insight, perhaps helping the presenting teacher understand the experience in a different way and/or hear how well her choice of images and/or documents communicated her interpretation of the documented experience. Everyone learns from the process.

The Beginning of the End

In the third year, all the teachers were working to develop the habit of documenting. They were beginning to figure out how much of the content they were accustomed to teaching in isolation could be learned more efficiently, more happily, and with more lasting competencies through inquiry and play.

We were seeing results, but by mid-year changes occurred in our context that impacted our work together. Schedules shifted, meeting times were eliminated, and challenges faced by many children required involvement of staff members unfamiliar with the Reggio philosophy. Extreme stress challenged administrative support to the project. Over time we realized that conditions were not conducive to continued collaboration, and in late March we decided to end the project.

Lessons Learned

Subsequent reflection led us to acknowledge that to sustain such a project it is essential that everyone who works with the children – teachers, administrators, special education and counseling staff, resource personnel, etc. – have an understanding of the philosophy and a commitment to the work and to making time for collaboration. A close relationship among
teachers, pedagogists, and administrators is both necessary for the work and a result of it.

Time for teachers to set up environments rich with possibilities and materials (they don’t have to cost much, if anything) is also essential, as is time for exploration in that environment every day. And, underlying all the work and dedication required by everyone involved, an element of courage is essential – courage to face uncertainty, courage to accept change, and courage to trust the children and the process.

I now know more about the significant role administrators play in the educational lives of teachers and children. Success in an educational project, such as ours, relies on a principal willing to give teachers autonomy within the district-mandated guidelines he or she must follow; one willing to make pedagogical support for teachers a priority; and one willing to participate fully in the project.

From this educational project I learned a great deal about my role as pedagogist. Teachers need varying levels of support to navigate sticking points, places where investigations stall or the teacher doesn’t know what to do. A pedagogist’s collaboration can help teachers navigate these sticking points. I learned that as a pedagogist I need to be as flexible and creative as I am asking the teachers to be. I learned that my affect of courage and joy was contagious and an important element of support for teachers.

I experienced in a new way that what I know about children and learning applies to all learning. My role required flexibility, responsiveness, and constant decision making. For example, during the Writing Museum investigation, I worried that we were not documenting enough. I considered assuming a documenter’s role. But I had learned that when I was in the room, Kelly preferred that I facilitate the research with the children. Yet she was willing to assume this role when I was not present. In the end, I decided that Kelly’s sense of agency was more important at that time than assuring there was documentation of the entire process. This was a consideration in all of the classrooms: when does one urge a teacher who is not confident to move from an observational stance to a more active one? How, where, and when a pedagogist supports a teacher has to be a responsive, ongoing, collaborative decision-making process.

I also learned that what is essential is sometimes intangible. A teacher’s shift in disposition to include an expectation that children will amaze her and a desire to share the thinking and process that she witnesses are two of those essentials. Invitations for children to express their thoughts, opinions, and imaginations, and a teacher who is listening, are essential.

Finally, I learned that, though hurdles abound, what I experienced in my own decades of teaching in an independent school is possible in more heavily mandated contexts. Could we have gone farther into our research together? Undoubtedly. Do I wish we’d had a chance to go deeper with pedagogical documentation with sustained investigations and the intricacies of small group work? Of course. This was an educational project that did not reach a natural conclusion. Still, the benefits to the children and teachers are encouraging. Teachers were just beginning to find their voices to articulate the changes they were seeing when the project ended. They exhibited changes in perspective and noticed changes in others. “She’s more positive in how she views the children,” one teacher said of another. About her own perspective, one teacher said, “I see the power of the children’s thinking.” Teachers seemed to smile more. They talked about children’s moments of brilliance, their problem solving, and their inventions more than before the project began. Many changes they made in their environment have remained, as have time set aside for “Playful Exploration” and spaces designated for continuing work.

Life in a Title One school can be challenging. The demands on the teachers and children are tremendous, and there never seems to be enough time to meet them. In the face of frustration, we can lose sight of why we chose teaching in the first place. But when the classroom is a place where children and teachers genuinely enjoy each other, where adults
allow themselves to be amazed by children’s thinking, and where a caring learning community has grown, we can take that frustration in stride more easily.

Generations of public schoolchildren are not being invited to think, to discover their intellectual strengths and passions, to find their voices. Until now, children in independent, charter, and magnet schools have been the primary beneficiaries of programs that emphasize both intellectual and emotional development. If only these children are accustomed to pursuing big ideas and making amazing things, then education becomes yet another factor perpetuating the inequity that characterizes our society at present. Bringing education for the future to public schools now is both a humane and a political act.

The results of our project, for children and teachers, are encouraging enough that my commitment to Reggio inspiration for the children least likely to be empowered as citizens in our current systems is sustained. It has to be possible.

REFERENCES


Credits
Images in this article courtesy of Pam Oken-Wright and Jennifer Miller
Eileen Hughes is an Innovations consulting editor. She is a professor emerita from Western Washington University (WWU) and has focused on the preparation of early childhood educators and the development of inquiry-based approaches. She is the former director and developer of the WWU Early Childhood Education Bachelor Program and taught many of the courses within the program. Her prior work in Alaska, Oregon, California, and internationally includes engaging in diverse settings, which contributed to her background and encouraged her to ask questions to deepen her learning and teaching experiences. She has enjoyed the continual study of the Reggio Emilia Approach since 1989, which has influenced her understanding of the underlying principles and values that support adults and children to challenge their thinking and to find the joy in the daily life of schools.

Developing the dispositions for an inquiry “stance” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) as an approach to professional development in the field of early childhood education underlies the type of research we find in the work of teachers in Reggio Emilia (Edwards & Gandini, 2015). Viewing professional development as an ongoing process that is integrated into the daily life of a school and as Rinaldi (2012) proposes “everyday research” where teachers approach their classrooms and everyday living, demonstrates how we relate to each other and the world. Effective professional development for the 21st century requires teachers to not only teach content but to support children to be critical thinkers, solve complex problems, and communicate and collaborate with others (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). Several of the features of effective professional development that support educators to teach for the 21st century as defined and researched by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) are evident in the work of Oken-Wright in her article, “Teaching and Learning Alongside Teachers: What is Essential for Positive Change in a Title One School?” These features include incorporation of active learning, collaboration, and inclusion of models of effective practice, coaching, and reflection.

Oken-Wright reflects on her experience collaborating with teachers in a public school that is identified as a “Title One School,” which receives federal funds for a high percentage of low-income families and also serves children who are dual language learners. She views working in this school as the next steps in her own professional development to identify processes and structures that are employed to challenge both the children’s and teachers’ thinking. Drawing upon her prior experience as a classroom teacher, she walks us through the process of working with several teachers over a three-year period making visible outcomes with the children, teachers, and herself. The parallel process for the cycle of inquiry (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001) is referenced as a framework for both children and teachers to engage in asking questions and gaining new insights. Driven by her prior experience as a teacher, she clearly formulates questions that spark her investigations with the teachers. Oken-Wright’s own inspirations from the Reggio Emilia Approach are interpreted and used as a framework for working with the public schoolteachers. She makes visible her developing questions as she reflects upon her work with the teachers throughout the three years. At one point she poses a salient question for herself by asking: “When does one urge a teacher who is not confident to move from an observational stance to a more active one?” The reciprocity of learning that exists between the author and the teachers is a key element in the nature of collaborative
professional development, which views each individual as a learner as they engage in a co-inquiry process (Abramson, 2008).

This article provides us with some core strategies when developing an inquiry stance as an approach towards professional development. First, the author notes examples for how it was necessary to understand the climate of the school program and to determine how to negotiate within a system that has established norms. For example, at the onset the author deemed it important that the children engage and sustain their interests for playful learning. She negotiates with the teacher and principal to alter the existing schedule to allow the children longer periods to sustain their playtime, and for the teachers to more carefully observe and document the children’s actions and words that would become the focus of their meetings and discussion for reflection and planning purposes. Another example was when the author and teacher in the first year of the project use the time during the children’s “enrichment class” to discuss their observations, optimizing the existing schedule to create a valued space for reflecting on their practices. When professional development brings innovative ideas to a school or early childhood program, it is important that educators look for possibilities within the current framework, inviting educators to find existing resources and interests and to build upon them as advancement toward common goals.

Another strategy employed by the author was the way she defines her role to facilitate the teachers learning by stepping into the classroom to demonstrate for the teachers, and to participate with the teachers in an active role by teaching alongside them. In this way, the author was able to invite teachers to observe how she elicited interactions from the children and for the author to observe the teacher’s strategies, providing each of them observations to discuss during their planning meetings. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) identify one of the seven characteristics of effective professional development as “active learning” that focuses on how teachers learn. One of the themes outlined in the research as noted in Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) is that successful design of professional development for teachers includes learning opportunities that are based on the interests of teachers and focused on their classroom experiences and needs.

When the author first begins her work with Jennifer Miller, she explains they found a need to extend discussions to directly working alongside the teacher in the classroom. Oken-Wright determines to use the teacher’s classroom as the context for professional learning as a meaningful way to engage in teacher research. Once in the classroom, she engages desired practices, thereby providing opportunities for the classroom teacher to analyze, employ, and reflect on new strategies. This also allows opportunity for the classroom teacher to start asking her own questions and to partner more in the inquiry process that fosters the collaboration in professional learning.

In the second year, the author explains how more teachers joined the “project” because they, “had witnessed the intelligence and joy – and academic growth – of Jen’s students during the first year.” And, at the end of the second year, the author met with several of the teachers to discuss readings related to the Reggio Emilia Approach and to project forward. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) report that high-quality professional development builds in time for teachers to think, receive feedback, reflect, and to inform future directions in their practices. The inclusion of readings at this stage of the teachers’ work supports their decisions-making plans based on understanding of a pedagogy that is driven by an inquiry approach, and to investigate their questions generated through their experiences from the first two years.

The role of the author in the first two years provides her sharing of expertise with the teachers as well as the exchange of expertise held by each teacher. This is another feature of the Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) design for effective professional development for the 21st century that is collaborative in design. The affordance of teachers to focus on their individual needs while relating to the overall curriculum of the other classrooms is an important aspect of professional development if it is to be sustained over time. It was after the second year that the teachers were able to articulate the outcomes of the collaborative professional development in the study of their own classrooms as it impacted student outcomes. They noticed children developed “awake minds” and a “sense of agency.” Noteworthy are the comments related to the
dispositions and motivation to learn resulted from joy in their learning, and joy in their work with the children. This is an important concept because by working collaboratively teachers have the potential to impact change within an entire school and not just in one classroom. As noted by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), high-quality professional development creates a “space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning.” Oken-Wright notes that some of the teachers are able to articulate at the end of the project changes with each other by citing quotes:

“She’s more positive in how she views the children.”

“I see the power of the children’s thinking.”

These are significant observations that reflect changes in a dispositional stance that resulted from a process of on-going professional development over the course of three years.

One of the many gifts the educators of Reggio Emilia give to many of us is the ways that professional development in childcare systems can contribute to an educator’s passion for learning and has an integral part of the life of a school or childcare program. We have the cycle of inquiry approach shared by the Reggio educators to support a framework for how to collect, organize, and reflect on upon our practices with children as part of the daily lives of the teachers (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). It has been documented that sustained professional learning is more likely to have an impact (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), which is exemplified in the pedagogy of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

As Oken-Wright points out, all children deserve an education that encourages them to have a voice that is heard, a learning environment that invites challenging ideas and is filled with interesting concepts for them to ponder, to test out. Creating this environment requires teachers who can listen and join in research alongside children — resulting in children and teachers experiencing a joy in their learning. Regardless of context, we may question if the underlying principles for inquiry-based learning as a way to approach professional development can transcend many types of early childhood programs or schools. It has often been stated by educators from Reggio Emilia that their pedagogy is not simply
learning a skill set or methods that comprise a model that can be replicated, but rather that the underlying principles must be interpreted and defined for a particular community that reflects the values of the people who live within it (Gandini, 2012). We can be nudged to explore the cultural concept of “funds of knowledge” or the identification of assets and strengths that draw upon the knowledge, skills and resources found in families and children within a particular community (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Oken-Wright and the teachers in this article begin the process of listening to understand the children’s ideas and capabilities as a means of identifying the strengths they brought to the classroom. It is a starting place to identify the unique assets of the children. This is an area we might all pause and consider when engaging in professional development to ensure we include the resources that exist with the families and children in a classroom community.

How does this process of collecting “funds of knowledge” inform us in building on the children’s strengths? Are there ways to build a partnership process with families to elicit the strengths and resources their children bring to the classroom?

I appreciate the author sharing this example of her work with teachers. It contributes to our understanding about ways that the design of the roles and processes in professional development can be inspired by principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach and interpreted in the context of a public school. I encourage all of us to consider, how can professional learning be a systematic inquiry? Our efforts should be transformative and challenge us to develop a shared knowledge through interaction with our colleagues, regardless of the type of educational community we serve.

REFERENCES


Jeanne Goldhaber is an Innovations consulting editor and a NAREA board member. Goldhaber, an associate professor emerita, taught in the early childhood program at the University of Vermont in Burlington, VT for over 25 years. She is a current member of the Reggio Inspired Vermont Early education Team (RIVET) 2.0.

Reflections on "School-Wide Research as Professional Development" & "Teaching and Learning Alongside Teachers: What is Essential for Positive Change in a Title One School?"  
by Jeanne Goldhaber

In preparation for this issue, the consulting editors and staff of the Innovations peer-reviewed issues looked to past articles to help us reflect on and put into context our current understanding of the relationship between educational research and professional development.

As we combed through past issues, we landed on an article co-authored by Carol Bersani and Terri Cardy with a title that stopped us in our tracks: “School-Wide Research as Professional Development” (2015). As we reread the article, we could not help but compare the experiences of the children, teachers, and families of the Kent State University Child Development Center (KSU CDC) to those shared in Pam Oken-Wright’s manuscript “Teaching and Learning Alongside Teachers: What is Essential for Positive Change in a Title One School?” Both of these articles speak directly to the concept of educational research as professional development.

From the outset, it was clear that the contexts of these two projects were very different: Bersani and Cardy report the work of teachers in a university lab school while Oken-Wright collaborated with a group of kindergarten teachers in an urban Title One school. While Bersani and Cardy do not describe the demographic profile of the Children’s Development Center, its website describes its community as including “children of Kent State students, faculty, staff, and members of the greater Kent community” (“Home page,” n.d.). The context of Oken-Wright’s school is a community in which 90% of the children are eligible for free breakfast and lunch, with a large percentage of the enrolled kindergarten children speaking no English or speaking English as a second language.

The ages of the children involved also differ: Bersani and Cardy report the children’s ages as ranging from toddlers to kindergarteners, while Oken-Wright worked solely with kindergarteners. Bersani and Cardy refer to the participation of both student teachers and classroom mentor teachers, while staffing in the Title One school reflects a relatively traditional pattern of one classroom teacher with the possibility of an assistant for a child requiring one-to-one support, and the out-of-classroom involvement of specialists. The authors of both articles describe different kinds and levels of family engagement.

Finally, based on the KSU CDC website’s statement that the teachers “draw daily inspiration from the Reggio Emilia approach...” (“Philosophy & Curriculum page,” n.d.), we may assume a high level of institutional support was in place for the work that Bersani and Cardy report. Although the principal of the Title One school supported her work with the teachers, Oken-Wright identifies the need for more institutional commitment for work of this caliber to be sustainable.

Clearly the contexts differ in many respects. But of particular interest are the ways that the experiences reported in these two learning communities are nevertheless similar. What might we learn from these similarities? Here are some of the “take-aways” that I found especially provocative.

The Evolution of a Research Question

The power of a good question appears to cut across contexts. Regardless of a school community’s demographic, the resources and/or constraints of its institutional umbrella, and the ages of the pro-
agonists, meaningful inquiry creates a culture of collaboration and exchange, discovery, and learning among all members of the engaged community.

The extent to which the authors and teachers in both contexts continued to generate and refine their focal research questions is particularly thought-provoking. Bersani and Cardy’s questions are multiple, recurring, and far-reaching. They ask questions related to their theories and assumptions, they broach “ethical and pedagogical questions” (Bersani & Cardy, 2015, p. 12), and they even frame questions about their questions!

Oken-Wright begins her work by declaring, “I had so many questions!” (p. 17). She wonders how to navigate constraints like time, space, and mandated subject matter while supporting “children’s development of a sense of agency when nearly every moment of the day is teacher-directed?” (Oken-Wright, p. 17). Ultimately, she identifies her overarching question as one that emerges over the course of the investigation: If everything cannot change, what changes are essential so that children in more restrictive environments can reap the benefits of a Reggio-inspired education…?” (Oken-Wright, p. 17).

These questions are important, and I believe it takes courage to grapple publicly with articulating what you do not know in order to share a learning process that is rife with uncertainty, blind alleys, and complexity. It gives the rest of us courage to take the leap and define professional development not as looking to experts to tell us what they think teachers and children need to know but as identifying and researching what particular teachers and children want to know.

Children as Researchers

Another similarity across contexts is the nature of the teachers’ and children’s responses to the authors’ invitation to engage in collaborative, meaningful investigations. Bersani and Cardy describe the children’s participation in this research as demonstrating “care, concern, respect, and empathy that promoted stewardship and democratic participation” (2015, p. 18).

Oken-Wright captures similar attributes in a transcript in which a group of kindergartners co-construct their vision of a Writing Museum where, “Everyone in the world should come!” (p. 21). They debate both the profound, like deciding on the aesthetics of selected artifacts: “There should be nice writing that don’t look scribble scrabble” (p. 21), as well as the mundane: “And food. Super-hot chicken and dessert! My mom can make the dessert!” (p. 21).

Teachers as Researchers

Both articles report changes in the teachers’ thinking and pedagogy. Several teachers of the KSU CDC give testimony to the impact this experience had on their learning. In the words of one teacher:

It strengthened our faculty, and it helped to ignite a passion for this way of working… It helped me to see more clearly the impact that I have when I am an engaged, active, supportive participant in the research alongside the children. (Bersani & Cardy, 2015, p. 44)

Oken-Wright shares one of her kindergarten teachers’ reflections on changes in her work with the children, “[I was able to] dive deeper into the kids’ passions and interests. What drove them? What sparked their curiosity?” (p. 20). Oken-Wright concludes, “...they [the teachers] found a window into the children’s thinking that re-energized them and helped them rediscover the reasons they went into teaching in the first place” (p. 24).

Final Thoughts: Toward the Development of a Culture of Shared Inquiry

We are born researchers. From our earliest moments we strive to make sense of the complexity of people and objects we encounter. These encounters shape our identity as life-long learners. Schools have the possibility of being places of encounter, places where everyone – children, families, teachers, support staff, administrators – ask important questions and join together to seek answers. Bersani, Cardy, and Oken-Wright tell us two stories of how this culture of shared inquiry was cultivated in very different contexts. Their stories serve as invitations to the rest of us to consider, regardless of perceived constraints, the possibilities within our own contexts.

REFERENCES


School-Wide Research as Professional Development

by Carol Bersani and Terri Cardy

This article was originally published in the December 2015 issue of Innovations, volume 22, number 4. The article has been reprinted below in its original format and style.

Carol Bersani was a professor at Kent State University for 45 years, 40 of which she spent as director and pedagogical coordinator of the Kent State University Child Development Center. She also coordinated the Early Childhood Education teacher education program for 23 years. She was a member of the Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange editorial board from 2004-2015. Carol’s study of the Reggio Emilia approach began in 1992. She has participated in five study tours to that city, always in collaboration with other educators. From 1998 to 2003, she and her school were members of the Virginia Tech Collaborative, a group of four universities where laboratory school teachers were studying the Reggio Emilia approach. That experience further developed her thinking about children as researchers and teacher research that is interwoven with that of the children.

Terri Cardy is the outdoor educator at Kent State University Child Development Center. She has been in this position for two years, supporting the work of the children and teachers in outdoor settings. She has been at the university for 10 years, teaching courses in the Early Childhood Education program, as well in a preschool classroom at the Child Development Center. Terri began studying Reggio Emilia inspired practice in 2005. She was part of the international study group in Reggio Emilia in 2010. She has attended NAREA conferences and is a member of Ohio Voices for Learning, which is a statewide organization that supports study of the Reggio Emilia approach.

Introduction

Shared research between adults and children is a priority practice of everyday life, an existential and ethical approach necessary for interpreting the complexity of the world, of phenomena, of systems of co-existence, and is a powerful instrument of renewal in education. The research made visible by means of the documentation builds learning, reformulates knowledge, underlies professional quality, and is proposed at the national and international levels as an element of pedagogical innovation. (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010, pp. 11-12)

Professional development is given priority within the daily activity of the centres and schools through the reflective practices of observation and documentation, with the weekly staff meeting being the primary occasion for in-depth study and sharing. (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010, pp. 13-14)

As a community of learners, our school has long been inspired by the system of early education in Reggio Emilia, Italy. It has provided a compass for our own work with children 18 months through kindergarten and their families in a university setting. We utilized a team approach, with co-leadership provided by the teachers, the studio teacher, and the pedagogical coordinator/director. For us, the inquiry cycle has always guided our study of documentation (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). During Carol Bersani’s last sabbatical, she began by re-studying the work of Dewey, Malaguzzi, and Freire. She then sought to mold
together the major elements of the inquiry cycle along with the major components of qualitative research methodology. Her goal was to design a flexible, nonlinear process for building knowledge within the school community—in essence, to weave together the children’s research with that of the teachers and families.

It is our intent here to describe the ways that our learning community embedded professional development within the daily activity of the children, teachers, and families. While the subject for study was children’s block play, the overall intent of the teachers was to engage in collaborative research that would support individual and collective development.

The Beginning of Our Study Together

During a previous year, the teachers had informally explored the question, “Who is the literate child?” They found that the exploration of this question was a valuable tool, both for professional development and collaborative study with families, but they desired a more in-depth, focused research study.

At the fall 2011 school retreat, prior to the beginning of the school year, the teachers proposed studying children’s construction play for that year, with a possible intent to focus on the social elements of group unit block play. Because unit blocks are part of every environment in the school, this was chosen as a focus from toddler to kindergarten classrooms. We were curious as to how children engaged others in block play throughout the years they are at the school.

The teachers constructed together a statement of expectations for the study:

• Professional development would be embedded within daily practice. Three out of four weekly faculty meetings a month would be devoted to the study of children’s block play. The study would extend also to our pre-service teachers, with classroom team meetings devoted to the study of documentation related to block play.

• Inquiry would become a co-constructed process among children, teachers, and families. The study of documentation together and the discourse that would flow from this study would be a critical and necessary tool for this inquiry. We proposed that family participation was integral to the research process. We thought that weaving the research of children, teachers, and families together would enhance learning to think together.

• Carefully-crafted research questions would challenge teachers and families to see children’s thinking from a new perspective and to learn something new about their play. The guide developed by Carol, the pedagogical coordinator, would be seen as a reference for our study. The major categories of that guide are:
  » framing the potential questions to guide our work, an evolutionary process;
  » reconnaissance work that includes readings and consultants;
  » the documentation process;
  » the collaborative analysis process;
  » realizations; and
  » implications for our practice and further study (Bersani, 2012).

• Each of the above categories included sub-questions to guide the teacher’s thinking.

• We agreed that a research question starts in one’s mind when one does not understand something that is occurring in one’s classroom. It challenges teachers to see matters from a new perspective and to learn some-
thing new. In our opinion, professional development is most successful when it is embedded within this way of working together. In essence, we are valuing our own thinking.

- As was the practice at our school, parent meetings would be held regularly throughout the year, with particular attention to the ongoing study of block play. Also, it was decided that each child’s portfolio would have a section that was devoted to his or her play with blocks. The portfolio was sent home on a regular basis and referred to in parent conferences and meetings.

The teachers offered their comments on the role of block play in our school:

“Blocks are, in a sense, a way of thinking. Blocks come with a way of being in school.”

“At our school, there is a seamless time for block play . . . children engage in block play during all the years they are at our school.”

“I wonder about the affordances of different types of blocks for group play.”

“Children have a strong desire to become members of a classroom community.”

Introducing the Research Focus to Families and Children

To introduce the study to families and children, a table was placed at the entrance to the school. Small table blocks were placed on the table, inviting children and families to construct with them. Photographs of children engaged in block play were placed above the table.

Families were invited to offer reflections of their own experiences building with blocks. Here are three of those reflections:

“I remember I tried to impress a girl in my class with my block building, but it didn't work.”

“I remember visiting my Grandma's house and playing with her wooden blocks. I made pretend houses with the blocks and drove a fire truck to save them. I put the orange, red, and yellow blocks on top for the fire and knocked them down with blue blocks to represent water.”

“My memory is of playing with Lincoln Logs, probably when I was 5-7 years old. I felt blocks weren't as purposeful but with the logs, you could actually build a house.”

Families stopped to read all the reflections as their children played with the table blocks.

Preparing Ourselves

We began by thinking about the documentation regarding children’s block play that each teacher might revisit. We also posed these questions for ourselves:

- What theories might inform this work?
- What assumptions do we hold now?
- What are the unknowns?
- What are our initial predictions for the focus of the work?

We began our preparation with focusing on the general concept of complexity in block play. Our first readings were focused on structural complexity. We thought that this would deepen our understanding of children’s intent and contribute to more detailed observations of children’s block play.

We began our preparation with focusing on the general concept of complexity in block play. Our first readings were focused on structural complexity. We thought that this would deepen our understanding of children’s intent and contribute to more detailed observations of children’s block play. Areas of focus were stages of complexity (e.g., tower, row, etc.), arch complexity (two blocks parallel with third on top, etc.), and dimensionality complexity.
(at least two blocks forming one line, etc.) (Gregory, Kim, & Whiren, 2003). Each teacher was asked to find a favorite article about block play to share at the next meeting.

It was decided that all documentation, interpretation, and the readings that supported our study would be archived in a notebook for future reference and reflection.

The discussion at this second meeting also centered on the following ethical and pedagogical questions, which resurfaced throughout the study:

1. To whom does the documentation belong?
2. How do we research alongside children?
3. How might children be encouraged to document their own block building?
4. What meaning do children give to the phrase “to build together”?

The Construction of Forms to Use in the Documentation Process and Strategies for Studying Documentation

The group decided to develop initial documentation forms that would support the study. We also began to think about ways of studying together. Initially, we chose Steve Seidel’s protocol as a tool for studying documentation. That protocol has the following steps: getting started, describing the work, raising questions, speculating about what the children are thinking (their intent) as they build, the presenting teacher adds her perspective, and the group then proposes implications for teaching, learning, and further study (Seidel, 1998, pp. 69–89). The protocol provided a very useful organizational tool and trained our minds to look closely. It also provided a framework for keeping an ongoing record of findings.

The initial form for the teachers to use as they studied documentation from colleagues in other classrooms included the following categories:

- Children’s thinking: Problems, intentions, hypotheses, and strategies that the children have identified
- What we teachers and families don’t know about children’s thinking
- Assumptions we hold
- Questions and ideas that children, teachers, and families might explore together (added later)

The children’s documentation form included these categories:

- Children’s names
- Date
- Documenter’s name
- Children’s drawing of their block structure
- Children’s thinking about their block structure
The teacher’s documentation form included these categories:

- Children’s names
- Date
- Documenter’s name
- Teacher’s description/story of the work
- Teacher’s preliminary analysis

The Study Begins

The study of children’s block play began in October, after school was underway. At our first faculty meeting, three teachers out of a group of 12 brought documentation for study by the entire faculty. We used the Seidel protocol to study their documentation with the ultimate goal to form a research question(s) to guide our work across the year. At the end of each meeting, we decided that each participant would write a reflection of her thoughts while participating in the dialogue.

What follows is a very brief example of how the protocol was used to study one teacher’s documentation:

Laurie Kidwell, a preschool teacher, shared documentation that involved a group of children using unit blocks to construct the ice arena building, a nearby place they have often visited. After the latest visit, the children were asked to create a collaborative drawing of the building. The following week, a small group used this drawing as a reference for constructing the building with unit blocks.

Teachers described the work:

“They referred to their collaborative drawing as they began to build but when the first attempt fell, they used a ‘mental blueprint’ rather than their drawing.”

“They critiqued each other’s work, using such statements as ‘What if?’”

“They asked clarifying questions of each other.”

“They said, ‘I think’ a lot.”

Teachers posed questions:

“How was the group formed? Do these children often work together?”

“Why did they rely on their memory when the structure fell, rather than their group drawing or photos?”

Teachers speculated about the children’s intent:

“Some may be building to tell a story of their visit, and some may desire to construct a model in order to remember the experience.”

“They seem uncertain about how to make the structure sturdy.”

“I noticed that they gave wait time to their peers, so they seem to understand others’ strengths.”

Teacher/documenter (Laurie) responded:

“The proposal was for any child with an interest in building to join the ice arena group. We visited many buildings over the course of the year, so that everyone had the opportunity to build. My question was, ‘What materials might promote more social exchanges?’”
Possible Research Questions Emerge

In framing the question(s), which we had come to realize is an ongoing process, we asked ourselves the following questions:

• What question would give an initial focus to the work?
• Are there sub-questions? How many questions are too many?
• What initial question(s) and provocations will we offer the children?

By late October, we had begun to identify the major focus for our study, which we did not know much about: “What are the social dimensions of block play?”

By late October, we had begun to identify the major focus for our study, which we did not know much about: “What are the social dimensions of block play?” One teacher, Jodi Monaco, asked, “What happens when a master builder involves other children? What strategies does she/he use to engage others in a joint effort? Does storytelling become an integral part of the work?”

Our discussion also centered on what children think about as they build. We thought that from the child’s point of view, their questions might be, “What does it mean to us to build with others?” or “What happens when we build with each other?” We have observed that children are aware of the skills of others, but what draws them together? Is it the physical space (a raised wooden platform) or social relationships or ideas?

Other questions centered on the teacher’s role:

• What is the role of teacher talk in sustaining the children’s ideas and increasing the complexity in block building?
• What is the relationship between a teacher’s values and the children’s block building?

A Second Message for Families

We sent another message to the families about our study:

We are interested in the children’s group construction play as it supports the development of social skills. Some preliminary social skills we have identified are the following:

• Collaborative planning: Where ideas come from
• Role taking within the construction process
• Perspective taking
• Collaborative problem solving

What do you see as your children build with blocks? We encourage your participation across this year’s study in classroom meetings and in offering reflections on your children’s interest in block play and the benefits you see for this type of play for your child.

The following is a teacher’s reflection on a parent meeting during which the center-wide research was shared and discussed. The teacher, Carolyn Galizio, began the meeting with a presentation about the children’s block constructions, with an emphasis on the social aspects of block play, and then, after the meeting, wrote the following reflection in her journal:

This class of parents had already formed relationships as most of the class consisted of younger siblings of children who had been in the class previously. What surprised me was that they felt comfortable in commenting about each other’s child, not just their own. It made for a very rich discussion.

Parents used their own backgrounds and disciplines in interpreting the block construction documentation presented earlier. For example, each spoke to what they saw in the work that was related to art and mathematics. Some referred to theorists they use in their own research in analyzing the constructions of the children.

We learned so much about what was happening at home or outside of school that parents found to be visible in the work and the comments of
their children. They noticed the strengths in their children’s abilities and thinking in block play that I saw daily at school, but they did not always see at home.

There were three outcomes to this meeting:

1. Our own analysis of children’s block constructions was expanded.

2. Upon arrival at school with their children, parents tended to sit longer and play in the block area (a very large area).

3. Some parents reported that they purchased blocks for their children and set up a block area in the home.

The Organization of our Study Shifts

By November, we had decided to break our faculty into smaller groups, making certain that toddler, preschool, and kindergarten teachers were represented in each group. We proposed that studying documentation in small fixed groups would allow us to engage in analysis at a deeper level. We wondered how we would track this. Also, sharing documentation from each classroom kept us connected and offered us the possibility of better understanding the evolution of social relationships, within block play, across age groups.

There was a debate about whether to focus on unit or hollow blocks. When we say “construction” play, what do we mean? For the purposes of this investigation, it was decided to narrow the focus to unit blocks.

We also thought that studying a smaller piece of documentation might be more useful in the process of digging deeper into the meaning children were giving to their constructions. Steve Seidel had visited our school and stressed the concept of “minute particular,” focusing not on the whole story but learning through deep focus on one particular event within the work.

Each week as before, documentation was collected from both the presentations and the discussion that ensued, as well as individual reflections. The following are examples of documentation shared:

**Toddler Block Play**

Teacher’s story:

Alice, almost two, found the hollow and unit blocks and started to build. She stacked the larger hollow blocks on the bottom and added the smaller unit blocks on top, end to end. Alice worked with steady hands to reach the top of the tower and was determined to make it taller and taller. Whenever the tower toppled down, Alice would rebuild it. Once when it fell, Ben, almost three, came over and helped Alice to rebuild it. Alice and Ben took turns adding blocks, and Alice liked that Ben was taller and could help her to build higher than she could reach. The two started with different building techniques though. Alice's was to stack one block on top of another while Ben liked to have more than one block per level of the tower. Alice noticed Ben's building technique and joined in, placing blocks side by side on one level. They worked cooperatively and built and rebuilt many times. The tower toppled down once again, and this time, the blocks fell into two small piles. Ben and Alice started to build a new tower but it seemed unclear as to which pile should be the base for the tower. The student teacher
asked, “Would you like to build one tower or two?” Alice responded by saying she would like to build two. But each built his/her own tower for only a few minutes, just several blocks high, and then left the block area. When Alice later was asked to look at photos of their block play, she said that Ben “helped her reach.”

Teacher’s thoughts:

This was early in the semester and one of our first block documentations. When we studied the documentation from Alice and Ben, we noticed that Alice allowed Ben into her work—we think because she perceived that he had a skill she needed. Ben was learning how to enter others’ play. We saw that he did have the skills to collaborate. We realized through this documentation the importance of the student teacher’s question, “Would you like to build one tower or two?” This question seemed to interrupt the play. Our teaching team then decided to focus on uncovering teacher questions that support children’s collaborative play with blocks. (Jodi Monaco)

Kindergarten Block Play

Teacher’s presentation:

I brought this documentation to the faculty as I wondered about a child’s desire to build alone. She loved Mondays, as the blocks were organized for a new week. Another girl began to build next to her new structure. It appeared that this girl was copying her structure.

A: “That’s not how mine is.”

S: “That’s okay. It’s mine.” A. moves away to build by herself.

My questions for my colleagues are: “Is it okay for a child to desire to build alone?” and “What role does the teacher assume when this occurs?”

Teacher’s thoughts:

With the support of others, I saw that blocks were really a preferred language for A. She desired to build independently. When you are in the classroom, you become so engrossed in daily work that when you have the opportunity to think together with others about children’s intent, you learn so much. It made me watch more closely. I learned to look at documentation from another lens, to more fully understand how this child was using block play to express herself. The benefit of minds together is essential to one’s own professional growth as a teacher. (Alisa Westover)

Wrapping Up the First Semester of Study

By November, we began each meeting with the question, “What did we learn last week that helps us frame our question?”

At a final meeting in December, we proposed the following beginning definition of social complexity (two or more children) in block play as present in our data/documentation:

- Construction play is ongoing; children demonstrate persistence with ideas.
• Children listen to each other’s ideas and are learning to stand up for their own ideas; they incorporate these new ideas, whatever the source, into their constructions.

• They plan together and modify the plan as needed.

• They talk about the structure as they build, using negotiation when conflict occurs; turn-taking is evident.

• Critique of the structure and others’ ideas are evident as they build.

• Verbal and nonverbal turn-taking are present.

• No one who wants to build is excluded.

• Children know each other’s interests and strengths and show respect for ideas.

• Multiple communication systems (drawing, verbal, nonverbal) are used.

Some emerging elements we wanted to explore in the new year included:

• Do stories serve as a provocation for block play or do they emerge from the construction itself? (Heisner, 2005)

• What provocations might engage more children in block play?

Entering the New Year

Taking stock of our work in fall semester, we decided to organize by age group (toddler, preschool, kindergarten) to begin to formulate sub-questions for further study. We agreed that our overall research question should continue to be “What are the elements of social complexity within group block building?”

Teachers of children 18 months–3 years

1. What is the role of language development in group block play?

2. What child and teacher roles help children to sustain a block construction idea?

Teachers of children 3–5 years

1. Do children build to support drama or does drama emerge from block construction?

2. What materials support complex group block building?

3. Would asking children to create a drawing of their block structures lead to more complex constructions in the future?

4. What teacher roles most support complex group block building?

Teachers of 5–6 year olds

1. What social structures are created within same gender/cross-gender block building groups?

2. What is the impact of a master player on the block construction?

Spring Semester

We continued to bring documentation for study, to use the forms we had developed earlier, and to work in small groups. In April, one area of focus centered on the question, “How does one become a master builder?” We also asked, “Does a child who is a master player with blocks carry that skill over to other areas?” We proposed that social complexity in play is highly individualized. It may possibly be linked with the materials being offered and utilized in representational work.
The teachers made several proposals for the environment (space and time). One was to propose to the children the removal of the housekeeping center in order to see if this would lead to more complex block building. Another proposal was to engage the children in group dialogue at the morning meeting about their constructions and plans for the day and to also hold the meeting when children shared their work before lunch in the block corner so that children who had engaged in construction could relate their thinking about their structures. We also recorded the stories that the children told during and after building with blocks. We noticed that stories became more elaborate as the year progressed.

In March, we revisited the elements of social complexity we had identified in fall semester. To that list, we added the following:

- Children loan their ideas to others as needed.
- Children are able to edit or reinvent their constructions through experimentation and by drawing upon their own ideas and the ideas of others.

We proposed that social complexity in play is highly individualized. It may possibly be linked with the materials being offered and utilized in representational work.

After a year of in-depth study of our documentation of the children’s work and the conversations among families, we formulated the following findings:

- Building with blocks was a language in and of itself.
- Construction became a vehicle for storytelling and reflective thinking.
- Social complexity “reads differently” for each child.
- Group dialogue at morning meeting generated many ideas from the children for block play.
- Many ideas also come from children’s observations of others’ constructions, a sort of spontaneous provocation.
- Children discovered strengths in themselves and others.
• Social skills most often documented in unit block play were: inviting others to build with them, observing and listening carefully to others’ ideas, planning and communicating ideas with others, and using negotiation when conflict occurred.

The children demonstrated care, concern, respect, and empathy that promoted stewardship and democratic participation. They know each other well—their interests and their strengths! They are also learning the very important language of collaboration. The active process of collaborating (for both children and adults) became a language for inquiry.

Wrap Up for the Year

At the conclusion of the school year, we organized a retreat. The team had compiled a list of the discoveries made throughout the year. Each teacher was asked to identify one or two major outcomes from our study together.

One teacher, Cindy Vesia, shared this:

Our shared focus gave all of us an opportunity to support one another, to challenge one another’s thinking, to share the joyful moments and the struggles. It strengthened our faculty, and it helped to ignite a passion for this way of working. It improved my documentation skills and helped me discover new questions to ask myself. It helped me to see more clearly the impact that I have when I am an engaged, active, supportive participant in the research alongside the children.

Another teacher, Laurie Kidwell, had this to say:

I think the framework designed for teacher research has been an important tool to further my thinking about the teacher as a researcher alongside children. It is helpful to go through this process together as a staff, so I can better understand the thinking of others and my own thinking. Systems and organization are very important to me. I feel more empowered this year to move ahead, because there is a clear direction for the research.

A third teacher, Terri Cardy, offered this reflection:

Early on, we realized that there needed to be a system for observing and organizing the work of the children. Our observations, using the school-wide form, stayed in the classroom and became the focus of study during the weekly classroom team meetings. To be certain that we captured the intent of the children, we placed a teacher in the block area each day. In team meetings, we discussed how teachers could be supportive of the children’s ideas for construction. Many of our discussions centered on listening closely to children, asking open-ended questions, and quietly observing and documenting when children did not need or request teacher support. As a team, we developed open-ended questions that could help support the children’s block building.

A fourth teacher, Carolyn Galizio, reflected on the family meetings:

As parents study documentation with teachers, they add a valuable perspective. I learned so much from opening my thinking to the differing points of view that families offered to our teaching team. Their questions and interpretations were gifts that helped us to develop a deeper understanding of children’s intents.

Conclusion

These teacher researchers speak eloquently about the key values embedded in co-inquiry and research as a primary vehicle for professional development. They summarized well the outcomes of this yearlong investigation:

• Igniting passion for thinking together—children, teachers, and families
• Understanding and expanding one’s own thinking and that of one’s colleagues; generating new knowledge to inform school practice
• Co-creating systems for documentation, reflection, and analysis that enhance the
Because all of the classrooms focused on one overall research question, the teachers had the opportunity to see and study what was happening in other classrooms. This was a way for them to think more deeply about their own inquiry. Following our weekly faculty meetings, teachers were excited to get back to their own classroom block areas to offer the children new affordances and to expand their own inquiry into the meaning the children were giving to group block play. Most importantly, we all saw how capable and resourceful the children were as they built together.

REFERENCES


Reflections on "School-Wide Research as Professional Development"

by Gigi Schroeder Yu

Gigi Schroeder Yu is an assistant professor of art education in the art department at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM. She is also an editor for the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) journal, Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange. Gigi was the project manager for “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit when it was in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2014. Gigi works with organizations to create an aesthetic dimension toward teaching, learning, facilitation, research, and professional development design. She supports teachers in inquiry/action research within their classrooms.

While discussing potential topics for the Innovations 2019 peer-reviewed issue, the consulting editors engaged in conversation around the topic of research. Our current educational climate often promotes a narrow vision of research that focuses on quantifying results, generally told from the perspective of those outside the context in which the research took place. However, as consulting editors, we hoped to draw attention to a concept of research as a form of professional development for educators, as well as an opportunity for children and teachers to work together, side by side, investigating familiar and unfamiliar territories.

“School-Wide Research as Professional Development” is highly worth another read as you consider the guiding questions for the 2019 peer-reviewed issue. In particular the question: “What regular and ongoing opportunities do teachers have for meeting together for in-depth study and sharing of the learning processes of the children and teachers?” (Call for Proposals, 2018, p. 28). This concept is illustrated through several examples throughout the article.

Bersani and Cardy describe an amazing challenge set forth by the members of their educational community to create a school-wide, year-long research project based on the block areas of the classrooms at Kent State University Child Development Center. Engaging in such an endeavor requires systems, processes, and protocols that allow for teachers and children to engage in in-depth, authentic, and meaningful research. Bersani and Cardy share the following elements that supported their study and also serve as examples of how we might consider doing similar research within our contexts:

Evolving Research Questions

Teachers developed research questions. The questions were not driven by assessments or evaluations, but rather by what they were curious about in regard to their teaching and children’s engagement in the block area of their classrooms. The research questions were revisited and refined throughout the research project.
Time to Meet and Reflect

Time for teachers to participate in weekly collaborative planning meetings with each other was a key element for studying documentation and planning for next steps. These meetings were essential for supporting ongoing study.

Protocols and Processes

Forms were developed to assist and focus teachers’ observation and documentation collection processes. Protocols for studying documentation were used within collaborative planning meetings and revised throughout the year.

Groupings of Teachers

Small groups were created that brought together teachers working with different age groups for meetings to allow for analysis of documentation at a deeper level.

Reading “School-Wide Research as Professional Development” in light of the 2019 peer-reviewed issue is an opportunity to consider the elements that support authentic classroom and school-wide research. We discover how teachers engaging in research in their classrooms can own their professional development as it is embedded in their daily lives. Authentic research that reflects those that live and work within the context that is being researched can happen.

We discover how teachers engaging in research in their classrooms can own their professional development as it is embedded in their daily lives. Authentic research that reflects those that live and work within the context that is being researched can happen.

It can happen when systems and structures are developed to support the experiences and interests of teachers and children as the driving force of the research.

REFERENCES

In contemplating the meaning of professional development in the field of early childhood, I think of the words “life-long learner” that we frequently hear in education. While this phrase seems readily understood, it is not easily put into practice. In the article, “School-Wide Research as Professional Development,” Bersani and Cardy (2015) provide some pragmatic and meaningful strategies for ways to foster a dispositional stance that promotes educators to be curious and nurture a passion for continual growth. Citing the influence of the Reggio Emilia educator’s approach to teacher research within the daily life of the children and teachers (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010), the authors offer insight into the ways their interpretations of the underlying principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach are studied within their own context.

Specifically, the authors address how their approach to professional development builds a community of learners among the children, staff, and families. The concept of bringing people together to examine their thinking, questions, or assumptions serves as a focus for bringing individuals into a collective endeavor. It supports development of individuals within the advancement of the larger learning community. Building relationships among the participants in the community of the school is a center principle of the Reggio Emilia Approach and consistent with the ways the article explains professional development that is an integral part of the daily life of the children, educators, and families. The authors note how staff are first drawn together in a wondering process that is motivated from their observations of the children. This is an important concept and I am reminded of my own work with teachers who upon reflecting on the process of studying documentation together noted that the staff learns so much about how to connect to the larger curriculum by understanding what each teacher is doing and thinking.

Supporting the passion in early childhood education

Eileen Hughes is an Innovations consulting editor. She is a professor emerita from Western Washington University (WWU) and has focused on the preparation of early childhood educators and the development of inquiry-based approaches. She is the former director and developer of the WWU Early Childhood Education Bachelor Program and taught many of the courses within the program. Her prior work in Alaska, Oregon, California, and internationally includes engaging in diverse settings, which contributed to her background and encouraged her to ask questions to deepen her learning and teaching experiences. She has enjoyed the continual study of the Reggio Emilia Approach since 1989, which has influenced her understanding of the underlying principles and values that support adults and children to challenge their thinking and to find the joy in the daily life of schools.

Reflections on "School-Wide Research as Professional Development"

by Eileen Hughes

Eileen Hughes is an Innovations consulting editor. She is a professor emerita from Western Washington University (WWU) and has focused on the preparation of early childhood educators and the development of inquiry-based approaches. She is the former director and developer of the WWU Early Childhood Education Bachelor Program and taught many of the courses within the program. Her prior work in Alaska, Oregon, California, and internationally includes engaging in diverse settings, which contributed to her background and encouraged her to ask questions to deepen her learning and teaching experiences. She has enjoyed the continual study of the Reggio Emilia Approach since 1989, which has influenced her understanding of the underlying principles and values that support adults and children to challenge their thinking and to find the joy in the daily life of schools.

Supporting the passion in early childhood education

In contemplating the meaning of professional development in the field of early childhood, I think of the words “life-long learner” that we frequently hear in education. While this phrase seems readily understood, it is not easily put into practice. In the article, “School-Wide Research as Professional Development,” Bersani and Cardy (2015) provide some pragmatic and meaningful strategies for ways to foster a dispositional stance that promotes educators to be curious and nurture a passion for continual growth. Citing the influence of the Reggio Emilia educator’s approach to teacher research within the daily life of the children and teachers (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010), the authors offer insight into the ways their interpretations of the underlying principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach are studied within their own context.

Specifically, the authors address how their approach to professional development builds a community of learners among the children, staff, and families. The concept of bringing people together to examine their thinking, questions, or assumptions serves as a focus for bringing individuals into a collective endeavor. It supports development of individuals within the advancement of the larger learning community. Building relationships among the participants in the community of the school is a center principle of the Reggio Emilia Approach and consistent with the ways the article explains professional development that is an integral part of the daily life of the children, educators, and families. The authors note how staff are first drawn together in a wondering process that is motivated from their observations of the children. This is an important concept and I am reminded of my own work with teachers who upon reflecting on the process of studying documentation together noted that the staff learns so much about how to connect to the larger curriculum by understanding what each teacher is doing and thinking.
own work with teachers who upon reflecting on the process of studying documentation together noted that the staff learns so much about how to connect to the larger curriculum by understanding what each teacher is doing and thinking. One of the authors’ key outcomes is stated as, “An understanding and expanding one’s own thinking and that of one’s colleagues; generating new knowledge to inform school practice” (Bersani & Cardy, 2015, p. 19).

The idea that educators can come together to strengthen their own knowledge base that contributes to the continuity of the curriculum can sustain the values of a program and motivate forward movement of wondering and questioning as an aspect of the inquiry process and is central to the ongoing nature of sustained professional development.

Another significant take-away from this article is the use of protocols to organize the process for studying together and to offer a systematic way to approach sharing among the learning community. The protocols identified in the article (Seidel, 1998) made the inquiry cycle visible by providing a framework to organize the contributions of each individual in the group and to make the individual voices visible. The protocols supporting everyone to direct their attention on the focused questions and organized a structure for presenting documentation to each other. These means of creating systems for how to proceed as a group provides a direction for teachers to focus their professional development meeting time. As a result, this can build a culture and language for inquiry. As noted by a teacher in the article about the processes of professional development, “…systems and organization are very important to me. I feel more empowered this year to move ahead, because there is a clear direction for the research” (Bersani & Cardy, 2015, p. 19). In sum, as expressed by another teacher in the article regarding the experience of the professional development, “It strengthened the faculty, and it helped to ignite a passion for this way of working” (Bersani & Cardy, 2015, p. 18).

A framework for how to support the inquiry process as an approach in professional development is necessary to create a climate in the school that integrates teacher research in their daily practice of the school. Educators of Reggio speak of professional development that is “…organized collectively in terms of its contents, forms, and the methods of participation of each individual” (Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2010, pp. 13-14). Professional development that can create a dispositional stance for wondering will likely lead educators to pursue growth and strengthen an ongoing passion for their profession.

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Children love drawing – all over the world, children love to draw. Very young children draw with their fingers in droplets of condensation on windows, in steam from a pot boiling in the kitchen. The language of graphics is a part of the human DNA from prehistoric days onward.

– Marina Mori | June 26, 2019

In the steamy summer of 2019, in Atlanta, GA, a group of atelieristas and educators from the United States were fortunate to partner with Marina Mori from Reggio Emilia, Italy, in order to create a series of ateliers based on the project, “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material.” These ateliers were part of the 15th NAREA Summer Conference titled, “Defending Spaces of Creative Freedom: Spaces of Joy, Trust, and Solidarity.”

Before the conference commenced, Marina and the atelieristas from the United States, organized an atelier much like the ones created in Reggio Emilia for children to experience. The room next to the atelier held an exhibition of children’s work from Reggio Emilia. The exhibition included photographs, videos, examples of materials, and words of the children.

It was our joy to receive the gift of working alongside Marina. Our task was to first participate with her in creating the atelier for the exhibition, and then to develop five different ateliers, each supporting a certain palette of materials for conference participants to explore. So, on Monday and Tuesday, before the conference began, all of the atelieristas worked together with Marina in unboxing materials, covering tables with white paper and clear plastic, and listening with our ears and our eyes as she shared an intensive professional development experience through the process of creating an atelier for “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material.”

An atelier first and foremost involves adults looking at materials – engaging our emotions – what surprises us, what annoys us, what interests us – we must feel it first of all, ourselves, as adults.

– Marina Mori | June 26, 2019

Wednesday, the atelieristas were thrilled to have a personal experience both participating in the atelier they had collectively created and exploring the materials with Marina. For two hours they engaged with materials and with each other. Marina suggested that as we were working with materials and exploring, we could keep a notebook near for words, sensations, and thoughts. Again and again, she remarked that this was professional development “right here” – how we were working and learning together. She said that preparation of an atelier is professional development done with others, not in isolation. She encouraged the atelieristas to take time to look, walk around, and see how the context of materials had been prepared. She encouraged them to not only look at the materials, but to touch them and listen to them, both those that make marks and those that receive them.

We can only see what we have experienced ourselves.

– Marina Mori | June 24, 2019

From these participatory experiences, atelieristas turned their attention to preparing...
The following reflections tell the story of the atelieristas and educators who participated shoulder-to-shoulder with Marina to prepare the ateliers, and what they learned about children, materials, and themselves. We hope their narratives will inspire you to offer children spaces for freedom, joy, trust, and solidarity.

REFERENCES


Reflection on an Atelier Session: Approaching the Familiar in Unfamiliar Ways

by Gigi Schroeder Yu

Gigi Schroeder Yu is an assistant professor of art education in the art department at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM. She is also an editor for the NAREA journal, Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange. Gigi was the project manager for “The Wonder of Learning – The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit when it was in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2014. Gigi works with organizations to create an aesthetic dimension toward teaching, learning, facilitation, research, and professional development design. She supports teachers in inquiry/action research within their classrooms.

Description of atelier session “Metallic Palette”: gold and silver sparkle, aluminum foil gleams, and bronze glows. The allure of shiny materials offers opportunities for seeing the world in dynamic new ways. How might these special materials draw out imaginative narratives? What new ideas and meanings are provoked when we engage with metallic materials? This session generously offers participants opportunities to research the properties of metallic mark-making and mark receiving materials as expressive and magical languages.

I was very excited to be asked to participate as an atelierista during the NAREA Summer Conference “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” atelier sessions. The Reggio Children publication of the same name has served as inspiration in my own work with children and teachers in the southwest United States. In addition, I had returned from a study tour to Reggio Emilia, Italy, only a couple of weeks prior to the conference. During the study tour, I had an opportunity to encounter materials during the atelier sessions at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center. Knowing that I would be facilitating an atelier session at the conference, I paid particular attention to how

ateliers based on a specific palette for conference participants to explore. Inspired by Marina and their collaboration with her, they created experiences for using the following palettes:

- Black and white materials
- Metallic materials
- Unusual instruments
- Materials specifically focused on infants and toddlers
- Highly chromatic materials
the materials were displayed, the wide range of textures, colors, sizes, and shapes as well as the experiences that were offered in the atelier for the participants.

Prior to the conference, a working group of atelieristas, classroom teachers, directors, pedagogistas, and I had an opportunity to participate in a mark-making atelier session with Reggio educator Marina Mori. This was an opportunity to see, hear, and experience being in the atelier as a participant prior to the sessions we would facilitate. During our time with Marina, she graciously offered us great detail and insight into the intentions of the atelier, her decision making regarding how the materials were arranged in regard to size, shapes, symmetry, colors, the textures of paper, and the potential relationships between mark-making materials and supports (or surfaces). The materials were arranged as an invitation and form of inspiration, not as a guide in “how” to use them. Marina’s description of the intentions of the materials and their arrangement reflected the concept of the environment as the third teacher. The visual of the environment, without words, reflected the possibilities for interactions and new discoveries.

Marina also shared how the educators (teachers, atelieristas, and pedagogistas) in Reggio Emilia, Italy, spend time exploring and experiencing materials for their own professional growth, prior to using them with children. She discussed how important it is for educators to build up their own knowledge of the materials and encounter them through their own experiences before offering them to children. She invited us to first use our senses to explore the materials, stressing that we might think we know the material, but in reality, we do not. I challenged myself to approach the materials with an unfamiliarity and mindset towards research and inquiry, rather than with an “all knowing attitude.” In terms of my own professional growth as an
American artist-educator, I consider the atelier experience to be one of the most important professional development events of my career as it allowed me new, invaluable insights for working with materials, teachers, children, and the environment.

Preparing for the Metallic Materials Atelier Session

I was very fortunate to be partnered with Cindy Bohntinsky, a teacher at Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool (PPP). When facilitating an atelier session, I find it very helpful to pair up an atelierista and a classroom teacher. Both roles offer great insight for the participants into the experience and the potential ways of working with children. Cindy and I were the perfect match. We both had lived and worked in Chicago, IL. In addition, Cindy is a dancer and relayed her ideas regarding the body as a nonverbal language in learning environments. Cindy and I were tasked with transforming a PPP classroom into an atelier. This transformation was a unique opportunity to actively demonstrate how the space of a classroom can be reinterpreted to offer new ideas and possibilities.

I had some preconceived ideas about the potential opportunities that we could offer participants with metallic materials. Cindy and I carefully laid out all of the materials on tables throughout the room and began to discuss the possibilities for arrangement. Shortly after, Marina came to our room to offer her insights and challenged our notions of the very nature of metallic materials. The three of us together, Marina, Cindy, and I engaged in a conversation, intertwining English, Italian, and the materials themselves as she challenged us to rethink our materials and what is a metallic material and what is not. Cindy and I quickly made new decisions about the materials. Some of the metal surface materials included: aluminum foil and pans, metal sheets of different grades, and photo blackout metal sheets. Mark-making materials included: a wide range of metallic pens, markers, pencils, and paints. Steel wool, wire, needles, and calligraphy pens were among some of the other atelier materials. We also went by the riverbank outside the school to collect interesting leaves, stones, and branches that could be considered as inspiration for working with the metallic materials. By the end of the day, our room glowed, literally, with shiny metallic materials, waiting for the participants to arrive.

The Atelier Sessions

When participants arrived at our atelier session, their facial expressions reflected wonder and curiosity as they looked over the metallic materials throughout the classroom. First, we gathered in a circle around the room and provided introductions to ourselves, the participants, and also the materials. These are some of the ideas Cindy and I offered for exploring the materials:

- The atelier is a place of research. See yourself as a researcher, researching the materials and your processes.
- Challenge yourself to not go right to creating something, but instead allow a relationship to develop between you and the materials.
- Discover what is possible with the materials and what is not possible.
- What happens when the identity of two materials become one?
- What does it mean to explore processes for working with a material versus making a product?
- Pay attention to the memories, ideas, and stories that emerge as you are working with the materials.
- Approach what you think are familiar materials as if you have never seen them before, as if they are unfamiliar.

Just as Marina challenged us, we asked participants to first take time to use their senses touching, seeing, smelling, listening before they started to interact with them.

Exploring the Language of Metallic Materials

The metallic materials were not silent in their interactions with the participants. They had their own voice and ways of contributing to the dialogue. The materials themselves made sounds as they were manipulated through twisting, pounding, and tearing. Participants discovered new ways of making marks as they
explore putting metallic drawing materials on top of metallic surfaces to explore the interactions. The natural materials served as both inspiration for ways to manipulate the materials (for example, the twisting tree branches caused participants to think about ways that the materials could be intertwined) and also in interactions with the metallic materials (for example, the leaves were used for rubbings with metal sheets and also served as a surface for exploring the metallic drawing materials).

**Researching Together**

About halfway through the session, we noticed some participants appeared stumped with what to do next in their explorations. So, we decided to pause and provide time for participants to reflect on their processes of working with the materials with each other. We asked participants to discuss their process with a partner and also provide each other with an idea for next steps or how they could “push” their ideas for working with the material in new directions.

**Reflections on the Atelier Session**

To conclude the atelier session, we gathered around the room to share some of the reflections from our experiences with the materials. The following are some of the participants’ ideas and reflections:

- New potential materials to use in the classroom
- Materials inspire rich vocabulary
- There is a lot of complexity in a single material
- Materials offer opportunities for problem solving and critical thinking
- Sharing our processes with someone else can help us see new possibilities for our work.
- There is no right or wrong to exploring materials
- Focusing on processes opens up new ways to explore and experience materials
- How can we honor children’s and our own right to processes versus products?
- The importance of time and giving time for processes
- **New ideas emerge from processes**

The preceding reflections are a testament to the rich and powerful insights that emerged as a result of the metallic materials atelier. We also reflected on how the experiences of the atelier session can be brought back to the educational contexts we work in. Approaching our everyday contexts as researchers and explorers may change the way we see ourselves and our work with children. Embracing a mindset of research, a study of processes, and approaching what we think we know with an attitude of “unknowing” can create an openness for new insights, discoveries, and approaches to emerge and take hold in our classrooms.
It was a wonderful opportunity working alongside Marina. The attention to detail and the very intentional display of the materials was fascinating to see. Everything had a specific place and a purpose behind that place. Of course, it looked beautiful, but it was more than that. It felt accessible, inviting, engaging, thoughtful, and exciting!

I know having the opportunity to partner with Gigi Yu for the metallics atelier was also beneficial. The set-up felt less daunting after working with Marina, and I truly learned a lot watching Gigi encourage and extend the knowledge and conversation amongst our group. That idea of keeping the knowledge circulating was evident.

I also appreciated the time given to be with materials. It definitely resonated the importance of engaging with the materials before offering them to children. That gift of time and exploration has helped guide us this new school year with our children.

Thought Explorations

- **Atelier**: Hands and emotions all work collaboratively.
- The culture of the atelier supports the crossing over of boundaries. It diffuses into every part of the school.
- Ateliers give visibility to curiosity, research, courage, creativity, and empathy.
- Experimentation, exploration, knowledge = ateliers
- Atelierista: nourish, inform, encourage interactions, keep knowledge circulating throughout the group.

Cindy Bohntinsky is a co-teacher of 5- and 6-year-old children at Peachtree Presbyterian Preschool (PPP) in Atlanta, GA; one of the schools of Project Infinity. Twenty-four years ago, she embarked on her first teaching position at an inner-city school in Chicago, IL. She created and implemented a full-time dance program for grades pre-K through 8th grade, and later taught both 4th grade and kindergarten. This is her ninth year at PPP, where she feels incredibly blessed to be a part of a Reggio Emilia inspired practice—a practice where children are recognized as being competent and capable, in an environment that is inclusive and collaborative. She has two daughters, aged 14 and 15, and a very supportive husband. She loves time with family and friends, visiting her beloved city, Chicago, and her sweet dog, Blake.
I was fortunate to facilitate an atelier at the 15th NAREA Summer Conference, which included collaboration with other professionals. The five atelier sessions offered were inspired by the book Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material by Reggio Children. Prior to facilitating the atelier for the conference, I participated in a working group with Marina Mori, atelierista from Reggio Emilia, setting up the atelier that supports the mini-exhibit, “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material.” I was privileged to spend three glorious days in her presence. It felt like I was once again on a study tour in Reggio Emilia with a private tutor. I have to say I was starstruck!

Working with Marina was an amazing professional development experience. I saw first-hand the thinking and action of a Reggio educator with many decades of experience. Marina shared this deeply rooted knowledge with us, and her thoughts and actions were so current and progressive. She talked while she worked, pulling together materials, putting us to work and never hesitating to stop and explain her deliberate intentions. We watched in awe as she transformed the atelier into a work of art. The materials were meticulously laid out to entice curiosity, which, for me, led to an overwhelming desire to touch and work with them. This was the gift she gave to us working with her. This is how children want to experience materials and it is our role as educators to think about the provocations and the materials we offer them. We need to experience materials, processes, and research to enrich our empathy and understanding of children’s approaches.

The working group days with Marina prepared me to facilitate an atelier experience for educators attending the NAREA conference. I was responsible for the atelier titled “Black and White Palette.” I was intrigued by how this limited color palette would be perceived by the participants. I was challenged to offer a variety of black and white materials, (including papers, cardboard, fabric, metal, etc.) and to consider the drawing instruments that would support the investigation.

White on black, black on white, white on white, and black on black. The materials enticed the group to consider only black and white elements as they created compositions. It wasn’t just about white and black, but about how the relationship between textures and layers emerged. The educators thoroughly engaged in their research, supported by interactive dialogue with other professionals.

This was a marvelous experience for me professionally. Now, as I start a new school year with children, I often ask myself, “What would Marina do?” Like I said, I’m starstruck! I think about this work every day and being able to participate in and attend the NAREA conference has truly inspired me in the work I do with children and adults on a daily basis. I am always grateful to engage in opportunities that allow me to be a student of The Reggio Approach, and to work with the very people that have influenced me for so many years.
Allora

by Kym Cook

Kym Cook is a studio teacher at St. Anne’s Day School in Atlanta, GA, one of the schools of Project Infinity. She has been at St. Anne’s for fourteen years and has been teaching for 24 years total – most of them in Reggio Emilia inspired schools. She studied art and education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the University of Montana. Her two children have inspired her to always keep learning – she has a 20-year-old airman son in the United States Air Force, and a 15-year-old sophomore daughter, both of whom make her world full of color. In her free time, she is a jewelry and ceramic artist, and she spends most of her quality sleeping time reading good books late into the night.

Allora is the word that comes to mind when I think about my week-long experience as part of a working group with Marina Mori, atelierista from Reggio Emilia, and it has become my favorite word to hear in study group settings with our colleagues. Allora is an Italian word that can mean then, therefore, or next.

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Allora is the pause after the previous sharing, and it tells us to get ready for what is coming – a new thought, a new layer of ideas, simply: there’s more. Every time I heard this word from Marina during our five intensive days together, it gave me a feeling of re-setting myself and allowed me to receive the next concept to consider. I was honored to participate with this group of people who study possibilities of expression and the hundred languages and revere the life of the studio.

In the days before the conference, our working group – studio teachers, classroom educators, pedagogistas, and directors – worked closely with Marina Mori to help create the atelier connected to the new exhibit of mark-making. This opportunity had not been offered here in the United States before: working closely to prepare and then participate in an atelier experience by Marina, translated by Jane McCall.

During the three preparation days, we engaged in rich conversation and were part of the painstakingly detailed presentation of mark-making materials and their paper supports, so that we could try to understand Marina’s methods and intentions. When I say painstakingly detailed, I mean everything from the beauty and neatness of the paper covering the table to the strategic ways the writing instruments, papers, and other supports were set up as invitations for mark-making. The attention to beauty, symmetry, and consideration of the potentialities of these materials was clear after watching Marina work carefully, making decisions about how everything would be presented. I feel that I have a sliver of understanding of the priority of clean, neat, beautiful, carefully considered presentation, and the choices one could make in offering many materials for investigation.

The attention to beauty, symmetry, and consideration of the potentialities of these materials was clear after watching Marina work carefully, making decisions about how everything would be presented.
Marina asked us to engage in our own exploration of these materials during the atelier she facilitated on the third day. She shared that it is very formative for teachers to experiment this way just as we invite children to do so in our schools. We often talk about exploring the hundred languages, but if the adults do not know, experience, or recognize all of the possibilities of the materials we offer – how are we really offering the hundred languages to children in our school contexts? If we do not have a relationship with certain materials because we have never experimented on our own, how can we understand when a child engages with it? We want to engage with materials that we offer the children and build our own pool of knowledge. We were invited to consider that all mark-making has two identities: something that leaves marks, and something that receives marks. As Marina said, “there is never an indifferent encounter” between the two.

I think this is the concept that I am ruminating on the most as I return to my studio context in this new year; when we consider mark-making opportunities, the mark-makers and the receivers of marks are equally important. We have brought this possibility to the studio already in the new school year. In the preparations we made for exploring lines and marks with children aged 18 months to five-years-old, we have tried our marks on different leaves collected from our surrounding area with many soft and bright colored writing implements. I observed children differentiate between choosing thick, solid magnolia leaf over a thin, ribbed hydrangea leaves among many other types.

During the week with Marina, we also explored materials such as light, digital microscopes, and 3D pens. We know this kind of exploration does not have to be an expensive endeavor. As Marina said, “There’s always a stone, and there’s always water to draw with.” I think that most of the atelier facilitators incorporated water, rocks and leaves as mark-making and mark receiving possibilities in the conference...
Watching Marina Mori was a rich experience of reading thoughts and thinking in the language of the actions. Observing her eyes and hands while engaging with materials along a current of ideas and intention gave a sort of spiritual revaluation to concepts and phrases like “dialogue with materials,” “listening,” and “observing.”

The experience felt like taking a deep breath of cool new air. It seemed to offer something more than just a fresher version of what I have been taking in. It was a woven tapestry of deeply rooted, concentrated concepts and values.

I felt an urge to pause, be present, take notice, read every action, and listen to understand. I learned that there is always more: more potential to add complexity, more possibilities of relationships to be encountered and explored, more connections to be made, and more beauty to be experienced.

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It provokes a weighty feeling being filled with excitement and responsibility, excited exploration and thinking mingling with silent exploration and thinking. This experience has inspired a practice of making thinking and intentionality visible, and readable in my actions and choices, which I believe will offer a more focused lens for observing and interpreting children’s efforts and strategies.

Candace Dupree is a Georgia native, parent, and educator. She serves as a pedagogista with Project Infinity by way of Grant Park Co-operative Preschool. She has been learning and practicing in the field of early childhood education for 16 years. The last 11 years of her practice have been deeply inspired by the educational project in Reggio Emilia, Italy. During the 15th NAREA Summer Conference, Candace helped facilitate the “Palette with Unusual Drawing Instruments” atelier.
From the experience I had being a part of setting up two different ateliers, and participating in facilitating one, I learned by doing. I learned the importance and the joy of giving careful attention to the detail of arranging and presenting a proposal. I learned that doing something like this incorporated all the Reggio values, and was a good way for me to grasp everything in a holistic way, instead of by pieces. I would recommend this way of learning to all teachers. We should not always be only participants in ateliers but participants in choosing, setting up, resourcing, problem solving, and facilitating ateliers. I think this would go a long way in supporting us, as teachers, to realize our own atelierista sides as we offer mini ateliers in the classroom and diffused throughout the campus.

I also believe, from the experience of collaboratively creating the mark-making atelier, that the principles learned there could be extrapolated to other types of materials and languages. Just as it was important for us all to experience many, many types of mark-making tools and papers, we could have many forms of other types of things. One of the biggest points I heard Marina Mori say was that children learn by comparing, which is why a wide range of any material is made available for the children. The other big point was how what you make – whether marks, or clay, or even collections from nature – can be amplified and the experience extended by digital means. These are all elements I want to offer more in our classroom and figure out how to tailor for very young children. I noted throughout the week that the infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia might all have the same research topic, but they personalize the approach to the research topic by school, and by age. It gets tailored.

I thought it was a really brave choice to make one atelier dedicated to infants and toddlers. As a teacher of this age group, I was so appreciative. Those of us setting up the infant-toddler atelier really tried to use all the principles and ways we had learned from Marina in the mark-making atelier. But her reaction to what we had set up was pretty strong. And, her ideas of how to present mark-making to the very youngest children were a bit different from what was presented for the older ages.

We had learned in the mark-making atelier about things that make marks and things that receive marks. We were provided reams of paper in many kinds of texture, color, and tone accompanied by markers, chalk, paint sticks,
and many new (to us) types of mark-makers, which were lined up in harmonic arrangements; even water and brushes for marking on stones. But we learned from Marina that infants-toddlers start mark-making in a different way.

Along with projected images, clay, water painting, and a much smaller array of paper and markers were included in the infant-toddler atelier. Marina said infant-toddlers should be learning about the concept of transparency and things that are not transparent. They should be learning about the overhead projector – light and bright, silvery and bubbly – and about materials that trick you, as in the way an overhead projector changes the perspective of objects and even the direction of objects (reverse: left to right and top to bottom). For example, a toy horse standing up may look laying down, or if it is lying flat it looks like it is standing up. Children learn these differences and contrasts. Marina spoke about how projecting is a form of mark-making and suggested keeping a variety of objects near the projector so children can see the different perspectives and gain familiarity at a very young age. Then, when a child is older, this becomes a tool that is easy to use and familiar to him or her.

After working with Marina, my interpretation of mark-making for infant-toddlers would be that this age group is learning what the things in the world are, and what they look like, and that the earth is full of things. Before one can represent things, one must first know that things are, then that things can move, then that one can cause things to move, then that things can have likenesses or images as in books or pictures, or projected, then one can manipulate the projections – and eventually the children learn to make representations.

I loved working with Marina, loved her care of us, loved her passion, and loved learning shoulder-to-shoulder with an “original” from Reggio Emilia.
The enigmatic title, *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material*, pertains to an exhibit, a catalogue, and a current *atelier* in the Loris Malaguzzi Center. The purpose of all three is to “restore to drawing, materials, words, and the children all the cognitive and expressive richness they generate” (p. 15). To this end, the exhibition and its catalogue are an “unfinished story that seeks wider spaces for reflection and comparison of ideas” (p. 9). The *atelier* is an interactive part of the exhibit with invitations to explore the materials and reflect on the processes. The existence of an *atelier* within an exhibition created by the Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – *Istituzione* of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia is noted as a common strategy for moving the discussion and reflection into public forums. The exhibit, the catalogue, and the *atelier* are all possible starting points for discussion and reflection. All are a compelling case for the well-being of mark-making and drawing in early childhood programs.

The story of how I became interested in the catalogue *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* is born out of simple curiosity. Over the course of a four-day 2018 summer studio led by Gigi Yu and Jesús Oviedo, Phoenix area early childhood educators had opportunities to explore and revisit vine charcoal, charcoal pencils, Conté crayons, China Markers, oil pastels, wire, corrugated paper, vellum, bubble wrap, and a multitude of interesting surfaces or supports. Much like the protagonists in the catalogue, *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material*, the summer studio participants found the appeal and potential of the various tools or instruments and supports. Gigi mentioned that *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* was influential in her research and organization of the summer studio. Upon hearing this, I had to have the book. Not only did I order one copy, I ordered 33 additional copies to share.

Once the catalogue arrived, this is what I found – *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* takes the reader exactly where Reggio Children intends, on a journey that is simple and complex, literal and poetic, contemporary and futuristic. Paola Cagliari and Claudia Giudici describe the project’s intentions as part of a renewal of the forms and methods of public communication related...
Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material takes the reader exactly where Reggio Children intends, on a journey that is simple and complex, literal and poetic, contemporary and futuristic.

We are challenged to think of the existence of a variety and complexity of tools and supports.

The intention of the nearly 100 pages with purposefully restricted commentary is to create for the reader the ability to focus on the children, their images, and their words. This is done very effectively with text limited to children’s quotations and minimal explanations. This is a substantial portion of the catalogue and has been curated and organized into sections with provocative titles such as “Camouflage, Relaunches, and Creative accidents.” The section entitled “Sensitive suggestions” gives powerful insight into how the materials speak to children, and how the children talk back to the material. I found myself making connections between the documented experiences of the children in the catalogue to experiences I have encountered either studying documentation of children’s words and work with others, or as a protagonist in my own learning as I was using mark-making instruments and supports. There were also new thoughts and insights generated by experiences I have not yet had, which were shown to me by the documentation in the catalogue.

Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material concludes with photographs of the record of observations and documentation studied for both the exhibit and the catalogue, the graphic materials offered in the atelier that accompanied the exhibit, the exhibit’s inauguration, an explanation of what happened in the exhibit-atelier, and interpretations and analysis made by Reggio educators, including Vea Vecchi. In this final section, I found articulate evidence to support the thesis that the exhibit, the catalogue, and the atelier make a compelling case for the well-being of graphic languages in early childhood programs. Extracted from the section entitled “The complex challenge of professional development,” is this explanation from Daniela Lanzi and Annalisa Rabotti:
Drawing communicates with the inner and outer worlds of the children, strengthens their empathetic receptiveness and sensitivity to entering into a relationship with the subject drawn and evoked.

The theme of drawing and narration, around which the exhibition was conceived and constructed, had a number of cultural premises: drawing is like the “mind placed on a surface,” and in the reciprocity with symbolic-verbal narration, it finds a strong potential for building knowledge for associating emerging meanings between languages. Drawing communicates with the inner and outer worlds of the children, strengthens their empathetic receptiveness and sensitivity to entering into a relationship with the subject drawn and evoked. In this interaction, the graphic language is “naturally” complementary to the narrative dimension. (p. 146)

One of the many tensions after studying the work of the educators in Reggio Emilia is that of a decision point. The decision of what to do next. What can or should I do with this body of work? A personal goal I have is to incorporate the study of Reggio Children publications into our everyday work as college faculty and leaders of professional development. In this case, studying *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* prompted the creation of an experience of sharing interesting instruments and supports with two educators in a local early childhood program.

The early childhood education program at Paradise Valley Community College administers a professional development grant for our state agency, First Things First. As a part of this grant, my colleague Ana Stigsson and I lead weekly collaborative planning meetings in local early childhood programs. Last fall we began working with two new educators at the United Cerebral Palsy Early Learning Center. The teachers co-taught in the pre-kindergarten room. The program director cleverly arranged coverage for both teachers so that we could meet weekly or biweekly to study documentation. We began with an invitation to the teachers to explore oil pastels, who in turn, offered the oil pastels to the children. We had a robust study of children’s use of the pastels and eagerly documented the children’s preference of pastels over crayons. While Ana and I were comfortable with oil pastels, pastels were new for both the teachers and the children. Oil pastel work evolved into work with watercolor crayons. And then mixed media of watercolor crayons and black Sharpie pen. We prided ourselves on the use of higher quality instruments and supports. We were comfortably challenging ourselves. However, there was that uncomfortable feeling that while this was indeed good work, there was and could be more. We gave copies of *Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material* to the teachers and the director to review. Fortunately, there was an enthusiastic embrace of trying out new palettes.

We started the new year with offering the children gorgeous metallic sharpies on black paper. Not small sheets of black paper, but long, expansive pieces that covered the long classroom tables. It was during these collaborative mark-making and drawing times that we uncovered children’s group use of space and how each child found a way to leave a mark.

One teacher found the Stabilo highlighters interesting. We ordered lots of them. We had a plentiful supply of bubble wrap and transparencies. The teachers experimented with placing the transparent supports on the window and the plexiglass easel outside. Our strong Arizona sunshine often made it difficult to see the highlighter marks on the supports taped to the window. The light table was brought out and children were excited to be able to see the color. Transparencies were referred to as “clear paper” that offered the
chance to “write on the table” without actually writing on the table.

We offered China Markers left over from the 2018 summer studio. The children found the China Markers fascinating. The waxy texture leaves a mark on almost any support. Teachers offered large expanses of cardboard on the floor with China Markers and highlighters. We were seeing the teachers offering the instruments alone and in combination, and varying the types, position, location, and size of the supports. As we moved through our work together, we noticed another strong shift. Unlike the beginning of the project, the ideas for the palettes were now coming from the teachers. Our role was to provide the instruments and supports, if needed, at the teacher’s invitation.

The collaborative planning meetings provided a forum for us to study the children’s approaches, initial explorations, and sophisticated responses. We were also becoming more sophisticated in our study of documentation and what we were learning about children and their mosaic of marks, words, and materials. The technique of blending, something that was discovered at the beginning of this study with the oil pastels, transcended all the instruments. As we studied the various representations children described for us, we found many connections to the children’s lived experiences and many recurring themes. As one teacher noted, “Children have a good memory for the things they like.” Perhaps so do adults, although we might have to work more intentionally to create the good memories.

Pieces that could be pulled out for discussion and challenges to others:

• Experimentation with richness
• What does the well-being of a language (material) mean?
• Power to generate narrative from drawing (grafiche)
• Exhibits/catalogues and the recurring theme making known the day-to-day life

How might an experimentation with a rich normality of instruments and supports change our daily encounters with children, families, and each other?

How might an experimentation with a rich normality of instruments and supports change our daily encounters with children, families, and each other? What is the status of mark-making and drawing materials in our program? What might a study of narratives generated by drawing (grafiche) reveal?

What are the possibilities of exhibits and catalogues, in not only our theoretical understanding of the Reggio Emilia approach, but our day-to-day life? What is the difference between imitation and inspiration? Where might this narrative take us if we write our own story of marks, words, and materials? Not arranged as a mosaic, but a different constellation of our experiences, both lived and desired.

REFERENCES

Many of us have childhood memories that include trees: trees with just-reachable limbs that invited us to climb, perch, swing; trees with mysterious nooks and crannies that housed miniature worlds; trees with broad trunks where we played games like tag and hide-and-seek.

Fast forward to the present, when as early childhood educators we now observe very young children stroking the bark of trees, hugging their trunks, watching the play of light in the trees’ leaves. We see older children engaged in encounters with trees similar to those we remember: climbing, perching, swinging, pretending, and playing familiar childhood games.

Until very recently, I tended to view trees as passive props that served as a backdrop for these memories and observations. And then I read Peter Wohlleben’s book, *The hidden life of trees: What they feel, How they communicate: Discoveries from a secret world* (2016). Based on extensive research published in reputable science journals, Wohlleben offers an extraordinary perspective of trees – one that opens the reader’s eyes to the ways in which trees communicate with each other through “olfactory, visual, and electrical signals” (2016, p. 12) that travel, albeit slowly, through an underground network of fungal connections.

This perspective of trees as living, social beings served as a wake-up call. I had not considered trees as protagonists in memories of my own childhood experiences. And, as an observer, I certainly had not recorded or even thought about the particular contributions trees were making to the children’s experiences. I hadn’t thought to pay attention to the tree – to its height, shape, girth, texture, movement, sounds, fragrance (and certainly not to its subterranean life!) – or to reflect on how this complex set of attributes may contribute to a child’s experience. Clearly, I needed to think more deeply about encounters that take place between children and trees!
This “aha” moment led me to reach out to a group of friends and colleagues with whom I had collaborated 15 years ago as a member of a teacher research collaborative, the Reggio Inspired Vermont Early education Team (RIVET) (Goldhaber, 2007). I am forever grateful to them for their enthusiastic response to my call for help. We gathered on a Saturday morning, September 30, 2017, when I clumsily presented what I had learned about trees as active, living agents in the environment. I shared some of my own personal memories and a small sampling of observations of children interacting with trees that the teachers of the UVM Campus Children’s School and I had collected over the years. Then, taking the leap, I wondered out loud what we might learn by paying closer attention to children and trees in relationship, with equal attention to the tree as a protagonist in their encounter.

To my great relief, my RIVET friends listened with interest and immediately began talking about their own experiences as children and with children. By the end of the meeting, we agreed to launch a new teacher research project, “Children and Trees in Relationship.” RIVET 2.0 was born.

As RIVET 2.0, we have been meeting every two to three months over the past two years. I believe our shared history explains the ease with which we embarked on this new project. For example, we were comfortable struggling with the frustration of trying to frame a question(s) that captures the essence of the subject at hand. We wrote draft after draft (and in writing this invitation, yet another). Our most recent version reads:

How do trees and children interact? What does each protagonist (the tree and the child) bring to the encounter?

How might a child “listen” to a particular tree? To a grove of trees or to the woods?

What are children’s theories about trees? For example, do children have ideas about how trees might communicate? Feel?

How do we invite children to know trees more deeply?

What can we learn about the symbiotic nature of our relationship with trees by observing children and trees in relationship?

During our time together, we share and study images, transcripts, and observations of children ages 3 months to 6-years-old in the company of trees (ages unknown!). We share our own personal memories and areas of expertise. We recently discovered that one of us actually knows a lot about trees from having spent much of her childhood in the forests of Sweden! We are reading about trees from many different perspectives and genres (see Suggested Readings) and are beginning to look at the ways trees are portrayed in children's literature.

An Invitation to Participate in Research

We are now at a place in our work together where we recognize the need to broaden our scope of study beyond our personal experiences and limited contexts. It is with this goal in mind that we are inviting NAREA members to join us in our study of children and trees in relationship.
If you are interested in participating in this teacher research collaborative, please consider sending either a personal story of your own experience as a child in the company of a tree(s) and/or an observation, image, and/or artifact of a child or children interacting with trees to Jeanne Goldhaber at jeanne.goldhaber@uvm.edu. If you are sending an image that includes children, you must include a completed and signed permission form for each image. To request a blank photography permission form, email Thresa Grove at thresa@reggioalliance.org.

Images submitted may be reproduced via publication in *Innovations* and/or on our project Instagram account. Please note in your email if you do not want your image(s) or story to be shared on Instagram. We welcome as much information about the context of the documented experience as you deem significant. Please follow our project account @children.trees on Instagram to view and comment on recent submissions.

RIVET 2.0 members will read your personal stories and documented experiences and based on their potential for shared reflection and analysis we will select two or three for publication. These pieces will be published in the 2020 Spring and/or Summer issues of *Innovations*, accompanied by an invitation to you, NAREA members, to think with us about the published selections and to send your thoughts and reflections to jeanne.goldhaber@uvm.edu. Toward that end, we offer the following questions as possible provocations:

To which attributes of the tree might the child be “listening?”

What might the child be thinking? Wondering? Feeling?

What might we as teachers do to honor and promote the relationship between this child (children) and the tree(s)?

Informed by the multiple perspectives of your contributions, RIVET 2.0 members will review the reflections we receive and look for themes as well as unique interpretations. We will then synthesize and share our collective thinking in the 2020 Fall and/or Winter issues of *Innovations*.

To start the ball rolling and to try out our collective wings, RIVET 2.0 is sharing one of its images from our archives:

We welcome your thoughts related to this image, and most eagerly await your memories and/or observations of children and trees in relationship.

**Note of appreciation**

*This initiative is an ambitious one! We would like to thank Innovations for its willingness to support what is an untried approach to conducting teacher research involving early childhood educators from across North America. Above all, we would like to thank you, our fellow NAREA members, in advance for your willingness to join us in this adventure, and we look forward to learning from and with you.*
REFERENCES


SUGGESTED READINGS (FICTION & NON-FICTION)


Credits

Images in this article courtesy of Jeanne Goldhaber and Barbara Burrington of the University of Vermont’s Campus Children’s School
Resources

Organizations

NAREA
North American Reggio Emilia Alliance
www.reggioalliance.org

Reggio Children
info@reggiochildren.it
www.reggiochildren.it

Reggio Children Publications
Resources published by Reggio Children are available:
In the U.S. from NAREA
770.552.0179
narea@reggioalliance.org
www.store.reggioalliance.org

In Canada from Parentbooks
416.537.8334
orders@parentbooks.ca
www.parentbooks.ca

Bibliography
Visit the NAREA website for a comprehensive listing of resources related to the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy.

North American Study Groups in Reggio Emilia, Italy

March 21–26, 2020:
Students and Professors Study Group

March 28–April 4, 2020:
In Depth U.S. Study Group

Contact: Angela Ferrario,
Reggio Children liaison for U.S. study groups
aferrario@comcast.net

International Professional Development Initiatives in Reggio Emilia, Italy

November 10–15 2019:
International Study Group

Contact: Reggio Children
www.reggiochildren.it

“The Wonder of Learning — The Hundred Languages of Children” Exhibit

June–November 15, 2019 | Atlanta, GA
Hosted by Project Infinity, a 19-year collaboration of five schools. The exhibit will be located at SunTrust Plaza Garden Offices in downtown Atlanta, and will be accompanied by a series of professional development initiatives.

Contact: Thresa Grove
thresa@reggioalliance.org


Innovations

Innovations has an open call policy for article submissions for the March, June, and December issues annually. For information on the annual peer-reviewed issue published in September, please see the NAREA website.

Contact: Thresa Grove
thresa@reggioalliance.org
www.reggioalliance.org

Message from Reggio Children

The office of Reggio Children is pleased that there is so much interest in North America about our infant centers, preprimary schools, and educational philosophy. We note with pride the resources published and professional development initiatives organized about the Reggio Emilia approach to education. We caution interested educators that some resources and initiatives related to the Reggio Emilia approach have not accurately reflected our experiences and philosophy. In order to ensure accurate representation of ideas concerning Reggio, we urge publishers and producers of resources as well as organizers of initiatives concerning the Reggio Emilia approach to coordinate their plans with Reggio Children, s.r.L, via Bligny 1/a, 42100 Reggio Emilia, Italy, reggiochildren.it, www.reggiochildren.it.

Innovations in Early Education
NAREA Professional Development

Discount for NAREA members

The 11th NAREA Winter Conference
Defending Thoughtful Learning, Human Competence, and Creative Dignity
Greenville, SC
March 19-21, 2020
Speakers: Representatives from Reggio Emilia
Exhibit: “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material”
Contact: NAREA
www.reggioalliance.org

NAREA & Reggio Children Resources

NAREA is the official distributor of Reggio Children resources for the United States, and will perform this activity along with other collaborations between NAREA and Reggio Children within the International Network framework. These collaborations include organizing conferences and seminars with participants from Reggio Emilia, Italy, and “The Wonder of Learning — The Hundred Languages of Children” and “Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material” exhibit projects.

Charter of Services of the Municipal Infant-toddler Centres and Preschools

Through the combined efforts of Istituzione, Reggio Children, and NAREA, we bring you a resource from Reggio Emilia: the English translation of the Charter of Services of the Municipal Infant-toddler Centres and Preschools. This book is given to every family as they begin in the infant-toddler centers or preschools to qualify the public services. Included are descriptions of how a school day is organized, the culture of the atelier, the way the kitchens work, and the priority access for the children with special rights, for example.

Cost: $15 + S/H

Bordercrossings

In digital environments, as with all educational contexts in Reggio Emilia’s municipal infant-toddler centres and preschools, children act as authors and constructors of their own knowledge, and of their own individual and collective imaginaries, disproving the idea of anaesthetising technology at the centre of attention, and making visible a different amplificatory and generative idea. This catalogue recounts an exhibition, Bordercrossings – Encounters with Living Things / Digital Landscapes, which has gathered and exhibits projects realised in Reggio Emilia’s municipal infant-toddler centres and preschools: nature close-up, seen and investigated by the senses, theories, and actions of today’s children, and by analogical and digital equipment connected.

Cost: $40 + S/H

Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material

This catalogue presents the exhibition "Mosaic of Marks, Words, Material," a collection of works by children of the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia. Drawing and telling stories means imagining, analyzing, and exploring spaces, forms, colors, words, metaphors, emotions, rhythms, and pauses, entering into a narrative dimension that is both internal and external to the self, playing on reality, fiction, and interpretation. Though drawing and words are autonomous languages, for the children words and stories, silent or spoken, almost always go hand in hand or intertwine with the drawing, creating an intelligent and often poetic mosaic.

Cost: $38 + S/H

If you are interested in purchasing these resources, please visit the shop section of the NAREA website: www.store.reggioalliance.org
Infants and children in all places in the world cannot continue to have rights only on paper; the right to have good parents, good housing, good food, good schools, good teachers, and good government is what they ask for and what is urgently needed. If we adults will keep in mind that the children are always the holders of new possibilities and perspectives—and not only in the field of learning and of knowledge—perhaps we will not carelessly dissipate, with guilty nonchalance, the good that they, along with we, possess.

– Loris Malaguzzi, Innovations, v.1, no. 1, Fall 1992