

Bridging Borders: Children’s Right to Dignity, Civility, and Dialogue

by Teresa Acevedo, Celena Martinez, and Iliana Reyes



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The border fence between Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico and Douglas, Arizona, United States

Introduction to the Study

This article documents a deeply moving study that was carried out at *Bonita* (Beautiful) and *La Escuelita* (The Small School), two federally-funded Head Start Child-Parent Centers located within two miles of the U.S./Mexico border. This teacher research project began as a study of fences, walls, and enclosures common to the experience of all children. During the course of the study, teachers noted the children's references to the border fence and, during a lull in the children's interest in the familiar enclosures of their homes and in their neighborhoods, teachers decided to re-focus the study on the border fence. This decision resulted in a powerful effort on the part of the children to understand, reflect on, and represent life (human and non-human) on the border. The children's families responded in kind, supporting and participating in the children's experiences as co-researchers, while exploring and sharing their own personal realities of life on the U.S./Mexico border.

The following questions guided this research project:

- How do adults and children influence and/or co-create their own social, emotional, and cultural contexts?
- How do children and adults co-create rich, diverse learning experiences within their co-constructed contexts?
- How are children's experiences, perspectives, and learning made visible through documentation within these contexts?
- How do teachers create contexts where creativity is viewed as an essential aspect of research and innovation?

Our educational approach has been influenced by the Reggio Emilia educational project. Specifically, our story illustrates how children, teachers, families, and the community in Douglas, AZ, carried out a long-term study that integrated their social-cultural, linguistic, and political exchanges and thinking. Throughout, we acknowledge the importance of including and maintaining cultural integ-

ity, cultural funds of knowledge in families, and the families' rich contributions to teaching and learning (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The concept of connecting people's life experiences at home, at school, and in the community counter the prevailing educational approaches that divide learning into discrete areas and rote instruction. Respect for the cultural integrity of the children and their families is the basis for facilitating reciprocal teaching and learning in both Spanish and English. To honor and respect this value, documentation of the children's and families' remarks and conversations will be expressed in the language in which they were spoken and translated into English for the non-Spanish-speaking reader.

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The educators at *Bonita* and *La Escuelita* have long histories of integrating aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach within their federally funded Head Start programs. They have consistently had a strong commitment to community collaborations, and, in this spirit, their relationships with the Tucson Children's Project and the University of Arizona have sustained and advanced their study of the Reggio Emilia approach through dialogue, consultation, and professional development among early childhood educators, graduate students, and families. Child-Parent Centers is grateful to their colleagues in the Tucson Children's Project and University of Arizona for the critical support they continue to provide to their study of the Reggio Emilia approach.

How It All Began

It often takes an outsider to see the potential richness of one's context, a context that may have become too familiar to register as a potential focus of study or investigation. We learned this lesson during a professional development initiative 2 years ago with Karen Haigh, a retired professor in Early Childhood Education at Columbia College, Chicago and Kristin Brizzolara, an educational consultant. They invited all of the teachers and administrators at Child-Parent Centers to discuss their community and immediate context. During this discussion, we decided to invite the children to consider the kinds of borders, fences, and boundaries that they encounter in their lives and to refer to this study as "Fences, Enclosures, and Walls."

While it was not our original intent to focus on the border fence, teachers learned from children's detailed observations of enclosures and fences that the border fence is a visible presence that affects children, families, and the community every day. The presence of the border fence is an inescapable and burdensome fact of life. It permeates the community deeply, in that people have to cross the border every day, just as they would cross a street in their neighborhood in pursuit of their daily routines.

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The Opening Provocation

The teachers began the investigation by organizing discussions within large and small groups as well as with individual preschool children within their respective programs. They asked the children to consider two questions: "What is a fence?" and "What is the purpose of a fence?" Using photographs of their neighborhoods, along with an invitation to use materials to represent their ideas, children drew pictures of their homes and yards and the fences near their homes. Children began forming their own committees, organizing around common interests and social connections that formed the heart of their collaborations. Representation of their experiences quickly emerged through the use of the diverse materials that were available to them.

The following transcript documents one of the many conversations that took place during this phase of our research while the children worked with materials.

Luna: *"El cerco es para que no se confundan los carros, y se quedan en su fila."* ("Fences are so cars don't get confused, and they stay in their own line.")

Flavio: "It's for dogs, so they don't come here; fences keep people safe."

Ivan: *"Estan largotes para que la gente y los animals se queden en su lugar."* ("They are very long so that people and animals can stay where they belong.")

Luna: *"Si, maestra, como las montañas; las montañas tabien dividen cosas."* ("Yes, teacher, they are like mountains; mountains also divide things.")

Deibany: "Fences are there so people who live in different places don't go over to the other side."

They recreated their living spaces in two-dimensional drawings and three-dimensional clay structures. Some children worked without the use of photographs or representations of their homes and ideas of fences. Teacher decisions about what materials to make available to the children were based on children's comments and what was available in the classroom. For example, the children commented on what they understood to be materials in the constructions of their houses: "My house is



made of bricks.” “My house is made of sticks.” “My house is made of steel.” We shared the children’s observations with the families who then brought in materials such as chicken wire and wood chips as contributions to the classroom supplies.

Teachers’ listening to and observing children’s interests and exchanges led to questions for further investigation. What are fences and enclosures made of? Where do we find them? The children expanded their ideas through discussion and their collaborative constructions as seen in the following transcript:

Jesus: “*Cercos son de diferente material, y el mio es chiquito y bonito, porque mi casa es bonito. Mi casa es de alambre.*” (“Fences are made of different material, and mine is little and pretty, because my house is pretty. My house is made of wire.”)

Shayala: “My fence is made out of pieces of wood from my roof. My dad made the fence so people will not come to my door.”

Zebediah: “Fences can be made of anything. My nana’s fence is cement and steel. My *tata* is tall, so our fence is small, because my *tata* needs to see who is coming to the house.”

Judith: “I don’t have a fence. My house is on top of another house. I have a balcony, and it is like a fence but that way, me and my little sister don’t fall off.”

As is evident in both transcripts, the children expressed concerns about their safety and the safety of their loved ones. In the second transcript, the children discuss the physical properties of familiar fences. Considered together, the children’s discussions and representations of fences seem to often reference the structures where the children lived, perhaps contextualizing their definition of fences in relationship to these familiar enclosures. Safety was a concept that emerged from the children’s comments, both in terms of preventing the entry of dangerous elements into their personal space as well as containing the inhabitants of the space and preventing them from going outside the enclosure where the threat of danger awaited.

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To support the children’s discussion of fences, the teachers offered the children fine-tip black markers and watercolors to represent their homes as well as an array of recycled materials to represent their fences. Teachers listened and observed where and how children began their work as individuals and together. Words children used in their conversations, descriptions of their homes, and general exchanges among children were all considerations for future study. Some children began drawing, others building, and some expressed their own stories and opinions. Daily, teaching teams exchanged observations about what would further contribute to what the children





were concentrating on. Teacher considerations were both conceptual and material.

Often, during morning routine, children are invited to talk about what is on their minds. Teachers may also share current events in the community or school while making local reading material and articles available for the families to read. It was during one of these morning meetings that the teachers offered the children a question provoked by an article in the local paper that had been published 4 or 5 months into this study. The question was: “Why do you think a fence was built between Mexico and Douglas? The children responded thoughtfully as they reflected on their personal experiences and relationships:

Luis: *“Mi papi dice que la frontera existe para que nos quedemos en este lado cuando viajamos, para que no crucemos al otro lado. Para que cosas no entran ni salgan.”* (“My daddy says that the border fence is there so we can stay on this side when we are driving, because we cannot cross to the other side. So things won’t get in or out.”)

Fidel: *“Mi papi dice el cerco es inmenso, yo lo veo cuando vamos a Agua Prieta, y no veo el fin. El cerco es para dividir a la gente que vive en Agua Prieta y la que vive en Douglas.”* (“My daddy says the fence is enormous, and I see it when we go to Agua Prieta, and I don’t see the end. The fence is to divide the people who live in Agua Prieta and those who live in Douglas.”)

Luis: *“Mi papá dice que la línea divide la gente que nació en Douglas que se queden en Douglas, y por eso, nosotros vivimos en Douglas, pero mis tíos, tías, y primos viven en Agua Prieta.”* (“My dad says that the line divides the people that were born in Douglas so they stay in Douglas, and for that reason,

we live in Douglas, but my uncles, aunts, and cousins live in Agua Prieta.”)

As we revisit the children’s two- and three-dimensional representations and the transcripts of the children’s conversation, we see clues to their thinking about the border fence—how it both separates families and contains people, its overwhelming size and length. But it was only later in the project that we decided to delve more deeply into the reality of the border fence and the prospect of a border wall. First, we had to confront the fact that we needed to reassess the direction in which our research had taken us and the concern that we had, in a sense, lost our way.

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Taking Stock and Moving Forward

Over time, home fences and enclosures were studied, examined, and constructed, using various materials. We learned so much during this time. We learned that the children are very aware of their surroundings and they are eager to share what they know. We learned that the children are keen observers, and we learned to listen carefully to their observations. We learned where and why children and their families moved around in the community. For example, one child said his family moved because they wanted a dog, and the dog needed a yard with a fence so they could pick up his droppings. We realized that what is richest is right in front of us, in the stories that the children and families tell us about the history of the community.

However, over a period of a year, the children's interest appeared to wane. Some children stayed focused, but many children were no longer engaged. The teachers had reached a plateau and were not able to generate ideas to stimulate interest related to the concept of fences or enclosures. They wondered if their own interest had also waned and whether they had lost track of exploring their surroundings. How could they interest the children if they themselves had lost interest and no longer felt a connection to the original intent? At this point, the study appeared to lack relevance both to the teachers and to the children.

The teachers reviewed what had transpired over the year and recalled the children's exchanges about the border fence. Revisiting the transcripts of conversations led the teachers to a decision to shift from the study of fences and enclosures around the homes, schools, and neighborhoods to focus more deeply on the border fence that separates the U.S. and Mexico. As a new provocation, teachers decided to place historical and contemporary black and white photographs of the border fence in the classroom. They were surprised that the photographs failed to re-engage the children. The teachers considered the possibility that the children did not recognize black and white images as representations of the border fence they encountered in their daily lives. With this interpretation in mind, the teachers offered color photographs of the border fence from their own albums and from those of the children's families. The teachers were happy that the children responded excitedly to the color photographs:

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Vladymry: "I know this place! I was there!"

Kathy: "*Oh, maestro, ese donde cruzas para Agua Prieta, y tambien tienes que cruzar ahi para ir a Cumpas.*" (Oh, teacher, that is the place where you cross to Agua Prieta, and you also cross there when going to Cumpas.)"

Janey: "That's where you have to wait a very long time for us to come over here."

Dominic: "There are also people who wash your windows, and they sell a lot of things."

Jordan: "That fence! That fence is there to protect the animals."

Sergio: "There are a lot of police officers that check your cars before you can cross the fence."

Jacob: "That fence is where people paint murals on them, but on the other side."

Valentina: "*Esa es la línea, maestra. En la línea, yo veo los muros con muchos dibujos de mariposas. Una Indígena esta dandole comida a un pajarito. Y un pajarito se esta mentiendo en la boca una vibora. Es su comida favorite. Las manos estan tocando la otra mano. Es la Amistad de Agua Prieta y Douglas.*" ("Teacher, that's the border, the line. At the line fence, I see murals with a lot of drawings of butterflies. An Indigenous lady is feeding a bird. And one bird is putting a snake in its mouth. It is the bird's favorite food. The hands are touching each other. This is friendship between Agua Prieta and Douglas.")

From the Fence to the Study of the Wall

The teachers noted that within the children's comments related to the border fence, few children made connections between their community's fences and the border fence between Douglas and *Agua Prieta*. Teachers observed that only a few children actually thought of the border fence as related to the fences they encountered in their daily lives, even though they crossed it frequently. Hoping to help the children make more explicit connections between what they had been studying and the border fence, teachers from *Bonita* and *La Escuelita* classrooms decided to organize field trips to the border.

This provocation proved to be an effective one. During the visits to the border fence, children revisited their ideas about the differences between walls and yard fences, ideas that they had explored during their earlier study of enclosures. They confirmed their understanding that fences have holes you can see through, while walls do not have holes, so you cannot see or pass through them.

As serendipity would have it, in the same week that the children were visiting the border fence, the community's weekly *Gazette* posed the question: "Do you support President Donald Trump's border wall order?" The teachers reworked the question and asked the children, "Do you think that we need a wall?" The reactions of the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children reflected the extent to which their theories and emotions were embedded in the political realities of both the U.S. and Mexico:

Erick: "My grandma can't come here, because she doesn't have a passport."

Fidel: "I have to wait in the *línea* (in line as a pedestrian or in a car) for a long time. I don't like it."

Isacc (apparently worried that the lizards could no longer cross the border): "Mr. President, please don't take the lizards away."

Francisco (worried one country would not have animals because the animals cannot cross): "People would always cross."

Jacquelin (who had not known about the wall or the prohibition to cross the border): "This is not fair. I want to have friends on the other side of the fence, because it is beautiful to have friends."

Luis: "You have to have big cards to say you can cross the border." ("Big cards" refer to passports. Luis's father could not cross).

The children's context is that of a small rural town surrounded by desert, and they live as a part of that desert alongside its wildlife and plants. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, when the children expressed a high level of concern for the injustices that would be incurred with the construction of a wall, not only for their families, but also for the wildlife that lives in the desert.

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The children's context is that of a small rural town surrounded by desert, and they live as a part of that desert alongside its wildlife and plants. Perhaps it should come as no surprise, then, when the children expressed a high level of concern for the injustices that would be incurred with the construction of a wall, not only for their families, but also for the wildlife that lives in the desert. They expressed a sense of empathy for all living beings having to contend with something that could divide them and threaten their safety. Fidel asked, "How will the moms and dads of the animals get back to their babies if a wall is built?" Children were clearly concerned that if a wall were to be built, not only would their families be affected, but also the animals would not be able to cross over freely from one side to the other. The children's sense of connectivity and concern reflects a value for all life forms on the border.

A Community of Engagement

Parents and family members were curious about what their children were learning. The children talked to their parents at home about what they were doing in school related to the border fence, generating a high level of interest among the parents. They had questions about what their children were saying at home and what they were seeing in the documented projects throughout the classrooms and centers. Teachers asked parents to bring in materials and photographs to further stimulate the project. Parents volunteered at school and participated in parent/teacher meetings where they saw their children's work and engaged in discussions about what the children were saying. While parent meetings included time for discussions and dialogues about both the political reality and the daily routines of life on both sides of the border, the teachers also invited the families to share what their children were saying outside of school about fences and the proposed wall.

Daniel's mom: *"Cuando visitamos nuestra familia en Mexico, el siempre pone atención al muro in la frontera para que le pude compartir lo que vio con sus amigos en le escuela. Me pide que tome fotos de los muros."* ("When we visit family in Mexico, he always pays attention to the murals on the border wall so he can share with his friends at school. He also asks me to take pictures for him.")

Zebediah's nana: "He comes home and talks about the study of fences and the border. He says it's made of metal, and it is very high."

Flavios' mom: "The day you talked about what they would tell the President, she said we could tell the President it is not a good idea, because she likes the Chinese food and ice cream in *Agua Prieta*, Mexico, and, she would not be able to see into Mexico."



In their dominant language, some parents shared observations of their children who were familiar with the Mexican side of the fence and its huge colorful murals. For example, a parent described a conversation she had with her child about a mural on the Mexican side of the fence. It represented two hands—one brown, one white—clasping. Her daughter asked why the hands were different colors. The parents responded by telling her that the fact that the hands were different colors did not matter. They explained that they did not want their child "to see any difference or to feel the sense of not belonging the way they had when they were growing up." The parents' responses reflect their own stories—stories these parents were hoping would teach their child to feel a sense of belonging and worth in her community, regardless of skin color.

Ongoing discussion about the Mexican side of the fence was also taking place in the classrooms. For example, a photograph of a mural



Butterfly mural on the Mexican side of the fence



Children's representation of butterfly mural

of a butterfly on that side of the fence captured the children's attention. During a discussion in the 4-year-old classroom, one of the teachers asked, "What do you think the butterfly on the fence means?" One of the children responded, "My mom says it's freedom, *van muy lejos, y regresan.*" ("... they go very far away, and then they return.") He also added, "*Que ellos pueden volar a donde ellas quieran, y no necesitan pasaporte. Pero hay otros animales que no pueden cruzar para Douglas porque está el cerco muy alto, como los gatos y perros.*" ("They can fly wherever they want, and they don't need a passport. But there are animals like cats and dogs that cannot cross, because the wall is too high.") Another child commented, "They [the birds] can fly everywhere, and they can cross the border."

As mentioned previously, the schools' community is semi-rural, with large desert areas on both sides of the border. Children see cattle and grass fields along and behind places like Walmart that they frequent regularly. When children and families cross the border, there is desert and natural habitat on each side. The area is a major bird migratory path as well. The children's comments reflect a reality that includes seeing wildlife on a regular basis on both sides of the border fence and their sense of empathy for all living creatures who might be affected by the construction of a wall.

The observations from home and school underscored the children's and their families' high level of engagement in thinking about and reflecting on how the physical properties of the proposed wall would impact the lives of all who live in the borderland. Parents, children, and teachers had become the real protagonists of this research project. We felt that now the study truly belonged to the whole community.

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Bringing Beauty to the U.S. Side of the Border

Children who had crossed the border described the paintings on the Mexican side of the wall, but when the children arrived at the border fence on the Douglas side, they saw no color, murals, or designs. The American side of the fence was brown with just a barrier message in dramatic contrast to the colorful, vital Mexican side with messages to the community. When they returned to their centers, children began to work on what they thought should go on the Douglas side of the fence. They wanted murals on their side of the border, too. The children acted on this desire by mapping both sides of the border, creating a three-dimensional map using wood, cardboard, wire, clay, and pencil and marker drawings. We interpreted these multimedia creations as expressions of the connection between both sides of the border, as in *ambos* (both) border cities that mirror one another.



Using photographs of border crossing stations, the border fence, and the murals on the Mexican side, children selected their area of focus—trees, the fence, the cars crossing. Each day, the children decided what they wanted to work on. They experimented with a range of materials to define what their worlds in both the U.S. and Mexico should be like. Some wanted to make maps of the border fence; others drew what they saw on the field trip. They made a variety of choices from an array of materials, including clay, paper, blocks, and recycled materials. Children imaginatively represented their experiences, feelings, and ideas of how they would change the American side of the fence through the use of colored pencils, markers, different sized paper for drawings, paints, ribbons, recycled materials, canvas, acrylics, and clay. We observed children making sense and giving meaning to what they were thinking, both individually and in their group/committee work. Children



had the freedom to construct among themselves with materials they chose. Teachers did not direct the children to build any kind of preconceived notion of a fence or a wall. They talked about and built what impacted them and had meaning to them.

We were reminded of Loris Malaguzzi's words that capture the freedom and creativity that children bring to their use of materials:

[T]he child has to manipulate material to his satisfaction. He has no debt to us. There is no proposal that the child has to make us. He has to savor, to play, and to experience the sense and the materiality of the object (2015, p. 93).

It is very important to know that every child produces something. Every child reflects himself uniquely in the final work.

Indeed, the children's use of such a wide array of materials presented both challenges and possibilities. For example, some of the children who chose to work with clay were relatively inexperienced with this particular medium and struggled to use it to accomplish their goals. These instances sometimes occasioned offers of help or advice from more experienced peers. For example, Jose Roberto had built a car that represented a car crossing the border station, but after it dried, a piece of it broke off. David asked, "How is that piece going to fit? Did you see how that would break?" Emmi replied, "It's okay. We can fix it." Teachers were struck by how quickly the second child offered to help and also by her use of the pronoun "we," suggesting a truly collaborative perspective. Exchanges such as these created an interchange of problem solving and collaboration.

We also documented interactions among the children as they negotiated their roles and lent their knowledge and skills to each other when using various media to accomplish their shared vision. Children initiated their own groupings and appointed who was going to work with whom. For example, some children became leaders, like Emmi, who said, "Today, we're going to work on the trees." Alexia responded, "*No me interesa.*" ("That does not interest me.") Alexia added that she would work with the butterfly group instead. A total of five groups were formed. Each child joined a committee that interested her or him. Every day, the children had a choice of where they were going to work, and within

each group, a child assumed a leadership role. Each morning, children could decide if they were going to remain in their group or move to another. However, the leaders of each group remained as leaders, since they were the most invested and engrossed in their work and tended to take charge.

Teachers noted an enthusiastic blossoming of interest over time. One teacher said, “The children are taking the lead. We used to take the lead, but now the children are really in charge of this study.” The families’ observations also underscored the children’s high level of engagement in thinking about and reflecting on the fence’s physical properties and its impact on their lives.

We also invited the families to share their feelings and thoughts about the proposed wall in their home language. Like their children, the parents were concerned about the divisive nature of the wall on personal, practical, and societal levels. Ana Lucia said, “*Impacta en el sentido que enseña a mis hijos que está bien dividirse entre personas, discriminar a otros y hacer diferencia entre seres humanos.*” (“The building of the wall impacts us all in terms of sending the message to our children that it is okay to divide, discriminate, and differentiate between one another.”) Cecilia offered her perspective: “In my case, I feel that the border divides people of different ethnicities. This causes a lot of racism, which is not proper, because we should all stand together in this world. It impacts my son’s life, because my mom and grandmother live in Mexico, and we feel divided.”

Several children expressed a similar perspective in the following transcript:

“If the wall doesn’t have a door, I won’t be able to see my grandma, because she doesn’t have a card. We don’t need a wall. We already have a fence!”

“If we go to Mexico, we won’t be able to come back to the United States.”

“We do not need a wall, because we are friends.”

“A very tall and strong fence was built in Douglas, I think, a very long time ago. I’ve never seen a fence this big and long, because I don’t have a fence. We have a balcony.”

“Does this mean I won’t be able to play with my cousin?”

Throughout these experiences, teachers supported the children’s and families’ right to co-construct meaning together by including their culture and experiences as a part of everyone’s school experience. At the 2011 NAREA Summer Conference, Elena Giacomini, *pedagoga* from Reggio Emilia, described teachers as “dignifying children’s ability to make sense of their experiences, perceptions, and ideas.” We would argue that throughout this experience, the teachers were equally committed to dignifying the experiences, perceptions, and ideas of not only the children, but also of their families.

Reflecting on Our Experiences

The role of the social, cultural, and political context

As the study progressed, the children and families felt safer expressing their opinions about the border and the fence, about who belongs where and why. This topic resonated authentically with them and us. Children, families, and teachers explored many aspects of their social, cultural, and personal identities. In collaboration with their teachers and families, the children investigated, experimented, and created solutions to problems they encountered and deepened their understanding of the complex social, political context in which they lived.

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We documented moments when children shared their cultural identities and practices with each other. The term “cultural mediator” used in Reggio Emilia to describe the role of an adult in professional settings, respects that one must belong to a particular culture to describe



Children constructing a wall of ribbons with “love messages”

it authentically. The children themselves took on the role of understanding culture as it is lived along the border and in their classroom and community. The cultural exchanges were bilingual and included sharing songs, family stories, *corridos* (ballads), and other cultural practices, all supported by their teachers and families.

As the children worked with materials, teachers observed the children’s familiarity with the contextual language of border life—*la linea* (the waiting line) became the border, *los papeles* became passports. Children also made distinctions like: “Oh no, today we are talking about the border, not *la linea*. At the immigration station, I have to use my passport, not more paper.” Their vocabulary grew. The bilingual capacity of the children was expanding to include the terms commonly used in both Spanish and English to describe border life.

As children explored their interests and concerns together, they asked questions that reflected their perspective that all living things have value. They asked, “Will animals need passports?” and “Will our country not have animals?” Their empathy and concern did not recognize boundaries between human and non-human life, a view that one of the

children summed up when she declared, “*Estamos juntos.*” (“We are together.”) We feel that this powerful statement represents the heart of the inherent contradiction of life in the borderlands.

Bilingualism as one of immigrant children’s hundred languages

This study raised important questions related to bilingualism and the concept of the hundred languages. What is the dynamic language of a project? We feel that one of the hundred languages of children in this Southwest border community is bilingualism. While the primary language of the two centers and their classrooms is Spanish, with varying levels of bilingualism evident in the classroom, children and families are accustomed to hearing both English and Spanish languages in the community and classroom (Reyes & Azuara, 2008). Code switching—the intermixing of languages—was reciprocal in both languages. It is a common and acceptable language practice of the community, as it allows members of the community to tell their stories and share ideas and emotions in both English and Spanish (García & Kleifgen, 2018). We see this linguistic mobility as enabling both the speaker and the listener access to richer and more relational communication, in the same way that exploring an idea through multiple media draws out and elaborates the representation of ideas, questions,

We see this linguistic mobility as enabling both the speaker and the listener access to richer and more relational communication, in the same way that exploring an idea through multiple media draws out and elaborates the representation of ideas, questions, stories, theories, and feelings.

—Teresa Acevedo, Celena Martinez, and Iliana Reyes



Children's representation of the immigration station

stories, theories, and feelings. The interplay of Spanish and English in the transcripts that are included throughout this article reflects the fluidity and power of a community that is truly respectful of its rich and diverse cultural and linguistic identity.

Children's natural search for meaning also played out in relationships, and their innate desire to communicate was evident throughout this experience. For example, children built relationships spontaneously, taking on translator roles. They seemed to intuit their friends' and teachers' understanding of words and gestures, reflecting their own knowledge and observations of who may or may not understand an exchange. These moments revealed the empathetic view of relationships and connections and, in this case, the role of language.

Parents as co-learners and co-researchers

This experience opened the door to a unique learning opportunity for teachers. They encountered a complexity at the individual and community levels that they would not have accessed in a standardized, curriculum-centered classroom. The teachers became attuned to the children and their families and learned political realities that affect everyday life in this community. Teachers deepened their recognition of the role they play in offering families and children a place of authenticity, creativity, validation, and safety. "I think we

provided a safe place for everyone to explore their life, identity, and history on the border where they live," one teacher said.

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The teachers were eager to collaborate with each other and were engaged in communal dialogue and fruitful conversations about their own conceptions and preconceptions of learning. These conversations gave a depth to the experience of teaching and learning that was remarkable. This study clearly deepened the teachers' understanding of their role in collaborative learning and teaching. According to Carolyn Edwards, "Carlina Rinaldi puts the act of 'listening' at the heart of education" (Edwards, 2012, p. 150). Edwards also recalls that in one of her first U.S. presentations,

Tiziana Filippini described the “listening [as] seeking to follow and enter into the active learning taking place” (Edwards, 2012, p. 151). Teachers expanded their realization that listening, observing, and documenting strengthened authentic, flexible, creative, and rigorous learning. In the words of Loris Malaguzzi, “The teachers need only to observe and listen to the children, as they continuously suggest to us what interests them and what they would like to explore in a deeper way. It is good when adults’ own interests coincide with those of the children, so they can move easily to support children’s motivations and pleasure” (Gandini, 2012, p. 65). Because of this experience, Malaguzzi’s words have more meaning for us. They will serve as a beacon as we continue to interpret our roles as teachers.

Children, parents, and a sense of pride

At the end of the project, children were very proud of what they had accomplished. They were continually sharing with their parents what they learned, articulated, and built. One child verbalized her sense of pride in what she had accomplished when she said to her mother, “Look what I said, Mom. Look what I made.”

During the 2011 NAREA Summer Conference, Elena Giacopini said, “It is easy to say we work with teachers, but what we actually do with parents is a challenge in all cultures.” One of Reggio’s central tenets is participation with parents. “It is a value and a strategy; not just with but among parents,” Elena stated. This study was inclusive of fathers, mothers, grandparents, and extended family in the community. For their part, parents contributed materials from their homes, family stories, and life experiences. Parents were proud of the children’s ideas as represented in the children’s constructions. These are relationships and intimacy practiced and learned. Teachers recognized and supported children’s right to live in their ideas. A cycle of pride and recognition emerged through which the parents became enthused because their children were proud of their work and wanted to talk about it each day.

Through documenting exchanges among children, teachers heard children recounting the myths they had heard from their families, passing them down to their friends and teachers in class. One little boy in the class asked if anyone knew the story about the train in Nacozari. He sang the ballad that his father loved about the engineer, Jesus Garcia, who drove a train full of explosives, “Locomotive Number 2,” away from town and was killed, saving the people in Nacozari. In this way, students and teachers participated in the oral tradition by hearing and taking pride in important historical stories about a folk hero from their larger community.

From our research project, there is evidence that teachers who are in the present moment and whose image of the child values collaborative relationships create rich learning for children and one another. Teaching teams who exchange ideas and observations ensure an eagerness to learn for themselves, for children, for families, and for the community. Attention

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to what is important to the child precludes insistence on preconceived guidance and rigid adult expectations. Creative thinking for both child and adult is dependent on joint reflections and changing organizational strategies that offer new ways for children to express their innate creative state of mind. Listening to children talk about their own and their families’ lives on the border without being intrusive resulted in the teachers’ understanding of and respect for the community where they taught. Learning is reciprocal. The teachers create contexts where creativity and ideas flourish. Conversations throughout the study among parents, children, and teachers became a proud celebration of their lives. This is democracy in action. This is education in its purest form.

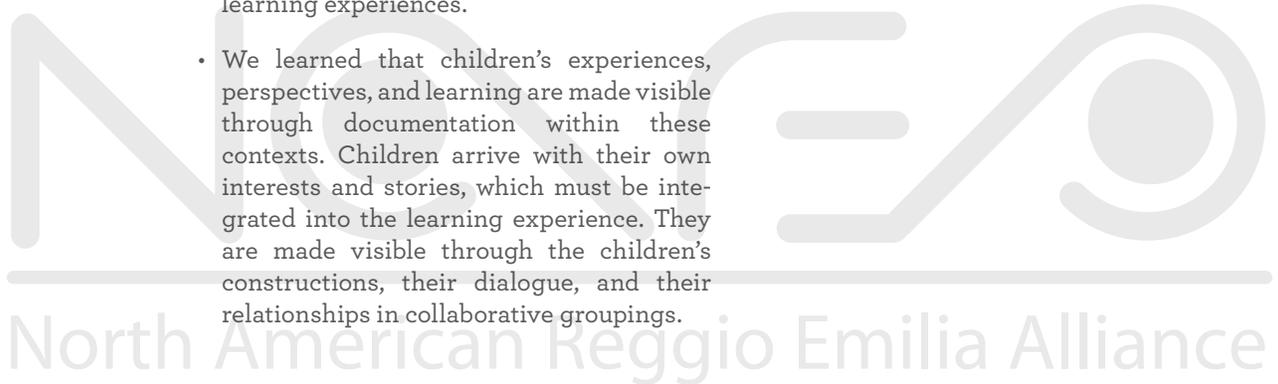
Concluding Remarks

We revisit here our original questions with the hope of inviting educators to continuous reflection and dialogue on their work with children and their immediate contexts.

- We have learned that adults and children influence and/or co-create their own social, emotional, and cultural contexts when we listen authentically, being respectful of what the child and the family bring to learning, while integrating their values and contributions into teaching experiences.
- We learned that children and adults co-create rich and diverse learning experiences within their co-constructed contexts through mutual attunement to and appreciation of what the child, family, and community offer to create rich and diverse learning experiences.
- We learned that children's experiences, perspectives, and learning are made visible through documentation within these contexts. Children arrive with their own interests and stories, which must be integrated into the learning experience. They are made visible through the children's constructions, their dialogue, and their relationships in collaborative groupings.

- Finally, we learned that teachers create contexts where creativity is viewed as an essential aspect of research and innovation. When entering the classroom, teachers come with a malleable framework, and within that flexible structure, relationships, discovery and creativity exist.

In summary, we learned this dynamic process in which all questions work together and are integrated. Young children are naturally curious and creative, and this approach to learning and teaching allows for that curiosity and creativity to flourish, not only among the children, but also among their families and teachers.



A Note of Gratitude

As our work reached closure and the children understood that documentation of our experiences would travel to Tucson for other children and teachers to see, they became concerned: “How will you take it (the documentation and its many parts: clay cars, paper butterflies, various structures)? “Will it break?” a child asked, giving voice to a past memory of a piece of dried clay falling off his work. Several children announced their refusal to carry sections of their work. So deep was their concern, they assigned other classmates who had not worked with clay to carry their clay pieces. They wanted to make sure their project was shared with others and was well taken care of. Overall, the children showed pride and enthusiasm in what they had learned and in what they had created. In these multiple ways, the study was authentic, rigorous, and tremendously important and meaningful.

We, too, (teachers, families, and administrators) understood the significance of what had been accomplished together. We are honored

to share our experience of life on the border as interpreted by the children and families through the exhibit that we created and, now, through this publication.

We wish to thank the children, families, and community of teachers from the Bonita and La Escuelita centers for honoring the many ways in which communication occurred and was documented in a primarily bilingual and bicultural context in the Arizona and Sonora borderlands. This invitation to peek into the amazing minds of children was made possible by the collaborative mindset and learning approaches of the following teaching teams: Brenda Pena and Patty Amaya, Sol Ramirez and Lupe Martinez, Norma Cruz and Aida Gonzales, Consuelo Gonzales and Lupe Romero, Ana Martinez and Genesis Enriquez, Maria Romero and Sylvia Cordova, Karen Garcia and Ana T. Martinez, Lupe Marrufo and Gloria Chavez, and Mari Dominguez and Minni Ramirez.

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