

VOICES: CONVERSATIONS FROM NORTH AMERICA AND BEYOND

A Partnership with Nature: An Urban School's Collaborative Study

by Kristin Brizzolara Vazquez & Karen Haigh



Kristin Brizzolara Vazquez is an education consultant with 15 years of experience. She supports educators and administrators from various contexts as they plan curriculum and pursue principles of the Reggio Emilia approach. Kristin has developed and facilitated expressive and constructive language workshops, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, for numerous organizations including Chicago Public Schools and Columbia College Chicago. She has designed art studio spaces, custom furnishings, and children's toys. Kristin holds a B.A. in Elementary Education with a concentration in Fine Art and an M.A. in Reggio-Inspired Practices: Space, Materials and Relationships from Lesley University. Kristin has consulted with Velma Thomas for over a decade.



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We would like to recognize Mary Kay Richardson (Principal) for her leadership and limitless dedication. We are grateful for the ongoing support and encouragement given by Peter Brown and Maribel Castro (administrative team members) whose commitment is unwavering. This work would not be possible without contributions from the entire Velma Thomas community!

Introduction

Velma Thomas Early Childhood Center, a Chicago Public School Child-Parent Center, is a stand-alone preschool with seven classrooms. There are four half-day and three full-day rooms. Five classrooms utilize a dual language (Spanish/English) model. Six rooms are designated “blended” serving both a general education population together with

children who have special rights. The seventh is a room with a small population of children with special rights. Over 170 children were enrolled when the study took place, with over half qualifying for free or reduced lunch. More than 70 percent of the children were Latino, with the remaining enrollment of Asian and European descent.

Velma Thomas is situated among two- and three-flats as well as single-family homes on the southwest side of Chicago in the McKinley Park neighborhood. A 70-acre public park called McKinley (William) Park sits less than one city block from the school. The park boasts majestic trees, a lagoon with a fishing area, wildlife, and walking paths as well other recreational areas. This expansive outdoor space, along with a recently developed nature play garden adjacent to the neighborhood public library, are integral to the daily life of the children and the general school community.

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The initial interest in the Reggio Emilia Approach came from Velma Thomas educators collaborating with educators and administrators at Chicago Commons in the early 2000's. Chicago Commons created a framework for Reggio-inspired early childhood education in deeply economically challenged communities of the inner-city Chicago, which is similar to Velma Thomas. We have been fortunate to have this framework and its resources to inspire and support us in our work. A key component from Commons' work which provided early direction to our journey is noted in *We Are All Explorers: Learning and Teaching with Reggio Principles in Urban Settings*, "Looking closely characterizes virtually everything that one undertakes in the Reggio Approach. Children and teachers look closely at objects of inquiry. Coordinators and administrators look carefully at strategies for supporting teachers and their development" (Scheinfield et al., 2008, p. 168).

During the 15 years that we studied and researched Reggio-inspired practices, numerous perspectives and ideas influenced our work. We are fortunate, due to the approach, to make meaningful connections in the educational community to consultants from a variety of disciplines with expertise in the Reggio Emilia Approach: dual-language education, mathematics, studio arts, design disciplines, dance, and nature study. The consultants equally supported the administration with leadership strategies and educators in the classroom with philosophical and practical guidance. We grew immeasurably during our encounters with Lella Gandini, Amelia Gambetti, and Tiziana Filippini in their visits to the school.

One such inspiration came in the late 2000's when Reggio educator Amelia Gambetti visited and challenged then principal Elizabeth Najera to define the identity of the school. Elizabeth's thoughts went to the nearby park which she described as an enchanting but somewhat neglected neighborhood meeting place. This conversation provoked a fresh approach to our relationship with nature. As classrooms began visiting the park more often, they were challenged to go beyond the familiar by taking measured risks in search of more exceptional possibilities.

Following Amelia's visit, the educators and administrators met with a consultant in hopes of redefining the identity of the school in relation to the natural world by creating a unique indoor common space. Inspired by principles of biophilic design, the intention was to draw upon both the profound and subtle elements of McKinley Park. The aesthetics, organization of space, and mood created an indoor environment with an immersive visual and sensory relatedness to the local ecology. Drawing further direction from the surrounding natural spaces years later, the main outdoor area also underwent an extensive redesign, providing intriguing natural playscapes and more clearly reflecting the identity of the school.

As the school's physical environment continued to evolve over time, the Velma Thomas administration and educators actively and collaboratively studied a special focus. Together, we engaged in annual reflections and during this time, we made connections to the past school year and planned a focus area for the upcoming year. In some ways, this practice was similar to an informal action research model.

Examples of past studies enacted by the school:

2015–2016

- Study of Group Times

2016–2017

- Study of Large Group Times

2017–2018

- Study of McKinley Park

2018–2019

- Continued Study of the Park

2019–2020

- Study the Park and Design Principles related to Children and Nature

2020–2021

- Continued Study of Park and Design Principles related to Children & Nature

In 2017, we deliberated a focus area of study for the upcoming year. The practice of engaging in a year long, school-wide action research project was well established in our school and so it seemed natural that we should look to the park as the focus of a shared investigation. Inspired by the work described in Reggio Children's publication, *Children, Art, Artists: The Expressive Languages of Children, the Artistic Language of Alberto Burri*, educators spent a day with a naturalist in the park. Days later we returned to the park, focusing on the environment as a place of light, reflection, texture, beauty, and color.

Through ongoing study of the park, a new layer of complexity emerged for a shared investigation. The school administration met with Dan Scheinfeld, a colleague researching children and nature. He learned about the school's focus on McKinley Park and suggested we read the work of David Sobel. As a result, the program researched and was then influenced

by Sobel's book, *Childhood and Nature, Design Principles for Educators*. It was proposed and later decided that classrooms would choose one or two design principles to pursue with children. The principles included: adventure, fantasy and imagination, animal allies, maps and paths, special places, small worlds, and hunting and gathering (Sobel, 2008). Anyone who has played outdoors can relate to many of these principles and probably with fond or even meaningful memories.

David Sobel's design principles:

- adventure
- fantasy and imagination
- animal allies
- maps and paths
- special places
- small worlds
- hunting and gathering

The switch to remote learning in spring of 2020 presented both hurdles and opportunities. As the interactions turned virtual, educators looked to new strategies to support their ongoing work. They acquainted themselves with and then welcomed technology platforms, interfaces, and applications to sustain their studies and create new collaborative spaces. The community of learners developed a library of tools and resources to support the documentation process. Maintaining a commitment to the value of nature in the lives of their students and families during remote learning, each classroom continued to encourage and pursue connections with the natural world through an emergent curriculum.

Through professional development, which has long been embedded into the fabric of each day, we maintained the depth and breadth of these studies even while teaching and learning remotely. As a part of this practice, classroom educators observed and documented daily encounters with children and prepared traces to share in weekly planning meetings. Administrators joined classroom meetings for reflection, listening, and designing future encounters and classroom experiences. Consultants provided further guidance through individual classroom sessions. The full staff shared work in larger groups monthly to sustain the shared aspects of the study. We

found new opportunities in virtual spaces to continue our discourse as each classroom pursued and developed their studies.

For this article, teachers from seven classrooms, along with Veronica Cline, the parent educator, share individual stories from the nature-focused classroom studies. The teachers were challenged with illustrating one or two small but remarkable pieces of their evolving work, which for some unfolded over

a three-year time span. Actually, any of the stories is worthy of an entire article or book but in supporting values of unity and inclusion, all classrooms contributed. These stories offer a window into the larger narrative with Sobel's design principles of nature providing a common thread running throughout. Sobel (2008) asks the guiding question for our shared work, "What's the relationship between School and Mother Nature?" (p. 1).



El Caminito

Nancy Arredondo, Liza Castillo-Duran, Adela Osorio, & Raquel Sanchez-Castillo

Early in the school year, we invited families from our half-day, blended, dual language classroom of three- and four-year-old children to take a sensory walk through McKinley Park. We encouraged them to pay close attention to the sights, smells, and sounds. It was during this walk that Saul, a precocious four-year-old, came upon a path located next to the lagoon surrounded by tall grass, native plants, and flowers. As we strolled down the path, we asked, "Que es este lugar?" ("What is this place?") Saul responded, "El caminito! Está hecho de agua, está hecho de tierra." ("The path! It's made up of water, made up of earth.") Kari, chimed in, "El caminito takes you back home." These initial encounters led to our focus on *el caminito* (the little path) at McKinley Park.

We began weekly walks to *el caminito*. Through consistent visits, the children developed relationships with the space and soon this little path became a safe place for the children to explore and wander freely. Together we witnessed the many seasonal changes it endured. Cold temperatures, rain, and snow did not deter us from experiencing the outdoors, but the noticeable changes became the inspiration for representational drawings and paintings.



Children walking through *el caminito* in the spring

We continued to inquire in further pursuit of the children's thoughts and theories during each visit. On one occasion we asked, "What can you do in *el caminito*?" Eli replied, "To see the snow. *Correr* (Run), play!" Abraham added, "Find snakes and squirrels. Just snakes. They don't exist, but they are in *el caminito*."

According to Burrington & Sorinto (2004):

The natural world and the quest for learning have the power to captivate each one of us, especially the very young. There is an enticing call for us to take a closer look, to examine, experience and revel in new discoveries. (p. 228)

For our classroom community, *el caminito* satisfied this call by providing shared moments of wonder. The complex interactions in and around the natural space helped us to realize that the local park offered enchanting opportunities for play and learning. Over time, the park became an extension of our classroom and the natural elements made their way into the physical indoor space. These changes represented a clear evolution of our relationship to the local outdoor environment.



A photo of *el caminito* in winter



A child's painting of *el caminito* in winter



Building Relationships with Trees

Arcelia Pineda, Stephanie Rodriguez, & Cynthia Magana

Our full-day blended classroom of four- and five-year-old children began regular visits to the park and noticed that new trees were being planted. The children showed curiosity about the new trees. Perched on a hill at the park, they watched as the workers planted the trees. While observing, Nanigi shared, “*El aire se mueven [las ramas], como que estan bailando.*” (“The wind they [the branches] move, like they’re dancing”).

Back in the classroom, the teachers asked the children to imagine creating their own park, “What would you have in a park?” The children requested swings and slides and surprisingly everyone wanted to include trees in their plans.

As a result of the children’s expressed interest, we decided to return to McKinley Park with pairs of children in search of their favorite tree. While at the park, each child created an observational drawing. In the weeks that followed, during our classroom meetings, children presented their initial drawings while their peers suggested adding ornaments, flowers, and toys to the trees. Victor wanted to give his drawing to his tree. His friend Max suggested, “Victor could put, like, hang a picture and put eyeballs on his tree so he could look at his drawings.” Throughout the study, the children continued to make gifts and place them on the trees.

Inspired by a tree study in Louise Cadwell’s book *Bringing Reggio Home: An Innovative Approach to Early Childhood Education*, we asked the children, “Where would you like to move your tree?” Most children wanted to move the trees to a friend’s house so they could play together. They represented their ideas using watercolor paint and Sharpie markers.



Workers planting trees



Favorite tree drawings while at the park



Children's gifts for their favorite tree



Max's painting

Max shared the intentions for his painting:

I want to move my tree and Joshua's tree by my house because I like Joshua's tree because it is bigger than my tree. My tree and Joshua's tree are going to play together, and I am going to play with Joshua.

While revisiting documentation, we noticed that the children often gave the trees human-like qualities. When provoked to think about what their trees did during the day, a child named Detzani said, "I came with my mom to visit my tree and I got lost on my way there because my tree called me on the phone, and he told me that he missed me and wanted to see me." Children wanted to spend time with their trees. Family members took their children to the park so they could visit the trees before coming to school.

We asked parents to share one wish they had for their child's tree. Victor's dad expressed the following:

As a father I would like this tree to share its shadow and air with my son. I would also like that in each of its leaves it could have life advice. We as parents can give them advice but we do not know everything, and it would be very good also that Victor could tell him things that he does not want to tell me. It would help him to express his feelings.

Our observations led to a deep appreciation of the children's friendships with their trees and with each other. The teachers and parents worked together to nurture these compassionate relationships as the trees became members of the classroom community.



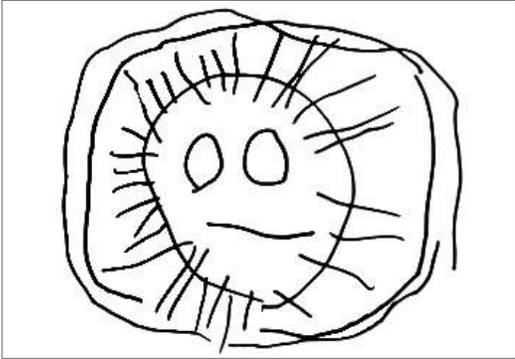
Taking Care of Worms: Hearing the Voices of Children

Jessica Fong

We embarked on a worm study that became a vehicle for children to express their theories about families and relationships through a connection to animals and nature. Our room of three- to five-year-old children was a half-day, dual language, blended classroom including children with special rights. Our study began when the children decided to dig for worms in the park and really took off when they started bringing the worms back to the classroom. We invited the children to draw the worms. They began by placing the worms directly on the paper as they drew. These early observational

drawings have traces of the yellow stains from the worms' bodies wiggling around on the paper while the children encircled them with drawings of their homes, families, and food, representing what we interpreted as their theories about what one requires to live well.

Through the children's drawings and discussions, we observed their anthropomorphic understanding of the worms. They saw the worms as an extension of themselves and in turn the worms became a part of their families (Sobel, 2008).



A child's drawing of mommy worm and family members

Andres: It's so cute. Look at my hand. Oh, my goodness! He likes that.

Sara: She's dirty on herself. Yeah, she's dirty.

Andres: Look it what he's doing on my hand.

Sara: Look it she's so super. She's gotta wash her hair. Look it she's so cute.

Andres: He's still tired, look. Because he wanna go his mom.

That winter each child created a small house, selected a worm, named it, and brought it home along with a journal to document the care of these tiny pets. One child described her journal as "the words for my beautiful pet." The children showed a deep understanding of how to care for a living creature as well as how they experience being cared for in their own lives.

One child in particular taught us how the power of relationships forged in and with the natural world. Daniela communicated her theories about worms and their homes through rich detailed drawings. Daniela came to us with a diagnosis of selective mutism connected to an earlier traumatic experience and initially did not speak to teachers or peers while in school, but she was a passionate and active participant in our worm study from the onset. We had a breakthrough one day when Daniela quietly whispered the name of her worm to Francie,

one of our team classroom teachers. Francie could not understand what she said, but Daniela persisted. She chose to forego outdoor play in order to sit with her teacher, drawing pictures to represent the name, acting out the name with gestures and body movements, and quietly repeating the name over and over, unwavering in her attempts to be understood. Finally, Francie understood her worm's name, "Pillow Elsa!" From that day forward Daniela's verbal language exploded, particularly during the worm study. An example can be found in the journal entry drawing Daniela shared [in Spanish], "In the kitchen they have table and chairs and refrigerator. Inside the refrigerator there is apple and orange, soup and spoon. They eat at the table in the kitchen." This moment with Daniela was one of many we had that year with the families and children that showed us as educators the profound impact caring for such small creatures had on the children as well as their families. Paul Shepard writes that through this interaction with animals, "the child discovers a common ground with other beings" (Sobel, 2008, p.30).



Daniela's journal entry



Cultivating Reciprocity with Nature Among Children with Special Rights

Erik Herro

During the school-wide study, our self-contained, instructional classroom of three- and four-year-old children with special rights decided on investigating experiences with special places and relationships with nature. Our team of educators was inspired by the various connections children formed as they explored and interacted with one another and the park, which in this vignette refers to the nature play garden. Focusing on special places helped us see how levels, both up high and low to the earth were special to the children. Some children sought out the tallest trees while others sought out low levels by laying on logs close to the earth, observing details of the terrain. Noticing the joy, focus, and motivation of our children exploring levels helped us further understand each child's strengths and how we could better support them, both outdoors and indoors.

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As we began to focus on the indoor space, we looked for ways to integrate their experiences with different outdoor levels into the indoor environment. Incorporating a loft allowed for higher level opportunities and became a central point of interest in the classroom. The children and teachers gathered sticks from the park to customize our loft. These sticks were used to extend the height of the loft, to define certain areas and allow for enclosed spaces, and to invite climbing opportunities in specific areas of the loft which we felt would be safe while still providing a challenge.



A child exploring great heights



Classroom loft made with natural materials

Inspired further by our observations of the children, we developed fixtures such as a spinning board, texture walls, and box tunnels. During one observation, while at the park, a four-year-old child with special rights who loved to spin objects wanted to access the wheels on our wagon but lacked the strength to flip the small vehicle upside down to get the wheels off the ground. A classmate noticed

his frustration and flipped the wagon so his peer could spin to his heart's content. From this interaction, our team was motivated to construct a spinning board out of recycled materials and hardwood for the classroom. Through all of these changes, the classroom environment began to reflect the park itself.

These experiences also changed what we thought we could do outdoors. During this time, our classroom was exploring watercolor paint with a specific focus of painting on and with a wide range of materials and in varied contexts. This presented a natural opportunity to link our classroom work with watercolors to our experiences in nature. Our teaching team felt it was important to make our children's experience of joy and connection to the play garden visible by giving back to the play garden so that our students could see themselves in the spaces they loved. The class gifted our wood paintings to the garden by weaving them into permanent features of the park such as the fence and stair railings.

A focus on relationships was always at the foundation of our work. We saw friendships blossom during play in nature, especially our children's relationship with the park itself.



Creating gifts for the park

The children's love of the space was so clear and inspiring, our team sought to express this through the gift from the children to the park. We felt providing our children with an experience of reciprocity with nature by giving back was an important way to deepen their experience and connection with the natural world.

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Playing with Imagination

Laura Villavicencio & Rachel Krueger

The nature focus for our multi-lingual (Mandarin, Lithuanian, Turkish, and English) blended class of four- and five-year-old children with special rights was inspired by Sobel's writing on imagination and fantasy. After reading *The Adventures of Beekle: An Unimaginary Friend* by Dan Santat, the children began to have conversations about imaginary friends. Noticing an emerging interest, we asked, "If you could have an imaginary friend, what would it be?" While drawing his imaginary friend, Cole responded, "It's a unicorn. It's pink

purple. Lolo boy [the imaginary friend] eats popcorn, butter popcorn. We draw [together]."

Using Sharpie markers on cardstock, the children transformed their imaginary friends into figures. These figures quickly became a significant part of the school day, making appearances in play with their peers and on visits to McKinley Park. They accompanied the children in their exploration of the park, finding special places to play together. Damien played with his imaginary friend

named “Panda” in a tree. As he manipulated Panda up the tree he said, “I’ve got to climb up here. I’ve got to get to my apartment. My apartment is so high up.”



Damien in the tree with Panda

While visiting the nature play garden in the community, we asked the children, “What would you do if your imaginary friend was with you?” We photographed children as they dramatized their ideas. Sitting in a tree, Lucy described how she would play with her imaginary friend in the following way, “We [me and Lina Lu] would climb trees. She would be a great climber, just like me. We would climb all the trees. I bet she would also like to go for a ride on the boat.”

The children began working more closely with technology. They revisited the digital photographs from the nature play garden and thought about how the scenes might change if their imaginary friends were there. Using a photo editing application, they manipulated scanned images of their imaginary friends and acted out the nature fantasy play again, this time in a virtual space. We observed how technology provided a platform for the children to bring their friends to life. It was powerful to watch them navigate the interplay of technology and the natural world with such empathy and independence.

Learning soon shifted to remote and educators wanted to create gifts to keep the class



Lucy’s digital image of Lina Lui

engaged and connected. Drawing on the strong interest, we created small keychains from the children’s drawings of their imaginary friends and delivered them to each child. The hope was that children would have a special memory to bring comfort in the following year as they moved on from their preschool classroom community to kindergarten.



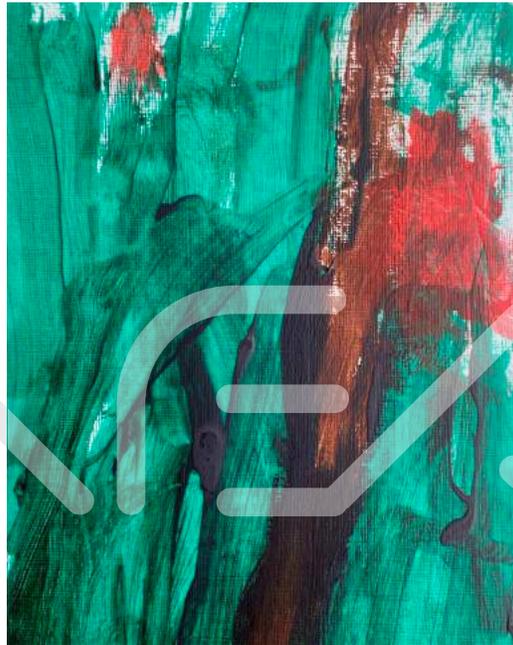
Imaginary friend keychains



Our Little Forest: The Natural World Through Many Languages

Jennifer Mayfield, Karina Cunculs, & Jennifer Acuna

In the fall, a parent who was a musician by trade introduced a simple children’s song/ game called “We Are Dancing in the Forest” to our blended, half-day, multilingual classroom of three- to four-year-old children. The song, which quickly became known to the teachers and children as the wolf song, sparked an ongoing interest in forests, animals that live within them, and stories that take place there. The children loved to sing the wolf song while in our forest at McKinley Park. Our forest was made up of a circle of tree stumps near a wooded part of the park. Children took turns acting as the wolf in the center of a circle while others danced and sang around them. Children created multiple representations inspired by both the forest and the wolf song using Sharpies and various paints such as tempera, watercolor, and acrylic. Many children added multiple layers of green and brown to create densely populated forests and especially enjoyed using acrylic paints to get the effect they wanted. While trees were most frequently represented, some artwork included wolves and other animals. Later children used their imaginations to generate and then dramatize stories, often with a common theme of wolves or monsters hiding in the forest. A collaborative painting of a forest on a large curtain



Forest Paintings



Forest Paintings



Forest Paintings

with acrylic paint was created by families and became a backdrop for the children to use when dramatizing their original stories.

When the school shut down and remote learning began, we asked the children to hunt and gather natural materials in their neighborhood or local parks to create miniature forests at home. Children arranged sticks, rocks, leaves, and other found materials on paper and told stories about these little forests. Families shared videos of the children's vivid stories, which again often included animal tales, for the class to view.

The study of forests and forest animals continued during remote learning. We even arranged several occasions to meet families in McKinley Park, providing opportunities to reconnect with our "forest." A few parents in our class even took the initiative to form "The Outsiders" group for families. The group met weekly at local parks and forest preserves throughout the city in hopes of fostering peer relationships and connections to nature. One parent described these experiences as "unstructured play sessions to allow children to fulfill their natural curiosity for life and learn from each other."



Virtually shared miniature forests

Nature Stuff, Puff Puff Puff

Once upon a time there was a wasp that turned into a nut after ten days alone in the forest. As a nut, he sat completely still until...First, he was stepped on by a quiet deer. And then, he was gnawed on by a puffy squirrel. And finally, a red bird swallowed a part of the nut and flew away.



Nurturing Our Partnerships Giselle Sanchez Santiago & Diana Tapia Calderon

In our first year as a half-day, dual language preschool classroom with children of varying ages, we wanted to create opportunities for meaningful connections. Therefore, our classroom team chose to study special places, which Sobel (2008) describes as "places where they [children] can hide away and retreat into their own found or constructed spaces"

(p. 38). On the first day of school, children and families explored McKinley Park in search of special places. A few weeks later, we organized pairs of children whose relationships we saw burgeoning in the classroom to revisit the special places they identified previously with their parents.

One such relationship was between three-year-old Lorena and four-year-old Ophelia. They hit it off right away. During their initial trip together, the girls took turns visiting each other's special places; playing running games while negotiating rules and activities.

On their next visit, Lorena and Ophelia interacted with the environment on a deeper level using its elements to enhance their play. They dug in the dirt and hid various items. The next few visits offered them the opportunity to use different materials in their special places, such as magnifying glasses and drawing materials selected by the children. Later, we asked the children to document their special places individually through drawings and photographs. We created mini books to capture the stories of their journey which they then shared with the large group, reflecting on their experiences and inviting others to partake in the experience. As Ophelia shared with her peers, she took ownership and stated, "You have to be careful when you get there not to harm the flowers. I want [it] to be the same when you get there. No smoking and not throwing garbage."

When we shifted to remote learning, the focus of special places continued within the home. Children photographed their special places and shared them during virtual small groups. We witnessed the children finding new ways to connect with one another. Despite the distance, the two friends noticed each other's special places and Lorena called out during the meeting, "Ophelia has lights in her fort, just like me!"

While our initial focus that year was to explore children's interaction in natural spaces, the study evolved into a close look at relationships that centered around shared interests. Upon reflection we learned that we were documenting precious portraits of human connection and unwavering joy. These encounters reminded us of Loris Malaguzzi's words "Instead of interacting only through feeling and sense of friendship, they discover how satisfying it is to exchange ideas and thereby transform their environment" (Malaguzzi, as cited in Gandini, 2012, p. 67).



Lorena and Ophelia's special place



Lorena and Ophelia's special place



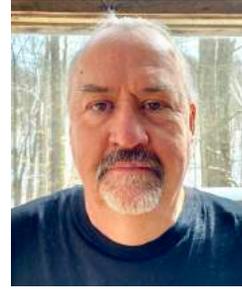
Lorena and Ophelia play in Ophelia's special place.



Lorena and Ophelia hide twigs.



Lorena shares her special place at home.



Childhood Memories from the Natural World

Veronica Cline, Kristin Brizzolara Vazquez & Peter Brown

The parents of the Velma Thomas school community are invited to engage in an annual project. Each project has a strong connection to work that is occurring in the classrooms that year. Previous projects included in-depth explorations of and experiences with materials; investigations into the principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach; and the design of a map illustrating landmarks and meaningful features from McKinley Park. In 2019, the parents' project paralleled the classrooms' focus on Sobel's design principles by emphasizing special places, maps and paths, and animal allies.

Muir (1877) suggests, "But in every walk with Nature one receives far more than they seek" (p. 232). Seeing value in what might seem a simple experience, the work began with walks through McKinley Park. Soon after, parents were invited to reflect on their own childhood through the lens of the natural world. Their memories were brought to life using natural materials with their children. Some parents shared how they took their children to the location of their specific childhood experience and together created new memories.

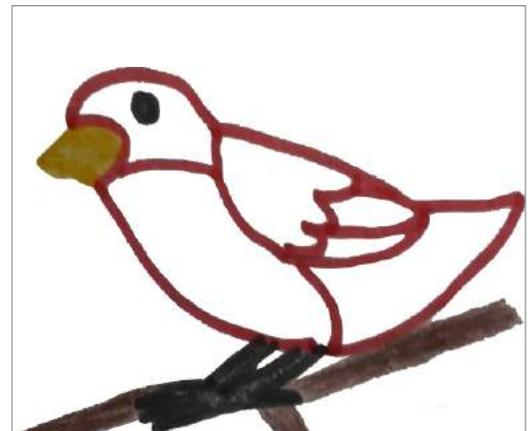
As the work continued, the focus shifted to the principle of maps and paths. During a group meeting, parents read and discussed powerful quotes and viewed images of children engaging in work and play, all related to maps and paths. Drawing materials were made available to represent a childhood recollection involving this design principle.

In the spring of 2020, learning went remote. While there was a desire to continue this work, parents were overwhelmed with their children's virtual learning. Outreach strategies such as phone calls, texts, and sharing the intent to create a significant piece of documentation (an e-book) helped increase participation. The principle of animal allies was introduced virtually through quotes and images related to the topic. Parents were invited to recall and represent a significant memory from their youth that involved animals.

The artwork created throughout this process made visible pieces of each participant's personal history. It was touching to hear them discuss the impact childhood experiences had on their adult lives. While sharing the work



Parent reminisces about river in San Luis Potosi, Mexico.



Parent drawing, "I identify with the little birds because my *abuelita* (grandmother) had many of them and when I was little, I liked to go to my *abuelita*'s to hear them sing."

during meetings, parents allowed a degree of vulnerability which resulted in some powerful connections between individuals.

In hopes of further nurturing these connections, we created an e-book which included graphic representations and voices of the

parents throughout their investigations into nature. We shared this digital book with the Velma Thomas community and staff. It is an ongoing piece of documentation focused on parent participation and engagement which we hope to develop further as the story continues to unfold.



Administrators' Perspectives on Professional Development

Peter Brown & Mary Kay Richardson

The development of Velma Thomas as a Reggio-inspired Chicago Public School has been a journey of continuous awakening to the possibilities of growth and understanding as early childhood educators, within ourselves indi-

The development of Velma Thomas as a Reggio-inspired Chicago Public School has been a journey of continuous awakening to the possibilities of growth and understanding as early childhood educators, within ourselves individually and collectively.

vidually and collectively. A key foundation of our mission is a common goal of supporting the rights of young children as inquisitive and self-motivated lifelong learners.

Often in school settings, there exists a hierarchy among administrators, lead teachers, and educational support staff where expectations of roles closely define and at times hinder truly collaborative participation in professional development opportunities. An initial understanding for us as administrators, was that the professional development model

we formulated had to provide a structure of continuous practice where participation, with dialogue and reflection, were promoted equally for *all* members of the learning community. This determination guides the structure for professional development and support embedded into the school.

This breadth of support is manifested in educators from a spectrum of positions, from the school clerk to the principal, who participate in equal measure in educational learning tours in Reggio Emilia, Opal School in Portland, La Cosecha (dual language focus), NAREA, and most recently, Anji Play in China. Additionally, all staff have opportunities to share long term, in-depth classroom learning projects. They create documentation panels within the school and try to present work at local and national educator conferences or seminars as the opportunity arises.

The process of writing this article led to educational staff and consultants collaborating on telling the story of our nature study. This provided a common focus during the present time of uncertainty, allowing staff to reflect on the importance of their work as educators and their image of children as capable, inquisitive human beings. Along with the reflective writing, staff members found inspiration reading and discussing remotely

Building Friendships with the Trees Construyendo Amistades con los Árboles

As our study of the trees at McKinley Park developed, we noticed the children building a special relationship with their trees. The children assigned their trees personal and human characteristics and a specific identity. The trees at the park thus became a reflection of the identities and personalities of the children in the classroom. More than simply trees they became another friend to the children.

A medida que nuestro estudio de los árboles en McKinley Park se desarrolló notamos que los niños construyeron una relación especial con sus árboles. Los niños asignaron a sus árboles características personales y humanas y una identidad específica. Los árboles en el parque se convirtieron en un reflejo de las identidades y personalidades de los niños en el salón. Más que simples árboles, se convirtieron en otro amigo de los niños.

Initial Visit to the Park La Primera Visita al Parque

During our first visit to the park we provoked the children to think about what they could see and hear at the park. Having said, "The wind, they move, look like they (the branches) are dancing."

Durante nuestra primera visita al parque, provocamos a los niños a que pensaran en lo que podían ver y escuchar en el parque. Negre dijo, "El aire se mueve, como que están bailando (las ramas de los árboles)."



Building a Park Construyendo un Parque

The children were asked to think about what a park might need. They worked together to create a park using natural materials. Trees were an essential part in all their creations.

A los niños se les pidió que pensaran en lo que un parque necesitaría. Trabajaron juntos para crear su parque con materiales naturales. Los árboles fueron una parte esencial en sus creaciones.



Dezani: The Squirrel The earth is the brown, blue is the water where all the food for the squirrels is.

Teacher: What kind of food?

Mia: Nuts! They need homes, leaves.

Dezani: and birds and bees, buzz, a caking, it needs a home.

Maya: I am going to put this on top of the squirrel's home (the tree) because they need water.

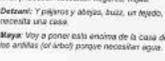
Dezani: La arbol! La tierra es café, el azul es donde está toda la comida de las arañas.

Maxine: ¿Que tipo de comida?

Mia: ¡Nueces! Necesitan hogares, hojas.

Dezani: Y pájaros y abejas, buzz, un ruido, necesitan una casa.

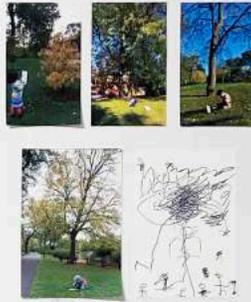
Maya: Voy a poner está encima de la casa de las arañas (el árbol) porque necesitan agua.



Favorite Trees Árboles Favoritos

We took the children to visit the park and asked them to choose their favorite tree. The children created an observational drawing of their tree and explained why they had chosen that tree.

Convenimos a los niños a visitar el parque y les pedimos que eligieran su árbol favorito. Los niños crearon un dibujo de observación de su árbol y explicaron por qué habían elegido ese árbol.



Victor: It looks like a Mario tree. I like Mario. I saw a big foot and it moved the tree with the big foot.

Victor: Se parece a un árbol de Mario. Me gusta Mario. Yo vi un pie grande y movió el árbol con el pie grande.



Daniela: I want a big, big, big, all the way to the sky tree. My tree has colors and a lot of branches. It is so long. The leaves fall down from the trees and the wind dries them and they stay like this look. (Daniela crunches leaves.)

Daniela: Yo quiero un árbol grande, grande, grande que llegue hasta el cielo. All árbol tiene colores y tiene muchas ramas. Está muy largo. Las hojas se caen de los árboles y el viento las seca y se quedan así mira. (Daniela desmenuza las hojas.)



Documentation Panel: Building Relationships with Trees



Parents' model of a treehouse village

the publications, *Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners* and *We Are All Explorers* on Google Meet, a virtual platform. A parent group formed with a shared interest in reading and reflecting on Reggio Children's publication, *The Languages of Food: Recipes, Experiences, Thoughts*.

The children's work often links to learning experiences for parents as well. For example, the children from the classroom investigating "Building Relationships with Trees," discussed design features for a treehouse village. The children's drawings, negotiations, and agreements regarding the features and design of the treehouse village lead to them sharing their work with the community. Ultimately, parents were invited to collaboratively build a 3-D model from the children's hand-drawn design proposal, using natural materials. Parents experienced a parallel process, as they negotiated and problem solved their way to add rope bridges between trees, water features, and various levels to climb. One parent came in the mornings, after working a night shift at his job to address details. The parents' model soon became an interactive feature in the children's classroom, where they played with mini figurines on the structure. Later in the year, during a redesign of the school's front play space, the designer and builder was inspired by the features of the children's drawings and parents' model. He incorporated several of the features, such as bridges, slides, water, and levels into his work, creating child-size interactive spaces for the children to play.

At the conclusion of the school year, a special day is planned with staff to celebrate and reflect on all the nature projects. Decisions are made for relaunching studies in progress, linking them to second year children or for sharing with children newly enrolled. Agreements are formed on an overall area of focus for the school, such as the current evolution of viewing children's relationship with nature via Sobel's work. Currently all Spring 2021 meetings continue via Google Meet, where educators share children's dialog, work with material, photo, and video documentation, with a determination to keep the core of the daily professional development, a lifeline to our learning together, alive.

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Credits

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