

# An Invitation to Participate in a Teacher Research Collaborative: Children and Trees in Relationship *Reflecting Together*

by Jeanne Goldhaber for RIVET 2.0



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In the 2019 September issue of *Innovations*, RIVET 2.0 extended an invitation to our NAREA colleagues and friends to share observations, images, artifacts, and video clips of children and trees in relationship.

We are so grateful to those of you who responded! Specifically, we would like to thank Zhiying Gao, Lin Li, Liting Yang and Xingwei Song of the Baisha Forest Learning Center in Baisha, China; Kathy Hardy of the Winnetka Public School Nursery in Winnetka, IL; Eileen Hughes of the Child Development Center in Bellingham, WA; Melissa Hyde of the Casper College Early Childhood Learning Center in Casper, WY; Alison Mahar of the Boulder Journey School; Alison McPartlon and Tracy Jaramillo of the UNM Taos Kids Campus Center; Taylor Etchemendy of Inspire Bilingual Early Learning in Taos, NM; and Nora Thompson of Washington, DC.

But primarily we would like to thank the children, families, and teachers for all they have taught us about life and learning. And trees.

And lest we forget, we thank every tree for her patience as we try to listen to her story. And learn how much it belongs to each of us.

The educators of Reggio Emilia urge us to listen to children. Indeed, this message was one of the first we heard in our early encounters with Loris Malaguzzi and Carla Rinaldi as they introduced the philosophical underpinnings of the approach to early education developed in the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Listening was presented as both a metaphor and as an explicit pedagogical practice. The metaphor of listening reminds us that children must never be anonymous, must never be discounted as immature, miniature replicas of adults but rather as inventors, artists, philos-

ophers grappling with ideas, questions, and feelings that warrant serious consideration. This view underpins the necessity of listening in our daily lives with children. What are they telling us through their gestures? Actions? Words? Drawings? Paintings? Sculptures? Through the many languages that they use when we make them available?

To answer these questions, we must pay attention, observe, record. Then, in collaboration with colleagues, families, and the children themselves, we must discuss and reflect on the meaning-making that the study of our observations may reveal.

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This view of children and the imperative to “listen” propelled the work of RIVET (Reggio Inspired Vermont Early education Team) in the early 2000’s. We met over the course of several years to share and reflect on our observations recorded in various Vermont communities, culminating in a small exhibit that shared the big ideas or threads that had emerged from our analysis of the work (Goldhaber, 2007). One of these threads reflected children’s high level of engagement with the flora and fauna they encountered in the natural world.

This intense period of collaboration then took a hiatus. While we continued to stay connected as friends and colleagues, we no longer gathered formally to share and discuss our work. Thankfully however, Peter Wohlleben’s book, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate - Discoveries From a Secret World* became the catalyst that brought us back together in 2017. Citing research in terms that made it accessible to the lay reader, Wohlleben describes trees as social in that they communicate *with* and care *for* each other through various means including olfactory, visual, and electrical transmissions.

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This alternative framing of trees as active, social life forms rather than as inanimate objects prompted us to reconsider our observations that included children and trees. While we had used words such as “interaction” and “relationship” in the many observations we had collected that included trees as the recipients of the children’s attention, we had rarely considered or reflected on the specific contributions the trees were making to the experience. For example, while we may have

noted a child hugging a tree’s trunk, we failed to record the texture, smell, and dimensions of the trunk. Was it cold or hot to the touch? Damp or dry?

This failure to consider a tree’s contribution was evident in many of our observations. While we may have noted a child tilting his head to follow the height of a tree trunk, we didn’t document the actual height of the tree or whether its upper branches were moving or bending with the air currents or whether its leaves were making sounds—sounds we might describe as rustling, or whooshing, or roaring. And what of the breadth of its branches and shape of its crown? And it’s not as if a tree stands in isolation—was the sunlight filtering through its branches and leaves? Were seeds, fruit, leaves dropping to the ground? Were there other trees that were participating in the overall experience?

Our observations fell short of this level of detail. As observers, we had failed to “listen” to the trees and as a result, the trees were silenced by our deafness and rendered anonymous in our observations.

### The Challenge of Listening to Children, Trees, and Each Other

This challenge of listening is one of the primary threads that emerged from RIVET’s conversations about the multiple observations that our colleagues across North America and China shared. We asked each other and discussed questions such as:

- To which features of the tree might the child be “listening”?
- What might the child be thinking? Wondering? Feeling?
- In what ways does a child’s use of expressive languages through different forms of media reflect his or her thinking and feelings about the tree?

I'd like to add several additional questions that arose from our discussion of the submissions:

- How can we adults listen to *trees*? Can the children teach us to be better listeners?
- What is our role as we “listen” to children who are directing their attention to or interacting with a tree or trees?
- How can we teachers respond to children and trees (who we believe are in relationship) with the goal of protecting and nurturing the connection between them?

We grappled with these questions on a cold Saturday morning in February 2020, in Vermont, as we discussed the submitted observations, images, and video clips. We continued to share our thoughts online following our meeting. In the end we decided

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that sharing excerpts from each of the submissions provided a richer and more provocative opportunity for the wider NAREA community to think together about children and trees in relationship. Our only wish is that each of the contributors was sitting with us so that we could hear in full what we knew were unquestionably meaningful stories.

#### **Trees and Children in Relationship: Observations, Images, and Artifacts**

We are very excited by the prospect of reading your responses to one, several, or all of the following excerpts from conversations, observations, and images that we received from our NAREA colleagues. Please consider them in light of the above questions, but we also urge you not to feel constrained by them.

#### **Teachers Who Listened**

##### **Teachers who listened to children in the company of trees and sent children’s words.**

The following are taken from transcripts and as singular comments of children in Taos, New Mexico; Boulder, Colorado; and Winnetka, Illinois.

“I like that they change like me—like when I lost a tooth—and get a haircut”.

“Roots go to the center of the world to drink together.”

Roots go to the center of the world to drink together.

“When the seeds open up, color comes out.”

“The leaves falling from the trees in autumn is like when your hands get tired and need to drop something.”

“Trees have branches. The leaves are like the hair of the tree.”

“Well, if you rip their branches and leaves off of them, they might be really sad. And if you are nice to them, they will give you apples.”

“There’s baby trees, and momma trees.”

##### **Teachers who listened to children in the company of trees and sent images and/or video clips.**

#### **Bellingham, Washington**

A small group of toddlers participated in weekly walks around their university campus child development center to observe aspects of the natural world. The center is near a forested area and it is surrounded by the plant life of the Pacific Northwest. These were regular experiences happening at least twice a week for about 3 months.

The teacher noted how on several occasions the children identified various types of environmental sounds and decided to encourage the children’s observations that focused their attention to what they might hear in the environment. A young child put up her “listening tube” to the tree and was asked what sound the tree was making. She replied, “I hear a pop pop pop!”



"I hear a pop pop pop!"

### Casper, Wyoming

The preschool children in Casper College Early Childhood Learning Center start the day off with engaging in the natural area located behind the school. Two years ago, we began utilizing our back area as an Outdoor Learning Environment. One child termed it the "wild" and that is how the children and teachers refer to it today. This area is open, windy, and may not be much to many people since it contains native weeds and plants, rocks, dirt and sometimes mud, and a few small Russian Olives and tiny pine trees.

One morning, Sara was observed sitting in the tree. She had positioned herself in the tree with her body on one branch, her back leaning against another, and her feet resting on a lower branch. Even though it was quite windy, she looked relaxed. Sara gazed west, towards the town; her face looking calm with a little smile



"It's peaceful here."

on her mouth and half opened eyes. I said, "Sara, you look calm or relaxed." She replied, "It's peaceful here."

### Washington, DC

I was outside with my two-year-old grandson on a chilly, windy day. I was walking with him when I heard him say, "Oh no. Pick it up." I often make videos of him to send to his parents at work while I take care of him so I realized that this could be something to capture. I switched on the video camera on my phone, turned around, and saw him holding a small branch of a tree with dead leaves on it, wiggling it from side to side. He seemed insistent to share his thoughts with a very serious expression.

He emphatically said, "Get it back! Arm back tree." I said, "Put the arm back on the tree?" and he said, "Yeah." I said, "Oh, how do you do that?" With his arm still extended, he looked at the branch and said, "Ummm...Grandma put it." He offered the branch to me. I took it and said, "Oh Grandma should do it? Let me try and reach it."

I saw a small tree next to us and stretched my arm up. I said, "I don't know if I can. I'm not as big as that tree. I don't know."

He reached over and took the branch back while I said, "What shall we do?"

He immediately started walking towards his garage door, gently swinging the branch from side to side. He said, "Take it home. Take home." I said, "Take it home?" and he said, "Yeah."

He laid it down by the closed door and I said, "We could leave it by the door and when we go back in, we could put it somewhere."

We continued our walk and he said, "Daddy and Mommy do it." I asked him, "What would they do?" He said, "Put arm back tree."

When his father came home that night, he took the branch to him and said, "Put arm back tree." His father reached as high as he could and jumped up, but he couldn't reach the branches to put it back. His mother tried later as well. Since no one could do it, he went and laid the branch at the bottom of the tree. He said, "Tree get it."

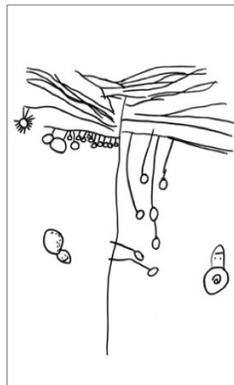
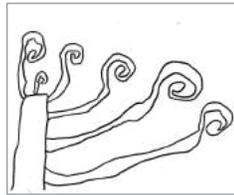
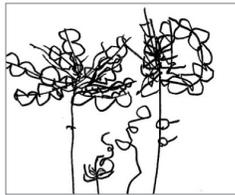
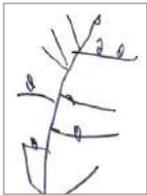
The next day, we went out to see the branch, but it was missing, probably blown away in the really windy weather. He looked for it everywhere, looking up into the branches of the tree to see if the branch ended up there. He finally stopped searching, looked at me, and said, "Tree got it."



"Get it back! Arm back tree."

Teachers who listened to children in the company of trees and sent children's drawings, paintings, and sculptures.

Boulder, Colorado



Baisha, China



**Teachers who listened to children in the company of trees and sent stories of ongoing experiences.**

**Taos, New Mexico: Tree Stories**

In their study of trees, a pre-K classroom created tree stories:

Once there was a tree. It had lots of roots. The roots were on the tree. The tree was falling, it was huge. It grew tall.

Once there was a tree. The tree was a huge, big tree. It was so large that no one could climb up it. They were so hanging, and they had a hammered pat. There was a pine cone on it and it was fun because it wasn't supposed to be there. The pine cone was so beautiful that it was cute and nice.

Once there was a tree in the forest. It had leafs and they fall down, It had dirt and apples. Yellow, red, and green apples. They need water and dirt to grow.

Once there was a tree. The tree was big and there was apples. The tree has leaves and branches. Birds live on the tree. The leaves are green and yellow.

**Winnetka, Illinois: Journal**

This year, our junior kindergarten class participated in a long-term study observing and chronicling relationships and change within ourselves, one another, and in West Elm Park. Several questions guided our project: What is a relationship? How do relationships grow and evolve? What qualities and values nurture the growth and evolution of a relationship? How do the children understand and describe a relationship? How do we document the children's perceptions of change within themselves and as a classroom community?

We began by talking with the children about the concept of friendship and getting to know one another through play, rituals, and conversation. The children studied their faces drawing, collaging, and in verbal descriptive portraits noticing the subtle details. We talked about the best part of themselves and why we felt we were unique. We shared stories, ideas, and the foundations of democracy supporting the best decisions for our classroom even when we didn't get our way. We cooked together,

shared snacks, celebrated loose teeth, new babies and pets, cheered one another along with our classroom motto, "Can you do it? Yes you can!" They collected endless data about what we like, do not care for, what we can do, what we are working on and learned the value of being a friend in our class. All of these activities made us aware of ourselves, others, and the world around us.

As our relationships with one another strengthened, we developed another deep relationship with the natural surroundings of West Elm Park. At first, we would all run from one end of the park to another and enjoy the vastness of freedom. After several visits the children began to explore the trees, crevices in the ground, find treasures of acorns, leaves, and sticks, and a love for Katie, a large White Oak that resides in the park.

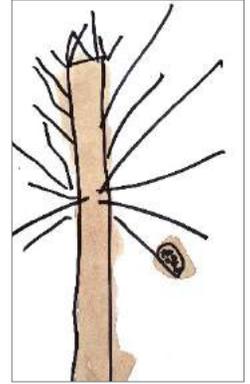
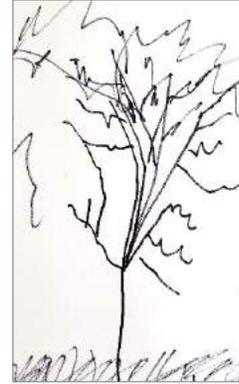
When a West Elm visit was announced the children cheered and always greeted Katie with a pat or a hug before running off to investigate what the park held for them that day, that season.

Fueling their interest in Katie, we researched, documented, drew, and painted pictures of Katie. Another question was offered: Can you be friends with a tree? Resoundingly the children respond "Of course!" and Katie became our friend for the year. We talked to experts about Katie, visited other trees, compared them to Katie, and learned how to take care of her so she could take care of us and our Earth. Visiting her often we were able to see and document her growth—just as we documented our own changes and growth all year long. We have all grown in mind, body, and spirit and will always have this special year in our hearts to keep forever.

The children's voices are the key element in this project. We are so fortunate to be their partners and collaborators on this journey of discovery. They inspired us to create a beautiful classroom filled with a rich variety of materials to use as they make sense of the world around them. Asking questions, listening, and observing the children closely has guided us in planning and proceeding with the project. Their enthusiasm was inspiring and contagious, and we loved every minute of every day with them this year. We collected words and images from the children that guided our reflections.

Over the course of the year Katie has become a member of the class and the children think of her as a friend. Katie has also become an important home-school connection, as the children talk with their families about Katie and share their knowledge, classroom activities, and love for her. Many children shared stories of concern after a storm when a tree was damaged or cut down. One day, after a storm, we watched a tree being cut down and put into a wood chipper. This was very concerning for the children. Their faces showed concern, they were empathetic, and they had so many questions about what would happen next, how this could have been prevented, and it grew an awareness of other fallen trees in their neighborhood, front yard, and even in another state.

We know the connection with Katie blossomed into a friendship—Amelia made the beautiful analogy that tree roots look like they are holding hands, just like friends. We know that the children have a heightened awareness of trees, what they need to survive, how to care for them, and that you can be friends with a tree, just as we have learned what it takes to be a friend to one another. It gives us great hope for their futures, and the future of our earth.

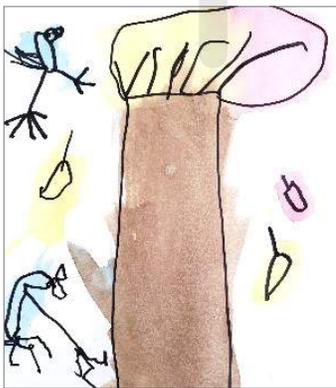


“It’s cold outside and some trees actually get cold. They lose their leaves, but the trunk is warm because it’s filled with water that gets sucked up into the branches and twigs. It makes the tree warm. When the leaves are gone the tree is naked, but the leaves don’t protect the tree, the bark does that.”

“If the bark falls off then she’ll be cold.”

“We could put tons of blankets on Katie to keep her warm anyway.”

*Katie in the spring:* “Trees are now my favorite things, because I can climb them. I like them in the spring best because they grow new leaves.”



*Katie in the fall:* “The twigs are hope. They hope the leaves hang on.”

“Katie’s leaves are now brown, last time they were brownish red.”

“There are more of her leaves on the ground.”

“Because she’s old and tired. Maybe all

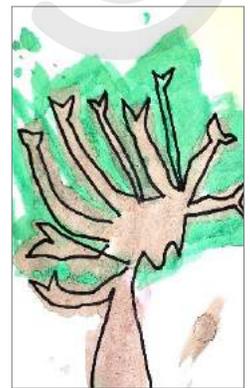
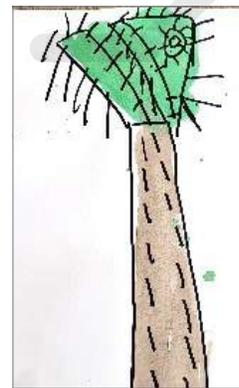
of her leaves will fall just like old people’s hair falls out.”

“The tree’s leaves looked different today because the colors changed. They really were yellowish brownish and now they are red brownish.”

“They were green in the beginning.”

*Katie in the winter:* “Katie looks like she is taking a shower. Her branches are bare.”

“She’s cold because she’s outside and the snow lands on her branches.”



“I see the little buds, way up there, do you see them?”

“Well, those are Katie’s leaves. They are going to pop open when it gets warmer.”

“Her bark is still on and I bet she’s drinking up the water.”

“I have counted 100 trees and they are on my map. Katie is still the biggest.”

“There is lots of healthy bacteria that is making everything greener.”

“Hello Katie, we love you.”

### Facts About Katie

- Katie is a White Oak.
- The White Oak is the Illinois State Tree.
- Katie is approximately 150 years old.
- Katie can live over 350 years.
- Katie has roots, a trunk, branches, twigs, leaves, acorns, and a crown.
- Katie is good for the air and for us. She helps us breathe.
- Katie's acorns feed the squirrels.
- Katie is 21 hugs in circumference.
- We love her.

"Katie's roots look like they are holding hands, just like friends."

### So Much to Think About! So Much to Discuss!

We RIVETers had set aside a Saturday morning to talk together about the work that had been submitted and it became quickly apparent that three hours would not suffice. We went back and forth between talking in depth about one particular observation or even one line from a transcript and then found ourselves considering it from a more theoretical perspective.

For example, in our invitation to participate in this teacher research collaborative that was published in the September 2019 *Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Emilia Exchange* (Goldhaber, 2019), we included a photograph of a tree that provoked a child's unsolicited comment, "It's a happy tree (p. 68)!" What about this particular tree caused the child to ascribe this particular emotion to it? Does the child interpret the shape of the branches that stretch upward from the trunk toward the sky as a smile? Does the breeze filtering thru the leaves make a sound that reminds the child of laughter? Or perhaps the sight of the tree makes the child happy and he assumes the tree must feel the same?

These speculations could also lead to a discussion about how we might have conversations or ask questions when we are in the company of children and trees. But first should we ask ourselves if our questions or remarks could lead children to "humanize" a tree, and if they do, are we depriving the children the opportunity to know the tree on their own terms and in their own language? Or conversely, by humanizing a tree's identity are we offering children

an invitation to connect with the tree in terms that we believe reflect their perspective, a perspective that is characterized by their references to parts of trees in terms of their own anatomy? Caution: one might find oneself getting "into the weeds," arguing the relative merits or limitations of an anthropomorphic perspective (characterized by the attribution of human characteristics to non-humans) compared to those of an *anthrocentric* perspective (characterized by a view that we, humankind, are central, more important and qualitatively removed from other life forms)!

In any case, please consider joining us in this next step of our teacher research collaborative by studying and reflecting on the observations and images our colleagues from across North America and China have shared with us. Even if, or perhaps *especially* if you find yourself in the weeds, send your thoughts, theories, wonderings, and questions to [jeanne.goldhaber@uvm.edu](mailto:jeanne.goldhaber@uvm.edu) by June 1, 2020.

RIVET 2.0 will gather together once again, with you at our virtual sides, to consider the possible meanings we have ascribed to the children's and trees' encounters and ways through which we might learn more about and deepen their relationships.

As important, if the above observations and images serve as a provocation to send us an observation or an image (JPG please!) of a child and/or of an artifact that documents an experience you believe reflects children and trees in relationship or if you have your own personal story to tell, we would be delighted to receive it! Please include a signed photo permission for each child featured in your submission. You may request a photo release form from Thresa Grove: [thresa@reggioalliance.org](mailto:thresa@reggioalliance.org).

We look forward to hearing from you!

### REFERENCE

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