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Contents

Teacher Research

Early childhood professionals have increasingly experienced working with children on the autism spectrum. Teacher researcher Lauren Forsyth describes the tensions and questions she faced as she worked alongside behavioral specialists who applied one kind of expertise to integrating a child with autism into her mainstream classroom. In contrast, Forsyth's insights arose from focusing on her underlying philosophy to negotiate the rules and expectations of the classroom community in dialogue with the children. Her photographic data provides compelling evidence of how the kindness of other children helped to include and support that child, and improve the level of connection among all the children. Laura also reflects on the power of being responsive to the wisdom of the child with autism himself.

—*Barbara Henderson*

The Effect of Peer Support on Transitions of a Child with Autism

Lauren A. Forsyth, MA, is an early childhood educator at Walter Ambrose Family Center in Webster Groves, Missouri. She is continuously learning alongside children and staff in a diverse mixed-aged preschool classroom. Lauren continues to follow her passion in child voice and the rights of all children. laurenbielicki@gmail.com

Photos courtesy of the author.

Each child brings unique gifts to the world. Along with these gifts, each child has individual, unique needs. N.H. is a 4-year-old boy in my class who has been diagnosed with autism, and is a cherished and valued member of our group. N.H. has struggled with transitions since the beginning of the school year. My co-teacher and I have worked with N.H.'s itinerant teacher on strategies to support him during these difficult times. He inconsistently transitions with the group, holding at least one teacher's full attention during this time.

N.H. is a member of our full-day general education classroom, consisting of 20 children and two teachers. Our preschool embraces inclusive education and is committed to fostering community and belonging by having children with a wide range of unique abilities represented in each classroom. Inclusion involves teachers, therapists, and specialists working together to meet the needs of all students, providing opportunities for each child to reach their full potential.

A specific experience prompted my research. N.H. frequently had trouble transitioning to lunch. On this particular day, he made his way from the classroom to the gym where lunch was served, but would not sit down at the table. He tried to run out of the gym, and then fell to the floor, crying. Knowing that N.H. responds to touch, I picked him up and placed him on my lap while hugging him. Two Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapists, who had observed his behavior for the past few months, approached and told me

to put him back down on the floor. As I did this, N.H. continued to cry, and began to hit and kick the floor and table. He repeatedly tried to run out of the gym. The ABA therapists are trained to use specific behavioral interventions with children with autism. I watched as N.H. looked up at me, wanting my attention and help. The therapists told me not to make direct eye contact with him, and allow no physical touch. It felt as though everyone in the gym was looking at N.H.—he was suffering. It was not natural for me to respond as they directed, and I became very upset with the situation. The therapists acted on their training and beliefs of what is best for the child; I was not upset with them, I was upset on behalf of the child's struggle and suffering.

There is no uncertainty that every adult there wanted to do what was best for this child. However, I struggled with the use of a generalized intervention. N.H. responds to pressure and touch. He reached for me, and I had to ignore him. It broke my heart that I couldn't pick him up and give him a hug. I was not listening to N.H., I was listening to what other adults thought was best for him.

It broke my heart that I couldn't pick him up and give him a hug.

N.H.'s peers also looked to me to help him. They are very sensitive in their relationships with him and naturally support him throughout the day. Even now, I ask myself what they were wondering. Did they wonder why I wouldn't help him? Did they think I was ignoring him? Were they wondering whether I might isolate them, as I isolated N.H.? I began to wonder why we couldn't change our approach at this time when N.H. needs were not being met. Did N.H. feel that I was failing him? Were we listening to him? Were we responsive to N.H.'s individual needs at this time? Did this become more about the adult than the child? I became even more passionate about the rights of N.H. and all children that day. My passion has driven me to this research project, which focuses on the effect of peer support in N.H.'s individual case.

N.H. presently receives ABA services. What we have learned from N.H. is that he needs something to hold or carry as he transitions throughout the day; however, even with such an object, he still does not consistently transition with his class successfully. The adults play a guessing game about what N.H. wants to hold while he transitions down the hallway. When N.H. resists or throws a tantrum, the ABA approaches dictate not to interact with him. N.H. is isolated from his peers. This approach changed the nature of our classroom; N.H.'s classmates had naturally supported him but were now denied that opportunity. Children with autism typically have social challenges, but N.H. responds to deep human connections and touch. He enjoys being with his peers, and his peers enjoy being with him. After observing

Children with autism typically have social challenges, but N.H. responds to deep human connections and touch.

his naturally occurring interactions with classmates, I decided to do a teacher research study to answer the following research question: **Will peer support positively affect N.H.'s transitions?**

Literature review

The rights and well-being of the child are reflected in being a valued member of a group that supports a growing sense of belonging, acceptance, and positive relationships (Erwin & Guintini 2000). Research states that difficulty with socialization is one of the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (Koegel et al. 2012). Although research also suggests that most children with autism have a desire for friendships, children with autism face challenges in creating stable friendships and relationships and initiating interactions with peers (Koegel et al. 2012). Odom and Bailey (2001) documented that children with disabilities participate in more social interactions when they are in a classroom with children with typical development than when they are in segregated classrooms. More peer interactions occur in environments where social strategies can be used. Integrating children with disabilities into classrooms with more typically developing children results in more social involvement with peers, less frequent teacher direction, and more social interaction during free choice activities (Bronson, Hauser-Cram, & Warfield 1997). On the other hand, when children were often directed by adults, less time was spent with peers and play was at a lower level of complexity. However, the children resisted classroom rules less often and completed more mastery tasks successfully (Bronson, Hauser-Cram, & Warfield 1997). Bronson, Hauser-Cram, & Warfield (1997) found that there is a range of benefits in the social and task mastery areas in classrooms with a large proportion of typically developing children, a moderate teacher-child ratio, and a small amount of one-on-one activities with individual children. Adherents to the Reggio Emilia approach also perceive all children as developing social relationships within their natural settings and therefore encourage these opportunities within an inclusive classroom (Katz & Galbraith 2006). As children with disabilities benefit from inclusion, peers of typical development gain tolerance, compassion, and understanding (Katz & Galbraith 2006). Soncini concurs, stating:

> Having a child with special rights in their class is highly educating for the other children because it forces them to adjust their behavior, language and communication, even their physical contact. This contributes to the children's acquisition of knowledge because it requires them to be more flexible. It stimulates the children to realize that the encounter with the child with special rights is possible. (2012, 199)
> Providing opportunities for positive social interactions benefits all children.

Balancing adult interaction and intervention also affects all children. Teachers' roles are very important in directing involvement in activities

facilitating social interactions (Katz & Galbraith 2006). Kemple (2004) points out that the teacher's involvement is of a sensitive nature. Too little involvement may leave the child isolated, but too much may prevent the child from making social connections. In a school study outside of Reggio Emilia, Soncini found:

> Teachers or therapists were acting almost like bodyguards who stayed close to the child, trying to anticipate all his or her needs. The adults seemed to be helping out of a sense of pity rather than a belief in the potential of the children. (2012, 209)
> A balance is necessary between a child's need for support and autonomy.

Children need opportunities to express themselves in personally meaningful ways (Mashford-Scott, Church, & Tayler 2012). This supports the child in becoming an active participant in his learning, and requires a balance of power between child and adult. Involving the children in research and listening to them will lead to new, authentic, and meaningful knowledge to support early childhood needs (Mashford-Scott, Church, & Tayler 2012).

> Too little involvement may leave the child isolated, but too much may prevent the child from making social connections with peers.

Methodology

For the purpose of this research, the main question I analyzed was: How does peer support affect the daily routine transitions of a 4-year-old child with autism? Specific data sources were triangulated to support this question. My passion about the subject will transfer into my work on this study.

The participants in this study consisted of twenty diverse children in a full-day preschool classroom, ranging in age from 3 to 5 years old. There were 11 boys and nine girls. These children were selected for this study because they were members of the same classroom and interact daily. Half of the children were in this class last year, some moved from another room, and some were new to the Center. I was one of two general education teachers in the classroom. N.H., the child supported in this study, was a 4-year-old boy with a medical and educational diagnosis of autism. This child had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and received both pull-out and push-in services with Applied Behavior Analysis therapists, an occupational therapist, a speech and language pathologist, and an itinerant teacher. N.H. had fine motor and communication delays, and struggled with transitions.

This study was conducted at Walter Ambrose Family Center (WAFC) in the Webster Groves School District, Missouri. The Center is state licensed and nationally accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. WAFC is also in collaboration with the Saint Louis County Special School District. The Center is open to young children ages 2–5 years of age. Full and half-day programs are offered to accommodate families'

needs and preferences. The children in this study are members of a full-day mixed-age general education classroom. The Center follows the Project Construct curriculum, providing differentiation and a child-directed curriculum. WAFC's vision, mission, and beliefs reflect the child first.

This study was conducted during times of the day when children transitioned from the gym to the classroom or the classroom to the gym. These times and settings were selected to represent contexts where social interactions naturally occurred.

Data collection and analysis

Multiple data sources were used for this research study. Existing data was also considered to ensure a more efficient research design. All of the data collected directly related to the research question.

Data was collected during three transitions of the day, for three weeks. These times included: walking from the gym to the classroom in the morning after breakfast, walking from the classroom to the gym for lunch, and walking from the gym to the classroom after lunch. N.H.'s ABA therapist was present every day except Fridays during the transition from the classroom to the gym.

Baseline data was collected using a teacher-made observation form that aligned with the data sheet used by N.H.'s ABA therapist. A plus or minus was marked reflecting how N.H. transitioned at that time. A plus was marked if N.H. transitioned with the class with no tantrum; a minus was marked if N.H. refused to transition, threw a tantrum, did not stay with the group, etc. A space next to each plus or minus was used to document observations and reflections. Photographs were not taken daily during baseline data. Baseline data was also collected from the ABA therapist, who used the same type of data sheet during previous weeks.

In an effort to provide an opportunity for the children's voices to be heard, a class meeting was held, discussing ways to support N.H. He was out of the room for occupational therapy at this time. When the children encounter a "cognitive knot," or challenge, a meeting is called. The children are empowered to share their ideas, thoughts, and theories with one another. They are then encouraged to test their theories. I began the meeting by sharing what I had noticed with the children. I noticed the children interacting with N.H. and wanting to help him, but now noticed the children shy away from him and seem more reluctant to go near him during his times of struggle. I made the children aware that their support was welcome, and asked

in what ways did they feel they could support N.H. while walking down the hall. I documented the meeting by transcribing the children's discussions in a notebook. Another teacher was there to support me as I documented the conversation. This data was collected at the beginning of the study. The children were told that their support and ideas were valued and welcomed, and that from that point on they would not be told to move away from N.H. when he was struggling.

Another source of data was photography. I took photographs of N.H. and the children during each transition, which were taken to reflect the children's affect. Photographs taken were dated and labeled.

> I noticed the children interacting with N.H. and wanting to help him, but now noticed the children shy away from him and seem more reluctant to go near him during his times of struggle.

The third data source was my teacher observations recorded on a data sheet. These data sheets were of the same format as the ABA therapy baseline data sheets. I kept these sheets on a clipboard during observations of transition times. Observations were written as the transition occurred or directly after. Reflections were also made daily. Meetings with the ABA staff were held regularly to discuss and reflect on this study. Collaboration and communication were essential in moving these ideas forward.

Findings

My findings suggest that:
- ownership of peer support strategies supported N.H.'s and the children's sense of empowerment;
- implementation of peer transitional strategies introduced at the class meeting positively affected behavior; and
- peer support developed a sense of group membership.

Finding #1: Ownership of peer support strategies supported N.H.'s and the children's sense of empowerment

Analysis of the data shows children's ownership and autonomy reflected throughout the study. In an effort to include the voices of the children and understand the perspective of a child, I held a class meeting to discuss different needs unique to individuals and the ways those needs could be supported. The children expanded on ways to help others when challenged by tasks or experiences. Previous to the study, the children began to move away from helping N.H. due to his isolation during his struggling behaviors.

Table 1. List of Ways to Support N.H.

Use his back scratcher.
Hold his hand.
Ask him if he wants a toy to carry.
Walk next to him.
Give him a book.
Talk to him.
Put my hand on his back.

The class meeting reflected the children's ownership in providing suggestions to help N.H. during his transitions. Table 1 presents this list.

The list presented in Table 1 reflects the children's knowledge about N.H. He responds to sensory stimuli and touch. The children saw N.H.'s therapist provide a sensory diet to him throughout the day. A sensory diet is a personalized plan that provides the sensory input a person needs to stay focused and organized. N.H. would swing or bounce on a large ball, was pulled on a scooter, and was provided the brushing/joint compression protocol three times a day. The children were familiar with the brush he used, hence the idea to use his back scratcher. N.H.'s classmates were also aware that everyone was a member of our classroom and must be included. Including N.H. by holding his hand, walking next to him, talking to him, and putting a hand on his back supports membership of the group. N.H. chose to carry one transition item during daily transitions. The children were aware of his preferences for small toys or books and suggested offering these items to support N.H.

Finding #2: Implementation of peer transitional strategies introduced at the class meeting positively affected behavior

If needed, N.H. is able to choose one item as he transitions. If the ABA therapist is present, she offers N.H. a choice of items before he leaves the room. I included photography in my data collection process to document N.H.'s affect during transitions. During a successful transition, N.H. walked with the group with no crying and without wanting to be held. In my photographs, N.H. usually carries a transition item. During one of the data days when the therapist was not present, N.H. did not carry an item with him as he transitioned to the gym for lunch and then back to the classroom. He walked next to a peer with whom he frequently interacts, with a smile on his face.

Figure 1 illustrates N.H. carrying a book during transitions on three different data days. The pictures illustrate his use of the book, along with his

Figure 1. Transitions with Item of Choice
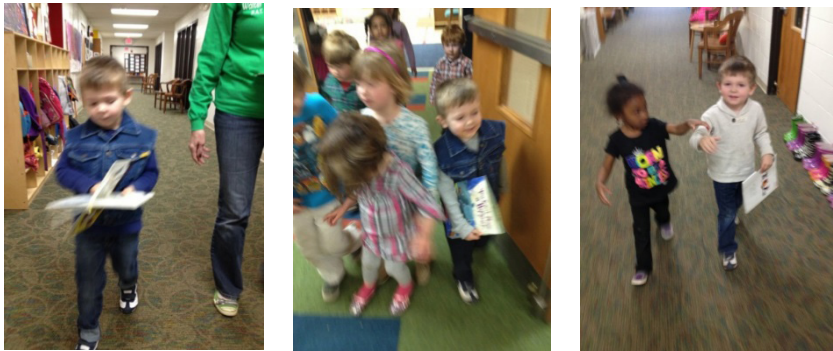
facial expressions during the transition. The first photo was taken walking to the gym for lunch. The ABA therapist walked next to N.H. in the back of the line, and he read a book as he walked to lunch. There was no peer interaction at this time. The second picture was taken during a time the class transitioned from lunch to the classroom. The two teachers were the only adults present. N.H. carried a book, but kept it closed. He walked in the middle of the group with a smile on his face. N.H. is also smiling in the third picture. Again, his book is closed and he is walking next to a peer. She is using a gentle touch to support him during this time. N.H. was engaged with his book when walking next to an adult, and less engaged with his book when he walked next to or amongst his peers.

Figure 2. Daily Transitions after Class Meeting

As seen in Figure 2, N.H. transitioned successfully 83 percent of the time after the class meeting was held, whereas he was not successful 17 percent of the time. During the three weeks before the class meeting, N.H. transitioned successfully 64 percent of the time. The 83 percent success rate was a 19 percent improvement. During these successful times, children would

say, "Come on, N.H." He would run after the line when the children spoke to him. The children would offer him their hand, however most of the time N.H. would say "no" and walk beside him/her. N.H. had a transition item in his hand for all but two transitions. What can't be measured with numbers is the qualitative data reflected in the images. N.H.'s affect had changed from crying behind the group, engaged with a book, to smiling and happy and more engaged with the group.

Finding #3: Peer support developed a sense of group membership

Providing help and support to one another is part of being a member of a community, and is welcomed and appreciated. The data reflects N.H. choosing to be a member of the group, and the children respecting him as a fellow member. When the children walked ahead of N.H., most of the time he would run after the line. The children quickly understood that N.H. did not want to be left behind. He wanted to be a part of the group, and they made an effort to make this possible. As noted above, some children would turn to him and say, "Come on, N.H." They did not want to leave him behind. Figure 3 illustrates two times when N.H. separated himself from the line.

As seen in Figure 3, efforts were made by the children to encourage N.H. to stay with the group. The children stopped to turn around and encourage him to catch up. They would not leave him until they were certain he was going to join the rest of the group. The children's kindness and caring created an inclusive and respectful classroom culture. They approached N.H.'s challenge as a group and gained compassion and understanding for individual needs.

Figure 3. "Come on N.H."

Conclusions and implications

The findings presented in this study suggest peer support can play a positive role in the transitions of a child with autism. Prior to the study, N.H. chose to walk in the back of the line during every transition. He would be the last child and occasionally separate himself from the line completely. However, during my study this changed: in 23 out of the 37 photographs taken of N.H. transitioning, N.H. was walking next to another child or in the middle or front of the line. The ownership and power shared with the children allowed for positive social interactions to occur during these transition times. In contrast, if we teachers had demanded a quiet, straight line that may have created a barrier for naturally occurring social interactions and support. In this study, the children took ownership of how to transition and help their peer transition down the hall. Balancing teacher support and child autonomy resulted in adults and children learning alongside one another. The adults were not the experts. This study reflected the voices of the children, and their experiences were mutually reinforcing. N.H. knows what is best for his own well-being, and his voice was heard and respected by the adults and the children in this study.

> The ownership and power shared with the children allowed for positive social interactions to occur during these transition times.

Listening to the voice of the child and putting the child first increased peer support and interactions in classroom experiences. N.H. has started to initiate more social interactions and continues to become more verbal. The other children too have initiated more interactions within the classroom setting. They ask N.H. if he would like to play, initiate more conversations, and view him as a valued member of the classroom. One day while playing with magnet tiles, N.H. looked to a peer and stated, "I want square, please." The peer handed him a square. N.H. looked back to his peer and said, "I need help." The peer helped N.H., showing pleasure in this interaction. The children want to interact with and support N.H, and do not feel a sense of dependency. During this study, friendships and relationships were built and strengthened. Many children with social challenges are pulled out of the classroom, isolating them from social interactions with peers. Why take these children out of the environment where natural social interactions occur? Children with social challenges need to be in environments where these interactions are encouraged and effective strategies can be explored.

> During this study, friendships and relationships were built and strengthened.

Possible limitations to this study must be addressed. N.H's ABA therapist began implementing a sensory diet around the time of the study. It is unclear whether this may have affected my research. Sensory experiences are offered to N.H. when he enters the classroom after breakfast and again before he washes his hands for lunch. He wears a weighted vest for thirty minutes after this time. There were times in the study when N.H. wore the

weighted vest during his transition to lunch and/or during the transition after lunch.

Another potential limitation of this research is the expectancies and presence of adults during these transitions. During this study, I was consistently at the back of the group; at times the ABA therapist was present as well. Other adults working with N.H. have shared with me their observations of different behaviors and that N.H. had a difficult time transitioning back to the classroom on a daily basis. In their view, this may be because he is not with his peer group and transitions alongside an adult. This supports the argument that peer support positively affects the transitions of this child with autism.

There are a number of areas in this study that warrant future research. The adults' role in child development and the effect adult expectancies have on a child's success would be an interesting area of study. Further work can be done on direct intervention and support balanced with listening to the child's voice and respecting the rights of the child. It would be interesting to assess the effects of generalized interventions compared to more individualized support, keeping in mind "the image of the child."

My study confirms previous findings cited in this article and contributes additional evidence that suggests listening to the child and incorporating his interests can lead to success. I am hoping this research influences adults working with children with special needs in focusing on documentation and interpretation, instead of using inferences to gain knowledge about a child's needs and well-being. This will give every child a better opportunity for active participation in their learning and development.

Approaches to special education vary, but my study suggests that child-centered, individualized interventions are effective. In my experience, a more generalized approach to intervention aligned with the therapists' ABA approach isolated the child, denying him the peer support he wanted and needed. A more individual approach to intervention may lead to greater success and respect for the child. An implication of this is the possibility that IEP goals be met through naturally occurring experiences in the most natural environment for the child. If a child struggles with social interactions, place the child in an environment where natural social interactions occur. Support them in a classroom with peers.

This study reaffirmed my belief that we can learn so much from children. If we deeply listen to children, they will show us what they need. This is why I believe there should be a more individual approach to interventions. I believe all children are capable. I believe that educators should learn who the child is and celebrate what they have to offer to the world. Children should not be known by a label. I learned that children need opportunities to be

who they are without adults getting in the way. All children need different levels of support in their natural environment. I learned through this study that everyone supporting a child needs to be on the same page, allowing the child to lead us. When this happened, N.H. and his peers showed us the answers.

The therapists' ABA approach isolated the child, denying him the peer support he wanted and needed.

This study gave children a voice. A child can provide new ideas and thoughts that offer adults opportunities to observe, understand, and learn. Including children as researchers will impact the early childhood field; the children will lead us.

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Rekha draws from her own passion and history to address a rarely studied topic: engaging in musical theater with 6- and 7-year-olds. However, rather than ask the research question that unfortunately dominates current educational research—how can musical theater improve children's scores in math or literacy?—Rekha considers what musical theater means to the children, and what is the teacher's role.

Her teacher research project demonstrates the techniques she used to support the children as they explored their roles in a musical production about dinosaurs. Her collection and analysis of data through pre- and post-surveys and informal conversations with the children and daily journaling produced findings such as the children "were most comfortable relating to their feelings, drawing upon [what their character] felt to be in a certain situation." Rekha's study highlights the value and potential of this kind of artistic engagement for the children and teacher.

—*Gail Perry*

From Broadway to Backpacks

Rekha S. Rajan, EdD, has been teaching music, theater, and dance to young children for over a decade. She received her doctorate in music and music education from Teachers College, Columbia University and researches children's participation in musical theater in school-based, community, and professional settings. She is the author of the book *Integrating the Performing Arts in Grades K–5* and the forthcoming title *Children's Experiences in Musical Theater*. rekha.rajan@cuchicago.edu

Photos courtesy of the author.

What are you going to teach us to sing today?

Can I have a big part?

I really like it when we do musicals, it makes me feel soooo happy!

As an elementary school performing arts instructor who teaches music, drama, and dance, I relish warm comments such as these, from three enthusiastic first-graders. My own extensive experience with musical theater led me to use the medium with my first grade children, and the previous week we had just finished our first musical together. The musical was "Dinomotion" by Jill and Michael Gallina, and was approximately 40 minutes in length.

My colleagues in the fields of early childhood and music education have shared their students' interest in participating in musical theater. They often ask me what shows I might recommend, if musical theater is appropriate for young learners, and where to find additional resources. I begin by sharing one of my first experiences in teaching musical theater, reflecting upon the first grade students whose motivation to participate in musical theater within their own school setting helped me to learn more about myself as a performer and a teacher.

Background

After receiving my bachelor's degree in vocal performance, I had the privilege of pursuing a career as a professional performing artist for many years. I took lead roles in musicals, sang musical revues, and performed concerts and solos to sold-out performance halls. Simultaneously, I held a private music studio where I taught young children piano and voice lessons. My youngest student—a 4-year-old—often reminded me of myself. I was the same age when I began performing, volunteering to take on roles as Sleepy the Dwarf in the local community theater's production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, or the *Little Red Hen* in my kindergarten class play. The connections between my early experiences as a performer, particularly those in school, to my experiences as an adult performing artist deeply influenced my pursuit of the arts as a professional career.

In fact, early experiences with musical theater often have profound, long-term effects on participants. Broadway performers recount their early experiences with musical theater by stating that "performing isn't something they want to do, but something they have to do"—they feel compelled to participate in musical theater throughout their lives (Wienir & Langel 2004, 3). Despite my more recent role as a performing arts teacher and researcher, I often drew upon my initial experiences as a performer to identify what it was about musical theater that was so appealing to me at such a young age. I used this reflection to shape my research project.

Contextualizing experience

My love of being on stage and performing drove me to pursue a career in performing. In turn, my experiences teaching young children whose curiosity and creativity expanded my own understandings of artistic experiences and the importance of early artistic engagement led me to pursue a master's degree in early childhood education. Charged with degrees in hand, and at the nascent stages of my doctoral studies in music education, I began my first teaching position as an assistant in an early childhood classroom, doubly responsible as the performing arts instructor for the entire school.

> The young children's curiosity and creativity expanded my own understandings of artistic experiences.

Since the elementary school already employed a music teacher, my role was somewhat different—I was the teaching assistant for one of two first grade classrooms, but I was also asked to augment children's performance opportunities. This was a natural alignment of my own experiences and interests. I also began to explore research that examined learning through the arts, considering examples of how students gained personal and social skills through participation in musical theater productions (Pitts 2007; Feay-Shaw 2001; Roberts 2007).

Coupled with my own desire to bring musical theater into the classroom, I sought to capture and document the experiences of my first grade students to better understand what musical theater meant to them. It was an enjoyable activity for me, both as a professional artist and as an extracurricular activity, but I could not assume that it would be a positive experience for the children. When researching children's experiences, it is important for practitioners to consider the adult-child dichotomy, to be cognizant of the role of the teacher within the setting and acknowledge experiences as being socially mediated and shared (Greene & Hill 2005).

> When researching children's experiences, it is important for practitioners to be cognizant of the role of the teacher within the setting.

I wanted to examine my role as the musical theater teacher and my relationship with the students as the first grade classroom teaching assistant in order to situate myself within the context of this project. I approached this research with the "assumption that understanding comes out of ways of seeing, knowing, and relating" (Graue & Walsh 1998, 72). I also framed my exploration as a teacher-researcher, looking for pathways to help me uncover the questions I had about students' learning and my own teaching practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009).

As I began this project, my main focus was to uncover how my first grade students viewed and experienced musical theater. While I found it an enjoyable and challenging activity, I wanted to explore how the components of musical theater participation were understood and experienced by my students. Thus, I focused on three research questions:

1. **How do first graders perceive musical theater and its components?**
2. **What are first graders' reflections on musical theater participation?**
3. **What is my role as the musical theater director/teaching assistant in the first graders' experience?**

Review of literature

In its earliest forms, musical theater was derived from vaudeville, the comedy and drama skits of the 1920s in early American popular culture, and slowly made its way to mainstream entertainment (Patinkin 2008). Musical theater is a reflection of our society and times. Consider how the plot of shows like *West Side Story, Annie,* and *Miss Saigon* portray specific events, moments, or periods of time in history through an intersection of music, theater, and dance.

Although originally associated with adult performers (Wienir & Langel 2004), musical theater has been glamorized in mainstream media making it an appealing and accessible form of art for young children. In December 2013, *The Sound of Music LIVE!* drew nearly 22 million viewers, making it

one of the highest viewed programs in over a decade (O'Connell 2013) and on December 4, 2014, the same production team presented a live rendition of *Peter Pan* filled with a cast of young performers.

Today, young children can pursue and participate in musical theater productions in a variety of contexts, including school-based productions, community settings, or roles available on the Broadway stage (Rajan 2012). There are numerous roles in professional productions specifically for young children. Early childhood and music teachers can find ways to integrate musical theater in curriculum through activities that connect with academic subjects, or through full-scaled productions (Rajan 2009; Roberts 2007; Feay-Shaw 2001).

Methods

Setting and participants

My research setting was a private elementary school in the Midwestern United States. In the first grade classroom where I was the teaching assistant, there was a classroom teacher; a reading specialist and an art specialist who each came once a week; and a group of 16 enthusiastic, curious, motivated students who ranged in age from 6 to 7 years old. There were 9 girls and 7 boys in the class. I began as the teaching assistant in September and after teaching integrated music and theater activities for two months, I decided to introduce a month-long musical theater production project at the beginning of November.

Since this was my first time teaching a group of students with whom I had already formed a teacher-student relationship (as opposed to experience as an arts education consultant in other settings), I decided to ask the children to vote on which show they would like to perform. From three choices that I had previously used successfully in the primary grades, *Dinomotion, Vacation on Mars,* and *How Does Your Garden Grow*, the students voted to perform *Dinomotion.* I believe their choice was influenced in part by a recent field trip to the local museum.

During a period of four weeks, I rehearsed with the students three times per week. My dual role as the classroom teaching assistant enabled me to include musical theater in the curriculum and daily activities, something that may not be easily accomplished in other settings. We began rehearsals by learning the songs in four steps. First, we listened to the song on a prerecorded CD provided with the musical score. Second, the students and I would sing the melody, line by line, until they mastered each song. Third, the

students and I would sing along to a karaoke version of the song also provided with the publication. Finally, the students were encouraged to practice singing alone, just as they would during the performance.

Although there were a variety of roles available (some larger than others), I ensured that each student had equal opportunities to be featured in the musical through song, dialogue, or dance. It was important to me that children focused on the experience itself rather than who had a larger role or spent the most time on stage. The cast of characters included a variety of dinosaur species, a group of students led to a dig site by their professors (a paleontologist and a geologist), and narrators.

As students learned the songs, I also included some scene studies. Finally, after the children memorized the songs and developed their characters, we began to integrate choreography into the performance. Students were always invited to share suggestions for dance movements that they felt might best represent each song and its meanings.

> **Students were invited to share suggestions for dance movements that represented each song.**

We held a total of two performances, one for the entire school during the day, and one for families that evening. We were allowed to use the sanctuary of a neighboring church as our theater without any additional cost. The space provided us with a platform that we used as the stage, prearranged seating, and wonderful acoustics that augmented the sound system.

Data collection and analysis

I collected three main sources of data for this project:

• **Informal conversations:** I spoke with each child individually prior to the musical and after the final performance. The goal of these sessions was to give students the opportunity to share anything specific about their individual perceptions toward musical theater. The conversations were documented in field notes, since many times they occurred spontaneously rather than in scripted segments.

• **Assessments:** The students were given pre- and post-musical questionnaires featuring open-ended and yes/no questions (**see Appendix**). The pre-assessment included questions about the arts (Have you been in a musical before? Do you like to sing? Do you like to dance?), and their feelings toward performing. The post-assessment asked what character they were in the musical, their favorite part, and if they would like to be in another performance. When administering the questionnaire, the classroom teacher or I read some of the questions aloud to students who needed assistance with reading or writing their responses.

• **Observations:** I documented my observations of student engagement, participation, and collaboration through daily journals. I typically wrote one

paragraph of objective descriptions of a particular event or interaction observed, and then another reflecting on this observation. This journaling technique is something I have used in my coursework in early childhood education, and as an early childhood teacher educator with graduate students.

Throughout the research project, the data were triangulated to look for emerging patterns and themes (Creswell 2013). After my initial conversations with the students, I compared the data from the pre-assessments with our informal interviews to find recurring themes or important categories of meaning. As I documented my own observations as a teacher-researcher, I then compared the original themes with data from my journal descriptions. Finally, I analyzed the data from the post-assessments with my final conversations with the children to create a deeper understanding of how my first grade students experienced and understood musical theater.

Findings

After analyzing and coding the data, I found three main categories gleaned from conversations with students, individual student assessments, and my observations. These findings were that children:

- made social-emotional connections;
- made academic connections; and
- became artistically engaged.

In the following sections, I describe the ways in which my students experienced and understood musical theater, and how the process shaped my own perceptions as a teacher researcher.

Finding #1: Children made social-emotional connections

I knew that one of the challenges to overcome in this project was finding ways to have my young students express, share, and document their experience in musical theater. In my conversations with the children, I found they were most comfortable relating to their feelings, drawing upon how it felt to be in a certain situation. Although the students all expressed that they were excited and happy to be in a musical, some of them also shared feelings of apprehension and anxiety:

Sometimes I'm scared to be on stage.

I'm a little bit nervous to be in a musical.

I am scared a little bit because I am performing in front of a big audience.

Others were already confident to begin with:

I'm not scared to be in a musical because my mom and dad say not to be scared.

I'm not really scared because I have been in shows before and got used to it.

It is fun to be in a musical and it's not that bad because it's fun to me.

Interestingly, while a small number of students said that they were not nervous or scared to be in the musical in the pre-assessment, over half of the children changed their response in the post-assessment, demonstrating an increase in their anxiety or apprehension in performing prior to the actual performance. To contrast these feelings, students unanimously reported that they would like to be in another musical and offered the opportunity to learn a larger role.

Students' personal growth and augmented self-confidence were demonstrated during the rehearsals and performances. The following anecdotal record details my observations and field notes of one first grader's physical and emotional responses to performing:

> *One girl seemed to forget the inhibitions that she often displayed in the classroom. During rehearsals she stood, somewhat sunken into her own shoulders as we practiced her solo. She seemed self-conscious, acutely aware that she was the center of attention, even though her peers were somewhat distracted, chatting amongst themselves, focusing on their own places in the show.*
>
> *During the performance, she sang loudly into the microphone, smiling, acknowledging her sister in the front row with a subtle wink of her eyes. After the performance, her parents choked back tears, clearly amazed at her ability to command the stage. They noted that their daughter 'is so unlike us. She is modest and shy, and never, ever displays affection publicly.'*

My students gained self-confidence through their performance experiences. The process of learning new songs, developing a character, and speaking into a microphone in front of a large audience enabled them to overcome feelings of stage fright.

In a large class discussion, I also asked the children to brainstorm what their characters might be thinking in order to empathize with and understand them. Here are some of their responses:

First graders cast as dinosaurs:

> *I'm really big and mean!*
> *I'm hungry. I like to eat plants too.*
> *He's probably thinking 'Where are my friends?'*
> *Is it hot for the dinosaurs? It looks really very hot in the pictures we saw.*

First-graders cast as students:

> *Do they get to dig?*
> *Where are the bones of the dinosaurs?*
> *I know what I would be thinking, I would be thinking that I really like looking for dinosaurs a lot 'cause they are really big and cool.*

The students and I subsequently discussed why it is important to think about your character. As they learned, being an actor means you are acting as someone other than yourself, telling a story through your words and actions.

Finding #2: Children made academic connections

I did not anticipate any specific academic learning as an outcome of this project. This was because I did not make any concerted effort to align the musical with other curricular or academic subject matter. The musical theater production was, in essence, a separate activity.

In retrospect, I acknowledge that any in-school activity cannot exist as devoid or separate of another—the lessons that engage students during the day are inevitably linked to one another, even if simply as a result of their own learning and understanding. As a result, I gathered examples of how students made connections to other academic areas. Their experiences in the musical were a springboard for new insights.

One such example was illustrated during a lesson by the classroom teacher:

Teacher: People that study plants for a living are called botanists. We will meet a botanist when we visit the nature center next week for our field trip.

Student A: Are botanists like geologists and paleontologists?

Teacher: They do have some similarities. Does anyone want to share their thoughts?

Student B: Well, geologists study rocks and botanists study plants.

Student C: So, maybe they work together? Since rocks can be found with plants?

Teacher: Those are great suggestions.

Student A: But, what about the paleontologists? Did they work with botanists?

Teacher: Yes, in fact, there are people who are even more specific, who study plants that existed during the time of dinosaurs. They are called paleobotanists.

Without any prompting from myself or the classroom teacher, the students were able to draw their own inferences and make connections from concepts learned through the musical to the lesson presented on botany.

Finding #3: Children became artistically engaged

It was evident in the data that my first grade students loved musical theater, performing, and being artistic. In their pre-assessments, the majority of students (12) shared that they liked to sing and dance, while all children had some experience performing prior to our production. In their post-assessments, students shared their reflections on performing:

My favorite part was everything.

The musical was really fun because of the dinosaurs.

I like being up on stage.

I really like to sing.

I just love musicals.

My favorite part of the musical was my part.

While some students noted prior experiences performing, the extent of these experiences was not explored further and could include the music lessons that I had already included in the curriculum, or other extracurricular activities that took place in after-school settings. In another example from my own observations, one of my students demonstrated a strong interest in character development:

One student was so eager to get fitted for his costume that he left his group activity and continuously followed me around the classroom as I was measuring and fitting students. He is a child with Asperger's Syndrome, and it is always a difficult task to motivate him when he appears disinterested and to help redirect his focus in the classroom. While he was initially reluctant to participate in a musical program as it involves dancing and singing—two activities that he has repeatedly expressed disinterest in—it was encouraging to see him so invested and engaged in receiving a costume. I wonder if it was because it afforded him the opportunity to morph into character, to fully immerse himself into his role as a dinosaur.

While I found that musical theater was both rewarding and challenging for my students (as I had hoped), I was also pleasantly surprised to find that many wanted to be in another show almost immediately. In fact, there was a brief period of sadness, mourning, and loss when the show ended. This was evinced through their collective sighs, reflective moments, and eager anticipation for our next production. As one student shared, he was "sad that this musical was over, but happy thinking about what show we might do next."

Conclusion: Beyond Broadway

Many people equate musical theater performance with grand staging, advanced technical aspects, flashy dance numbers, professional singers, and buoyant actors—all echoing through a large performance hall that has been sold out for weeks. Yet, musical theater is more than the performance. There is a rich, underlying process of learning one's character and in turn, learning about oneself—memorizing individual lines, but working collaboratively with peers.

As I observed the growth my students made, I also questioned how much of my own personal experiences influenced their perceptions. Was I too enthusiastic? Was I not enthusiastic enough? I recalled one of my greatest teachers, a music educator. He was so infectious with his love of theory that we, too, were compelled to love the dry, heavy topics he shared with us in class. Were students' experiences a direct response to my own love of performing?

Throughout this research project, I questioned my role as a participant-observer, performer, and teacher, dissecting and analyzing how each of these positions influenced and shaped the project and the data I collected. I tried to be cognizant of the extremes of performing, the juxtaposition of emotions such as feeling happy to be in a musical and sad when it is over, and the ways in which those dualities emerged from the data.

Ultimately, I realized that as a classroom teacher I also held dual roles. I was the primary instructor for my students, but I was also a performer, with the classroom as my stage. I was sharing my love of learning, be it in the arts or academic subjects with the children. Their willingness to explore the opportunities I presented to them created a reciprocal dialogue of artistic performance.

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Before the Show

Date:_____   Age:_____

1. Have you been in a musical before?

_____

_____

2. Do you like to sing?

_____

_____

3. Do you like to act?

_____

_____

4. Do you like to dance?

_____

_____

5. How do you feel about being in a musical?

_____

_____

After the Show

Date:_____   Age:_____

1. What character(s) were you in the musical?

_____

_____

2. What was your favorite part of the musical?

_____

_____

3. How did you feel after the musical? Why?

_____

_____

4. Write one thing you learned from the musical.

_____

_____

5. Would you like to be in another musical?

_____

_____

Stories are a central way people make sense of the world. In this article, Laura Hope Southcott introduces us to a special kind of storytelling—Learning Stories (rich descriptions of moments of classroom life, illustrated by photographs, dialogue, and children's creations). Southcott shares two learning stories from her kindergarten classroom, demonstrating how by making learning visible these stories can: deepen educators' understandings of children's thinking, guide instruction, and support home-school connections. Southcott contributes to our understanding of how authentic assessment is a key component of good early childhood practice.

—*Ben Mardell*

Learning Stories: Connecting Parents, Celebrating Success, and Valuing Children's Theories

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I am a kindergarten teacher in a public school in Ontario, Canada. As teachers in Ontario began expanding into a full-day kindergarten program, we experienced a change in the focus of the Ontario schools' official early years' learning philosophy. As educators of young learners, understanding and naming the learning unfolding in our classrooms each day is both an opportunity and a challenge. Documenting children's thinking and making it visible for teachers, families, administrators, the school community, and for the children themselves is critical to effective teaching. It requires us to carefully choose from a wide variety of assessment tools.

We started searching for meaningful ways to document children's theory-making and emerging understandings in play- and inquiry-based programs. The traditional assessment methods we were using—such as running records, checklists, and standardized tests—did not necessarily capture the learning unfolding in the classroom (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer 2007). I began rethinking how I used documentation and assessment in my classroom to extend learning, embarking on my own pedagogical journey. My search was this: What assessment tool supports my view of children as capable learners, deepens my understanding of children's theory-making, celebrates their successes, and helps strengthen connections between home and school?

In an inservice training, the school system introduced a process known as *learning stories* as a method of both documentation and assessment in Ontario kindergarten classrooms. As Reisman relays (2011), learning stories

help give guidance to teachers about practice; they are in essence informative stories about children's learning and teachers' own learning (see Figure 1 for an example). Learning stories, a form of pedagogical documentation and narration, have a rich history of supporting teachers' understanding of what children can do and what they know. They are widely used in early years' classrooms in New Zealand (Carr & Lee 2012), and more recently in the United States (Carter 2000) and Britain (Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdouss 2011). Teachers can use learning stories to document children's learning and open a window into their own professional learning (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer 2007). Wien, Guyevskey, and Berdouss describe the use of pedagogical documentation as a way to understand children's thinking. They argue that

> [A] parallel process goes on for the teachers who create the documentation in an effort to understand and represent the children's theories and the ways these theories may shift back and forth between playful fantasy and reality. (2011)

The learning in learning stories is twofold: teachers come to understand how their own thinking is being shaped at the same time as they learn about children's thinking. It becomes a learning story nested within a learning story.

Learning stories feature children's experiences engaging in learning, and are written by educators and shared with families (Hatherly & Sands 2002). Families are often encouraged to add a home connection, which strengthens the link between home and school. The learning story includes the voices of those present during the learning experience, such as the child, early childhood educator, and/or parent. There is a title, an explanation of what happened, and its significance in relation to the child's thinking and development. They not only highlight the actions of the child, but also illuminate how educators support the child and extend learning. In this way, learning stories have the potential to reveal the reflections and actions of both children and educators in the classroom, capturing the complexity of learning and teaching.

Although we were encouraged to use this tool, and some teachers began using it in their classrooms, learning stories were new to me. I began experimenting with learning stories shortly after a workshop held in the spring of 2012 by our school board. The next fall, I wrote learning stories as a way to illustrate the learning in my classroom. I also decided to use learning stories to make learning visible in a Ministry of Education project in which I was involved that same year. There was a gap in what we knew about how the teachers in Ontario use learning stories, how these stories align with our documentation and assessment practices, and fit with key goals of the full-day kindergarten early years' program. I decided to engage in a self-examination of documentation and assessment in my classroom, launching my pedagogical journey in pursuit of an alternative assessment tool that supported my view of children as capable learners. This is my own learning story, as well as that of my students.

Figure 1. Example of a Learning Story

Learning Stories—Potential Elements

Not all learning stories contain all of these elements; teachers choose what best illustrates the subject.

- Subject headings at the top of the page
- Activity summary as opening text
- Title
- Teacher observations
- Photographs and images of children's work
- Quotes from children's discussions
- Teachers' questions about children's learning
- Teachers' observations about children's learning
- Teacher contact information
- Question presenting overarching pedagogical concern

exploring and celebrating families, heritage, and culture

We have been working on our self-portraits. Our first attempt was using fine black marker and white paper. A copy of the drawings were sent home last week for families and friends to enjoy!

self-portraits & the art centre

The self-portraits were truly amazing! Each one is very special in its own way. The children took such care drawing their faces, noticing the differences and similarities between them. They used a mirror to look deeply at their faces, admiring their eyes, shape of their ears, and the rich colour of their hair. One student even counted his teeth!

My mouth looks like a banana
That's you?
I have hair behind my ears. This is the way I usually look.
My hair goes down to my ears.
You should put spots on your face.
It will look just like you.
That's the neck.
I have cheeks. Oh! I forgot my ears.
I have a huge head and a tiny body.
I'm going to have to look in the mirror to copy myself. I need teeth.
Look at my hair!
I have glasses on. My hair is long and messy.

What are the children learning while they are drawing or making their collages? What are their OWN theories of learning?

- The children are noticing same and different characteristics in their features (math connection).
- They are beginning to or furthering their appreciation of themselves as individuals (personal and social development).
- Some have observed that they look like their family members.
- They are thinking about the materials that they chose to make their self-portraits.
- What material makes the best hair? What colour are their eyes? What should they use to make their nose?

Lakehead Public Schools

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teaching learning & leadership program   Ministry of Education ON

How can educators help young learners' to develop critical thinking skills through play-based and inquiry-based learning?

This article shares my reflections on my practice regarding learning stories in my early years' classroom, focused on this question: **Can learning stories serve as an assessment tool that supports my view of children as capable learners, deepens my understanding of children's theory-making, celebrates their successes, and helps strengthen connections between home and school?**

Review of literature

Helm, Beneke, and Steinheimer (2007) suggest that documentation informs instruction by helping to individualize learning as well as to plan and gather useful materials. With these three aspects of documentation in mind, teachers are able to meet children where they are and move them to the next step in their learning. Helm, Beneke, and Steinheimer (2007) go on to say that teachers choose a particular method of documentation that fits their curricular focus; plans for sharing with the child, family, and school community; and accounts for the depth or breadth of the data needed. Learning stories are an authentic way to gather the data of practice, to collect small stories from the classroom, and nurture trusting relationships with families.

Learning stories are a form of pedagogical documentation, which "is a research story, built upon a question or inquiry 'owned by' the teachers, children, or others, about the learning of children" (Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdouss 2011). Pedagogical documentation examines children's learning more closely through a researcher's lens, drawing on teachers' observations, artifacts, and student dialogue to create a rich picture of and a window into children's thinking (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer 2007). Fraser refers to documentation as a "cycle of inquiry" which echoes the action research spiral of plan/act/observe/reflect (2012, 148). Children and/or teachers pose questions or statements that can be framed as questions; observations of children help the teacher to gather materials for exploration; children's theories are interpreted and reflected on; and new questions based on this learning are developed. The next cycle in the spiral involves more planning to support the children's new questions. Learning stories can help teachers and children document this reflective research spiral.

> Learning stories are built on a question that is 'owned by' the teachers and children and draws on teachers' observations, artifacts, and classroom dialogue to create a rich picture of children's thinking and learning.

Pedagogical documentation reveals the teacher's understanding of the children's theory-making and ideas about the world around them; learning stories zoom in to closely unpack this understanding. As Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdouss suggest, "habits of documenting also include becoming aware

of the potential that moments of classroom action may have for yielding something meaningful about learning" (2011). Teachers choose a significant classroom moment to enlarge in a learning story in order to explore children's thinking more closely.

A collaborative effort

Similarly, Gandini and Kaminsky describe pedagogical documentation as a way to listen with care (2004). They argue that adopting a pedagogy of listening focuses teachers' efforts on exploring children's ideas, theories, and hypotheses. We take our cues from children's conversations with each other and the relationships they have with the classroom environment, their peers, and the materials that we set out with purpose and intent. This holistic form of documentation encourages us to negotiate a common understanding of unfolding events with children. Children's views and conversations are at the heart of learning stories, and their words are transcribed as a source of reflection and exploration into their thinking and theorizing.

> Seitz states,
>
> [A]n effective piece of documentation tells the story and the purpose of an event, experience, or development. It is a product that draws others into the experience—evidence or artifacts that describe a situation, tell a story, and help the viewer to understand the purpose of the action. (2008, 88)

Documentation may focus on student growth, development, actions, behaviors, relationships with other people, materials or the classroom environment, curricular expectations, and inquiries or projects (Lewin-Benham 2011; Seitz 2008). These factors help teachers to shed light on and make provisional interpretations of learning and thinking.

Reisman (2011) describes writing a learning story as a means to demonstrate what children are saying, doing, and representing as well as suggest a direction to follow with guidance. Photos are key to this process. Reisman also points out, "With learning stories, children's choices and languages show us where we are now, and point us in the directions we could go. We only need to know what to look for" (2011, 91). Learning stories are similar to holding up a magnifying glass or taking a picture with a camera, allowing the moment of learning to be frozen and/or bringing it further into focus. The more precise and sharp the documentation created by the teacher about the significant moment of learning, the clearer the children's thinking is made visible (Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdouss 2011). Learning stories are essentially about taking an ordinary moment and making it *extraordinary* as a way to pay close attention to children's emerging theories as they play and inquire (Shor 1992).

A learning story also provides the educator and the child an opportunity to further reflect on the learning unfolding in the classroom—what the learning might mean and what next steps could be taken to extend the learning and support the child (Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdouss 2011). This approach is an alternative way to interpret children's learning. This method can be

used to guide instruction, communicate with families, and plan next steps for learning. We create a story that brings our emerging insights and understandings of children's growth into focus (Ontario Ministry of Education 2012). Hatherly and Sands point out that "a good story gives insight" about how children make sense of their world (2002).

Methods

Setting and participants

My research was conducted in a full-day, three days a week kindergarten program in an Ontario public school. The participating children ranged in age from 4 to 5 years old. Three adults, including an early childhood educator and a student support professional, were also involved, as well as the children's parents.

Research plan

To support our learning stories, I took hundreds of photos of children as they played and followed our classroom inquiries. I collected work samples that acted as a spark for many learning stories, such as a child's drawing, wire sculpture, math work, journal writing, or a painting. I set aside time to observe children several times a day and record what they were saying and doing on observation sheets. I would observe and write for different lengths of time depending on the play the children were involved in and as I looked for an ordinary moment to make extraordinary. I watched and waited for moments of learning that gave me a window into children's thinking.

I took video of children to reflect on afterward and transcribe conversations. The transcription of the children's conversations helped me identify moments of learning and served as catalysts for learning stories. For example, many of these moments of learning demonstrated children's ability to share or help a peer, explore a theory about a math concept or a big idea from science such as the property of materials or objects, highlighted skills such as cutting paper or holding a pencil, or revealed an interest in writing or reading. Learning stories were created to reflect on and share with children, administration, parents, and critical friends. I wrote at least one learning story for each of my students and many whole class or small group learning stories. Sometimes, I included the learning stories on our classroom documentation panels, in inquiry binders, on our classroom website, in children's portfolios, or in a slideshow.

I collected data for approximately one school year and wrote learning stories for each of the children in my classroom during that time. Many children had more than one learning story written about their thinking and theory-making. I also wrote learning stories for small groups of children involved in a variety of inquiries in the classroom as well as learning stories that involved the whole class. I read and reread the data, looking for children's thinking and new understanding. From these insights, I wrote about

the children's learning, using photos and the children's own words to add depth and meaning to the stories. The data was organized into inquiry binders for the children, families, and administration to read.

I have highlighted two particular learning stories: Kyler's learning story at the block center and a small group learning story about painting Ukrainian wooden eggs during an afternoon at the art table. The children's names in the learning stories have been changed and the learning stories included in this article have been shared with permission from families. The Ukrainian eggs example was part of a grant from the Teacher Leadership and Learning Program (TLLP) from the Ministry of Education in Ontario, and the layout was formatted by my school board's desktop and graphic technician. I have used this same format (pictures, photos, and text) as a template for all of my recent learning stories, using a blank publishing template on my computer.

Data collection and analysis

I was first introduced to learning stories at a school board workshop. I was intrigued by all the possibilities learning stories presented for my own students and my own practice. Afterward, I went home and wrote my first learning story, as I had a meeting the next day with parents about their child. I wanted to share a learning story with the family during our meeting as a starting point to our discussions. The learning story starred Kyler, and gave some insight into his thinking as he built ramps in the block center. The learning story was linked to expectations in the language, personal and social development, and science and technology areas of the Ontario Kindergarten document (Ontario Ministry of Education 2010–11). Noticing Kyler's keen excitement as he began his work with the moldings and marbles, I started to document his learning. I took photos and carefully transcribed his own words as he talked to other students, another educator with whom he worked, and as he thought aloud. I wrote the learning story that evening using the documentation I had gathered earlier in the day.

For Kyler's learning story, my first learning story, I used a PowerPoint Presentation slideshow. Most slides contained a photograph of Kyler at the block center as well as his own words as he explored. Other times, I have used a simple publishing template from my computer and inserted text and photos to create a learning story. Since Kyler's learning story, I have experimented with different formats and templates in Microsoft Word, and found that the layout of the learning story is an important element in the telling of the story. The simpler the format, the clearer the learning story is and the child's thinking takes center stage.

> The layout of the learning story is an important element in the telling of the story. The simpler the format, the clearer the learning story is and the child's thinking takes center stage.

I had technical and design support from our school board's desktop graphic design technician when the learning stories for the TLLP grant were created. Inspired by *The Wonder of Learning, Browsing through Ideas* posters, these learning stories were shared at a Ministry of Education learning fair in Toronto, Ontario, and beautifully illustrated all of our learning. The Ukrainian eggs and the self-portraits learning stories are two examples from the TLLP grant.

To document the second learning story, I used photos taken that afternoon and transcriptions of the children's conversations with each other that supported the development of a learning story about our wooden eggs. I was interested in hearing what the children at the art center would talk about as they worked together, painting their eggs. Some children looked at the eggs carefully in order to replicate the patterns they saw, while others took inspiration from the eggs, creating their own scrollwork and swirls. I sat with the children while they painted, taking pictures and writing down their conversations to reflect on their learning. That evening, I wrote a learning story about painting our Ukrainian eggs and shared it with the children, parents, and administration of our school. The learning story was displayed in our classroom, included in our inquiry binder and in our newsletter, and uploaded onto our classroom website. The learning story included many photos and some of the painted eggs the children created at the center. The painting experience provoked some conversations from the children about the eggs, the art of painting, and respect for a friend's treasures. At the end of the children's dialogue, I decided to summarize what they were thinking as they worked.

Both learning stories were shared with families, and copies were placed in our inquiry binders about our classroom explorations and children's individual portfolios or file folders. The inquiry binders showcased our learning during an exploration.

The learning stories

Kyler's learning story reveals his work with materials at the block center during play one morning. That day, I added new resources such as cove molding, marbles, and small wooden blocks to spark children's interest in building ramps. Children who were interested in exploring and experimenting with the materials were encouraged to visit the block center.

The second learning story involves a small group of five or six children that I had invited to the art table to create colorful painted eggs. As part of our celebration of families and cultures funded by our TLLP grant, I

Figure 2. Kyler's Learning Story

Kyler's learning story

Exploring new materials, talking about his thinking,
inviting friends to join in the learning
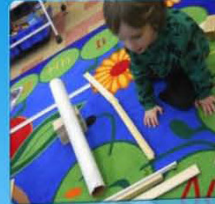
Kyler began play time with marbles and mouldings. He quickly built a structure to test his theory about where the marble would roll when released down the tube.

Science and technology:

2.1 state problems and pose questions before and during investigations.

2.3 Select and use materials to carry out their own explorations

---

"Its move slide down to the bottom of the shaft". Kyler began to roll the marble down the tube but noticed that it fell off the track at the bottom or jumped over the moulding he had placed at the end of the tube. He seemed to want the marble to round the corner and follow the next set of mouldings rather than leave the track. "Need tracks where this one is" Kyler offers.

"It keeps on jumping over" someone offered as she walked by. She tried to uncover what Kyler was thinking. "I put a lot of junk here" replied Kyler, referring to the growing pile of wood at the end of the ramp. He was trying to stop the marble from leaving the track by piling up mouldings to act as a barrier. "It's so high" notices Kyler as he started to moved the moulding once again to allow the marble to work its way down the tube.

Kyler's learning story

* A student came by and asked if she could play. "This is mine but you can make something here" suggested Kyler, pointing to the other side of the tube closest to the chart stand. She joined in and started to roll a marble around the far end of the structure. "I wonder if you win like this?" she asked Kyler.

* *Personal and social development:*
* *1.3 express their thoughts and share experiences*
* *2.5 interact cooperatively with others in classroom events and activities*

Kyler piled up the mouldings to stop the marble from leaving the track and talked about his thinking.

Language:

1.2 listen and respond to others for a variety of purposes

1.6 use language to talk about their thinking, to reflect, and to solve problems

---

"The marbles better have to look out" and "Its all covered up". "I can't get there" were comments Kyler made as he began to add more moulding. Another student joined Kyler at the carpet to play. Some of the blocks that were holding up the structure were moved. With help, Kyler was able to share his concern about the removal of materials that he was using.

A few minutes later, one more student came over to see what was happening on the carpet with the marbles and moulding. After being asked to gather more blocks to build the ramp, the other student began to build his own structure.

suggested the children might be interested in sharing some special treasures and artifacts from home. In response, a child brought in a beautiful Ukrainian wooden vase and eggs as well as an embroidered doily from his grandparents' house. These treasures were displayed on our culture table for children to explore. Shortly afterward, I decided to place an art invitation with the beautiful wooden eggs. I mixed some lovely paint colors similar to those on the wooden eggs and found small delicate paintbrushes for the children to use. Many children were interested in exploring the materials at the art table over the course of one afternoon. As a space opened up at the table, other children joined in the learning. Paint, brushes, our beautiful wooden eggs, water, and paper were set out for children to use.

Figure 3. Ukrainian Eggs Learning Story

The child who brought the eggs to the classroom shared his understanding of the special eggs and their place in his family's traditions and celebrations. He was able to talk about the importance of the eggs to his family, becoming our expert in the learning experience. During the following week children would often walk by the culture table, pick up the eggs, or draw new pictures of the eggs or the vase. They also took time to look at the inquiry binder where I had placed some of the paintings of their eggs, photos, and a transcription of their initial conversations.

Presentation and discussion of the findings

Use of learning stories has deepened my understanding of children's theory-making, the importance of celebrating their successes, and has helped strengthen connections between home and school. Celebrating successes honors children's learning and thinking. When we view children as capable and strong learners we recognize the prior experiences and knowledge they bring with them to school in all domains of learning. Teachers have an opportunity to immerse themselves in the children's ideas, thinking, and wondering. Teachers meet children where they are and support their next steps in learning. In the past, the focus has been on the expectations or developmental stages that children haven't reached or met, an approach that equates children with an empty vessel waiting for educators to fill with their knowledge and a deficit view of children's learning. By sharing the children's successes with others through learning stories, for example, we invite others to reflect on the learning, celebrate with children, and open up new possibilities for understanding

> Use of learning stories has deepened my understanding of children's theory-making, the importance of celebrating their successes, and has helped strengthen connections between home and school.

Figure 3. Ukrainian Eggs Learning Story

exploring and celebrating families, heritage, and culture

ukrainian eggs
& the paint centre

Beautiful Ukrainian Eggs

We set up an invitation to paint Ukrainian eggs today at the paint centre. A child had brought in some wooden painted eggs and a beautiful wooden container from his grandparents. He visited his grandparents on the weekend and together they chose some treasures to share with us. We displayed the collection on our culture table with a lovely embroidered doily. Some children came to draw the eggs on small pieces of paper we had left for their use. Later in the afternoon, we set up colours (orange, blue, yellow, white, brown, purple) to paint paper eggs.

I'm doing the big one.
I used all the colours for mine.
And this is white. I made the big one.
What colour is this?
Pink.

I like these eggs. I wonder what kind of paint is this? Will it come off? It's not the same paint as we are using. Maybe it's Ukrainian paint? Some one must have very fancy paintbrushes.

Those are really beautiful. We don't just go like THAT. That jar protects them.

Lakehead Public Schools

Laura Hope-Southcott
2012-2013

Laura Hope-Southcott Cristine Sillen Colette Leroux-Cowan Janice Hill

teaching learning & leadership program Ministry of Education ON

How can educators help young learners' to develop critical thinking skills through play-based and inquiry-based learning?

their thinking (Wien 2013). Children and teachers also have a further opportunity for reflection on learning as they reread the learning story. My findings were that:

- learning stories deepen understanding of children's thinking;
- learning stories can engage parents in the learning at school; and that
- learning stories helped me reflect on my use of authentic documentation to make children's learning visible.

Finding 1: Learning stories deepen understanding of children's thinking

Kyler's learning. Kyler's learning story gave us insight into his thinking as he built ramps in the block center earlier that day. As I wrote:

He quickly built a structure to test his theory about where the marble would roll when released down the tube. Kyler began to roll the marble down the tube but noticed that it fell off the track at the bottom or jumped over the molding he had placed at the end of the tube. He seemed to want the marble to round the corner and follow the next set of moldings rather than leave the track. 'It keeps on jumping over . . . I put a lot of junk here,' referring to the growing pile of wood at the end of the ramp. He was trying to stop the marble from leaving the track by piling up moldings to act as a barrier. He piled up the moldings to stop the marble from leaving the track, and talked about his thinking.

Kyler had set up cove moldings, wooden blocks and marbles on the carpet. He was trying to find a way to stop the marble and struggled as it continued to jump over the "junk." As he tried new ideas to stop the marble, he piled the cove moldings higher and higher. Kyler shared his plans to modify and adapt the ramp as he worked. Using photos and Kyler's own words, I wrote a learning story.

The learning story deepened my understanding of Kyler's thinking as he built a ramp—I discovered that he was also interested in finding a way to make the marble race down the cove molding in a particular way. Kyler persevered and tested many theories to move the marble by manipulating the materials as he worked, such as piling up the cove molding and moving the molding around to facilitate the movement of the marble. As I transcribed his words I noted the language he used as he thought out loud.

Kyler's learning story provided a glimpse into his thinking about ramps, marbles, gravity, force, movement, and "junk."

What were the children thinking about? Shared thinking made visible

- How beautiful the Ukrainian eggs are.
- How special the treasures are and how thankful they are that they are being shared.
- The wonderful patterns we saw on the eggs.
- What kind of paint is needed to paint the wooden eggs.
- Is the paint used on the eggs different than what we are using?
- Size of the eggs (smallest and biggest).
- The name of different colors and color mixing.
- How to make their own patterns, lines, dot, swirls, flowers, or reproduce what they see.

Children's learning while painting Ukrainian eggs. At the end of the children's dialogue, I decided to summarize what they were thinking as they worked. Writing our learning story revealed what the children noticed about the various sizes of the wooden eggs, the type of paint needed to paint the eggs, and different aspects of color mixing as they attempted to replicate the delicate scrollwork and patterns they saw. As I recorded in my observational notes, one child noted as she worked,

These are really beautiful. We don't just go like THAT. That jar protects them.

The child admired the beauty of the eggs and the delicate paintings on them. She wanted to paint her own egg very carefully and deliberately just like the one she saw, wanting her friends to be as careful in their paintings

as well. She also shared her new learning about the wooden vase that her friend brought in, and its purpose to protect the egg. Listening to the children's viewpoints as they examined the wooden eggs at the culture table or painted their own eggs at the art center allowed me a window into their wonderings.

Carr and Lee refer to learning stories as "shared thinking about learning" (2012, 46). As I wrote down the children's conversations at the art center, I began to appreciate the many languages the children used to express their learning—painting the eggs, listening to their friends talk about the eggs, noticing the colors, materials, and designs of the eggs, sharing materials, showing appreciation for the beautiful artifacts, and giving positive feedback to each other for their efforts. I was also learning how important moments of learning such as this one were to community building, growing children's own capacity, and to my own understanding of an ordinary event made extraordinary.

For example, that afternoon the children spoke about mixing colors. Here is how their conversation started:

If you want brown, you just mix the colors.

I want blue.

I want another one (paper egg).

I like these eggs. I wonder what kind of paint is this? Will it come off? It's not the same paint as we are using. Maybe it's Ukrainian paint?

I'm mixing the colors. Look at what blue and orange makes. She is making another egg.

It makes grey. Someone must have very fancy paintbrushes. Red and blue makes purple.

I'm mixing colors.

How do you use white?

Finding 2: Learning stories can engage parents in the learning at school

Sharing a learning story with Kyler's family was a starting point to our discussions one evening after school. We had planned to meet that day and I was eager to share Kyler's block play, using his learning story as a point of reference and reflection.

After the meeting, I received an email from one of Kyler's parents:

I have read his Learning Story several times at bedtime. He was thrilled to see himself inside a bedtime story, and it has been a great starter for conversations about his classmates and his classroom behavior, as he is the expert on the story, and I am the learner.

As shown by the parent's email, learning stories have the potential to engage families in the learning at school. The response from Kyler's parents is echoed in the literature (e.g., Carr & Lee 2012; Hatherly & Sands 2002). Hatherly and Sands contend, "learning stories [can be] sites of interesting conversations as students, parents and children reflect on the learning together captured in the story" (2002, 9). Parents can share what is occurring at home or how they might use the learning story to support their child. In Kyler's case, the parents used the learning story as a bedtime tale and a starting point to engage Kyler in a discussion about his day and his learning. Kyler's parent noted that the learning story made Kyler the expert in the story and he was able to tell about his ramps. Kyler's parent added,

The learning story experience is positive in so many ways. It is a relationship builder and reinforcer for all three dyads in the learning triangle: teacher-student, teacher-parent, and student-parent.

Carr and Lee suggest learning stories "provide opportunities for learners to revisit stories about learning in which they are 'heroes' and to write or dictate their own stories about learning, often using photographs taken of the event as cues" (2012, 42). For Kyler and his parents, the learning story about the ramps and marbles carved out a space for the family to share and talk about learning before bed for several nights. In Kyler's story, he was the expert ramp maker who best understood how to stop the marble from rolling away. His parents and I were the learners in this story.

Kyler's learning story provided all of us with a place to reflect on his learning as he played at the block center that morning. His parents were able to talk about a specific moment of learning from his day at school, using the story to support their conversation. I could also share with Kyler's parents his actions, thinking, and feelings as he experimented with the materials at the block center.

Finding 3: Learning stories helped me reflect on my use of authentic documentation to make children's learning visible

A closer examination of learning stories as a way to capture small moments of learning helped me to better understand how to use documentation to name the learning, plan for instruction, and connect more meaningfully with children's ideas and their families. As Reisman states, learning stories "point us in the directions we could go" (2011, 91).

I reflected on what I learned about Kyler's thinking. I could add or remove materials to support his learning about movement, gravity, or force. I could set up a different invitation to provoke thinking. I could also reflect on how he had met aspects of the curriculum expectations as he played with the resources at the blocks center. As well, I could plan to ask open-ended questions to dig deeper into his thinking to explore his developing theories:

- Why did this work/not work?
- What would happen if . . . ?
- Why did you choose to use . . . ?
- What did you notice about . . .?
- What might you do differently?
- Tell me about your thinking?

Kyler's learning story and the story of the painted Ukrainian eggs afforded me the opportunity to reflect on my use of an authentic documentation tool to push my own thinking about ways to make the children's thinking visible. I found that the learning stories I wrote demonstrated where the child was and the next steps in his or her learning journey or where a group of children's interests and wonderings lay. Learning stories revealed opportunities for, of, and as assessment of learning. I was able to plan for daily instruction that was responsive and meaningful to the children in a way that was respectful of children's ideas and thinking. Writing learning stories also required me to slow down and really listen carefully and with intention to my students' conversations with each other and myself to find out what they were thinking and what theories they were exploring.

The painting experience provoked some interesting ideas about the eggs, the art of painting, and respect for a friend's treasures. At the end of the children's dialogue, I decided to summarize what they were thinking as they worked. The learning story helped to illuminate the children's thinking about the wooden painted eggs and the craftsmanship needed to make such intricate designs. The children

were very curious about the colors that we chose to make for the eggs, the designs that were intricately drawn on the eggs, the size of the eggs, and the type of paint that was used. I transcribed the children's conversation as they painted their eggs to help clarify my thinking and deepen my understanding of their theories and interests. Writing our story revealed what the children noticed about the various sizes of the wooden eggs, the type of paint needed, and aspects of color mixing as they attempted to replicate the delicate scrollwork and patterns they saw.

Conclusion

Our school board introduced learning stories to a group of teachers during an in-service workshop. A closer examination of learning stories as a way to capture small moments of learning was needed to better understand how to use documentation to name the learning, plan for instruction, and connect more meaningfully with children's ideas and their families in my classroom.

Learning stories invite perspectives of all those involved in the learning experience, especially those of the child. Indeed, when explored from this lens, learning stories give voice to all the learners in the story—the child, the teacher, and the family. Carr and Lee (2012) view learning stories and narrative as an assessment tool where "adults and children tell and retell stories of learning and competence, reflecting on the past and planning for the future" (2012, 2). Perhaps this is where the value of learning stories is at its most powerful and empowering. Learning stories focus on what children can do, say, and represent, and support teachers' insights on next steps. This form of documentation tells a story of learning using the children's own words and highlights the questions and wonderings that they have and are in the process of researching. Learning stories celebrate children as capable learners with their own theories ready to be tested about the world around them.

They also support teachers' understanding of their own practice as they reflect while gathering data from their practice about the children's learning, writing the learning story, and then sharing the story with others. Learning stories helped me to identify the strengths of this documentation and assessment method for my practice and my students' growth.

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Paraprofessionals, or assistant teachers, are one of the most underutilized resources in early childhood classrooms. Aaron Sauberan demonstrates how a teacher can take the leadership role in a public school setting by designing and implementing a successful professional development model for teachers and paraprofessionals in a preschool special education program. While created to improve support for children with special needs, Sauberan's model—promoting nonjudgmental observation skills, the strategic use of video, and focusing on building collaborative relationships—have implications for all early childhood classroom teams.

—*Ben Mardell*

Room to Grow: Supporting the Role of Paraprofessionals

Aaron T. Sauberan, MA, is a preschool special education teacher in a blended program with Innovative Preschool at Loma Vista School in Chico, California. He is pursuing an Administrative Services credential, and is excited about supporting effective, collaborative classroom teams. asaubera@chicousd.org

Paraprofessional Andie wonders . . .

"What about this job is helping me grow personally, and what about this job do I need to work on?"

In the spring of 2012 it became clear that my school, Loma Vista, would experience significant teacher turnover in the upcoming school year. I was torn between feeling panicked for our program's continuity, yet also optimistic that there were things we needed to do differently and this offered an opportunity to change.

Loma Vista is a public school, which serves an early childhood special education population. Innovative Preschool, a private preschool, is housed within Loma Vista. My role as a preschool special education teacher is to assess and teach 3–5-year-old children with special needs who are included in the two Innovative Preschool classrooms primarily serving typically developing children in our school. It is my job to go between both rooms to provide the free and appropriate public education children with special rights are entitled to as described in their Individualized Education Programs. I do this by working collaboratively with the director and staff of the Innovative Preschool. My role also includes leading a team of five special education paraprofessionals. I strive to provide the children I teach an inclusive experience of belonging to a community while providing the benefits of intentional, differentiated teaching.

My collaborative teaching assignment challenges me to find and use a balanced blend of special education interventions with developmentally appropriate practices. I routinely discuss the challenge of finding a balance of teaching practices in a blended environment with my general education teaching colleagues. Our collaboration is mainly focused on finding this balance.

This line of questioning was not part of the staff development at Loma Vista, which consisted of semi-monthly trainings mainly led by the county office of education. Trainings were generally geared towards presenting the informational and procedural aspects of special education practices, such as discrete trial training. New and experienced staff were taught much of the same content each year, which led to experienced teachers and therapists not regularly attending the trainings with their new paraprofessionals.

Years ago, I would have been satisfied with paraprofessional staff that reliably followed my directions. However, as my teaching career advances I realize that developing greater team collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals benefits children and has the potential to deepen the relationships and job satisfaction of all staff. However, there were no opportunities within our current professional development system for paraprofessionals and teachers to collaborate on why and when to use recommended practices with children with special needs or to connect this learning to the actual children they teach. This was a problem. I wanted to create opportunities for teacher leadership and team building between teachers and paraprofessionals and to redesign our professional development system in functional, child-centered ways, ultimately leading to paraprofessional staff understanding why and when to use various practices. I was motivated by the opportunity to provide continuity to my school while encouraging change. My administrators supported teachers taking leadership roles and encouraged me to investigate how best to guide our continuous improvement.

> Developing greater team collaboration between teachers and paraprofessionals benefits children and has the potential to deepen the relationships and job satisfaction of all staff.

I organized my teacher inquiry using a design process developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2011). Using their process, organizing a large body of information is achieved, partly, by identifying main ideas. These ideas ultimately help to develop processes to address the enduring questions that guide practice. I identified three main ideas based on the challenges and opportunities facing us: the increasing importance of the role of paraprofessionals in preschool special education; the fact that many teachers don't know how to support paraprofessional staff; and the nature and scope of the professional development system that is critical in transforming practice.

My teacher research question stemming from these ideas is: **How can our school increase both individual paraprofessional competency and whole staff capacity to engage in good early childhood practice?**

Review of literature

The role of the paraprofessional

Increasing demands on special education teachers has led to the employment of paraprofessionals in greater numbers and a shift in their significance and responsibilities in the classroom (Hughes & Valle-Riestra 2008; McGrath, Johns, & Mathur 2010; Ashbaker & Morgan 2012). The role of paraprofessionals in special education classrooms has become increasingly important as preschool special educators are ever more busy with baseline, formative, summative, and accountability-related assessments; becoming familiar with and aligning curriculum to early learning standards; and preparing for and participating in a wide variety of meetings. The number of paraprofessionals employed in the United States increased by 131% from 1992 to 2010 (Fisher and Pleasants 2012). They have moved from performing non-instructional, supervisory, and clerical tasks to providing instructional support (Ratcliff et al. 2011; Ashbaker & Morgan 2012). Common teaching tasks include working with children in whole and small groups and individually, behavior management (Ratcliff et al. 2011), and assisting in planning (Hughes & Valle-Riestra 2008). Despite the need for strong collaborative and cooperative relationships among all adults in the classroom (Hyson 2003), researchers found paraprofessionals and teachers did not work as a team and viewed the job duties of paraprofessionals differently (Jones et. al 2012). Paraprofessionals reported that they have more responsibilities than teachers report and which sometimes exceed the intent of the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Fisher & Pleasants 2012; McGrath, Johns, & Mathur 2010), which states that "appropriately trained and supervised" paraprofessionals may "assist in the provision of special education and related services" (IDEA 2004).

> Researchers found paraprofessionals and teachers did not work as a team.

Supporting paraprofessionals

Special education teachers must address the varied abilities and backgrounds of the paraprofessionals they supervise in order to create effective instructional teams (Jones et al. 2012). However, teachers are unprepared (Hughes & Valle-Riestra 2008; McGrath, Johns, & Mathur 2010; Ratcliff et al. 2011) or reluctant to supervise and evaluate paraprofessionals (Fisher & Pleasants 2012). Skills such as teaching, supporting, and valuing paraprofessionals (Hughes & Valle-Riestra 2008) are not being taught to teachers through preservice or in-service programs (McGrath, Johns, & Mathur 2010; Ashbaker & Morgan 2012). A gap exists between the support that teachers can provide

> Skills such as teaching, supporting, and valuing paraprofessionals are not being taught to teachers.

paraprofessionals and the support paraprofessionals need (Appl 2006). Gaps also exist in the reported experiences of teachers and paraprofessionals (Jones et al. 2012); paraprofessionals request that teachers receive training in how to work with them (Ashbaker and Morgan 2012).

Teachers need to clarify paraprofessional roles and expectations, develop relationships and a team ethic, and effectively communicate with their paraprofessionals (Fisher & Pleasants 2012; Jones et al. 2012; Ashbaker & Morgan 2012; Ratcliff et. al 2011).

Professional development

Regularly-scheduled professional development meetings can help teachers develop a collaborative team approach that values paraprofessionals by seeking their opinions and contributions in planning and making decisions (Appl 2006). Although teachers might not have the skills at first to develop collaborative teams with their paraprofessionals (Jones et al. 2012), joint teacher and paraprofessional in-services can provide models for teachers on how to provide teaching, follow-up activities, and reflection for paraprofessionals. Isolated skill training for paraprofessionals has proved ineffective (Jones et al. 2012). Instead, a variety of in-services and on-the-job experiences (Ashbaker and Morgan 2012) exploring meaningful questions has the potential to develop teacher and paraprofessional communities of practice (Fisher & Pleasants 2012.)

Paraprofessionals sometimes lack formal education, may hold different views on children than teachers, and may be reluctant to discuss difficult topics (Jones et al. 2012; McGrath, Johns, & Mathur 2010; Jones et al. 2012; Ratcliff et al. 2011). Both/and thinking as described by Copple and Bredekamp (2009) allows for early childhood topics that create tension to exist together. The concept of both/and thinking can guide teachers and paraprofessionals to effectively communicate about that tension. Assessment strategies that identify the needs of paraprofessionals can help target professional development (Ashbaker & Morgan 2012). Although professional development should convey respect and value towards paraprofessionals, it should also establish clear roles and expectations for the shared understanding of the collaborative team (Hughes & Valle-Riestra 2008; McGrath, Johns, & Mathur 2010; Ashbaker & Morgan 2012). Through

appropriate professional development, paraprofessionals and teachers can become open to new points of view (Appl 2006) and develop skills in instructional strategies, working towards goals and objectives, and observation and assessment (Jones et al. 2012).

Methodology and research design

Setting and participants

Located in the Chico Unified School District, Loma Vista is an early childhood special education public school that serves other purposes as well. Innovative Preschool, a private, nonprofit, licensed preschool is housed within Loma Vista with the agreement that the District may place some children within their two classrooms (with staff support). Loma Vista serves children in two inclusion classrooms and seven self-contained classrooms. All children have opportunities for interaction in various common areas and during whole-school activities.

Children. Approximately 90 preschool children with special needs attend classes and receive additional services at Loma Vista. Our attendance increases yearly.

Staff. We have eight onsite preschool special education teaching positions, three speech therapists, and approximately 30 paraprofessional positions associated with classrooms and speech services. All of the teachers and paraprofessionals participated in the teacher research project. Five teachers were relatively new to the early childhood special education field and to our preschool; some teachers were hired without the appropriate credential and were allowed to earn the credential while teaching.

The paraprofessionals represent a wide range of background and experience in education, many of them working at Loma Vista longer than their lead teachers. All of the paraprofessionals have attended some college, with 56% holding a bachelor's degree, and one paraprofessional holding a master's degree.

Professional development plan

My teacher research plan was to design and implement a new professional development plan for our staff that addressed the gaps of prior professional development, addressed key elements, and assessed needs. For the 2013–2014 school year, I designed and implemented a professional development plan to address my three main ideas of the increasing importance of the paraprofessional role in preschool special education; increasing teacher support for paraprofessional staff; and the critical

> We would cycle through this order: whole staff in-service, individual classroom collaboration, and a Professional Learning Community meeting.

nature and scope of the professional development system in transforming practice.

We were fortunate to have two hours every Friday afternoon available with paraprofessional staff for professional development and classroom preparation. My professional development plan was designed as a rotation of events. On a monthly basis we would cycle through this order: whole staff in-service, individual classroom collaboration, and a Professional Learning Community (PLC) (DuFour 2004) for teachers. The purpose of this order was to learn and practice as a whole group and set the stage for teachers by providing new ideas and modeling how to lead their paraprofessional team. Then the classroom teachers led their own staff in a classroom collaboration revisiting and expanding on in-service content or engaging in their own line of inquiry for the benefit of the children. This was followed by a PLC meeting where teachers generated the conversation, reflecting on and supporting each other's progress leading their paraprofessional teams.

In-service professional development sessions. To support collaboration, the whole staff attended five in-service professional development sessions and two relationship-building gatherings. The core of these sessions was devoted to working on the skills of observing children and discussing their abilities in the context of child development standards. The focus was the development of pivotal, open-ended skills: nonjudgmental observations, knowledge of child development, and collaboration. We continually revisit these skills (e.g., the ability to observe, discuss, and place a child's ability within a developmental continuum) in each professional development session, and use the skills as context to discuss our interactions and teaching practices with children. As opposed to the former didactic approach to staff training, a collaborative approach was used to generate conversations about instructional options.

> The core of these sessions was devoted to working on the skills of observing children and discussing their abilities in the context of child development standards.

Making nonjudgmental observations of young children, especially those with special needs, can be challenging and is a new concept to many. I believe that we are conditioned to focus on the deficits we see in children, and it takes conscientious practice to shift the focus to include a child's abilities. I recorded one-minute videos of children and/or staff to capture an unedited slice of life in various settings around the school; the briefness of the video allowed for a narrow observational focus. We made lists of things we saw and heard in order to focus on children's abilities and discussed the importance of being respectful when watching the videos.

Classroom collaboration. I moved the child-centered work that had previously taken place during the teacher PLC meetings to what I termed *classroom collaboration*. During classroom collaboration, the teacher and paraprofessionals responsible for the same group of children develop a collaborative team approach to discussing children, identifying priorities, planning, problem solving, and reflecting. Teachers practice leadership skills modeled at the staff in-services, paraprofessional input is valued, in-service topics are reviewed and expanded upon, and new lines of classroom inquiry are opened.

Professional learning community meetings. PLCs attended by teachers continued; however, the new intent of these meetings was for teachers to develop educational leadership skills with the support of their teacher colleagues. In PLCs the teachers reflect on their classroom collaboration—how their classroom collaborations influence outcomes for staff and children—and share in each other's successes.

Data collection and analysis

A variety of assessment strategies were used to develop and analyze progress on the research (**see Appendix** for data collection tools).

- Paraprofessional in-service needs assessment
- In-service observations
- In-service products
- Post-in-service participant evaluations
- Post-research participant survey
- Summative interviews

Paraprofessional in-service needs assessment. Thirty-two paraprofessionals completed a needs assessment survey. Survey takers were asked to rate their level of understanding on a five-point scale for seven early childhood special education practices.

In-service observations. During the in-service sessions, photographs, observational notes, and videos were taken to document the activities and the level of engagement.

In-service products. Hands-on small and large group projects resulted in products such as: writings, graphic organizers, informational posters, artwork and instructional materials. These products provide examples of the learning process and outcomes for individuals and groups.

Post in-service participant evaluations. At the end of in-service sessions, participants were asked to anonymously rate their overall satisfaction on a sliding scale, and to write comments. Space for both positive and critical comments was provided. Formative assessment and on-going planning of the in-service professional development sessions was supported by data provided by the evaluations, observations, and products.

Post-research participant survey. Twenty-six participants completed an anonymous summative survey. Survey takers were asked to rate their agreement on a five-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" on seven statements. The first four statements referred to perceptions of their abilities and the last three statements to perceived opportunities and feelings related to the professional development activities.

Summative interviews. Four paraprofessionals and three teachers were interviewed using a series of five open-ended prompts. They were asked to discuss their views on the difference between training and professional development, the new professional development model (in contrast to the former approach), the value of collaboration, the role of nonjudgmental observations, and the most important benefits of the professional development and/or learning goals for the future. Two administrators were interviewed using different prompts to elicit their overall view of the changes.

Findings

The following findings emerged from the implementation of my teacher research study:

- participants in the professional development responded positively to the change of format;
- paraprofessional feelings of value increased;
- participants' ability to observe children nonjudgmentally improved,
- use of videos was consistently well received; and
- some classroom teams developed common language about children and teaching practices and engaged in informal cycles of planning, doing, and reflection.

Finding 1: Participants in the professional development responded positively to the change of format

"It made me look at things differently… and maybe see things in a way that I wouldn't have seen them before."

—Michell, paraprofessional, summative interview

Participants responded positively to the change in professional development from isolated skills training to a variety of in-services and on-the-job experiences. The new model focused on observing, discussing, and understanding children, as well as learning a variety of developmentally appropriate and individualized teaching practices. Early in the professional development process, a needs assessment survey was given to paraprofessionals. Diverse responses, indicating both strength and need, reinforced the varied knowledge and skills of our paraprofessionals. I used this information to plan targeted support for small groups needing more information on a certain topic, and organized heterogeneous groups to capitalize on the strengths of a few, or generalized universally understood topics into other contexts. This model provided multiple points of entry for both new and experienced staff, as well as opportunities for leadership. For example, staff who were initially problem-oriented might have more to contribute at the reflection stage, whereas staff with more knowledge of varied instructional strategies might contribute more at the planning stage. In this model there is room for virtually everybody. As teacher Sarah stated during her interview,

> *"The professional development gave us a structure . . . and it helped frame for us how to continue those discussions in a fruitful way."*

In response to the open-ended interview prompt about previous trainings versus professional development, teachers and paraprofessionals indicated that in contrast with previous years' trainings the new professional development was collaborative, involved discussion, and supported our ability to internally generate our professional development priorities rather than heeding an external source's direction. Out of 26 participants responding to the summative survey prompt "I feel positively about staff in-services," 19 indicated "strongly agree" and seven indicated "agree."

Finding 2: Paraprofessional feelings of value increased

Paraprofessionals felt valued when their opinions and contributions were sought to assist in planning and making decisions. As paraprofessional Michell stated during her interview,

> *"This made me feel part of a team, like I'm appreciated, and I also feel like my job satisfaction has gone up . . . that I'm part of a bigger picture."*

Purposeful inclusion of paraprofessional input occurred within a trusting, mutually respectful team, where a traditional hierarchy gave way to a sharing of responsibility. Whole group in-services provided guidance for teachers and a model for them to revisit topics and practice skills in smaller groups with their paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals were motivated to use their observational and decision-making skills with increasing independence, such as in the "I do, We do, You do" model developed by Fisher and Frey (2008). Out of 26 participants responding to the summative survey prompt "I

Traditional hierarchy gave way to a sharing of responsibility.

have opportunities to collaborate with and contribute to my classroom," 15 indicated "strongly agree," nine "agree," and two "disagree."

> *"Prepping materials together, talking about our curriculum for the week, reviewing our kids, we are on the same page when we start. I can't imagine doing it any other way."*
>
> —Brittany, paraprofessional, summative interview

Finding 3: Participants' ability to observe children nonjudgmentally improved

> *"Learning how to point out without judgment, I think that's very valuable. It allows us to not put our own emotions or our own predispositions on a situation or on a student."*
>
> —Liz, teacher, summative interview

Paraprofessionals generally start without the experience in observing children nonjudgmentally that teachers have had. Learning to do what Liz points out above is challenging. As one participant wrote in a session evaluation:

> *"I thought it was very important to go over what is objective and what is subjective."*

Both teachers and paraprofessionals expressed the importance of observing children and placing their abilities within the context of child development as a way to discuss next steps for learning. Brittany, paraprofessional, stated in a summative interview,

> *"I think observation is critical and if we are not doing it we are missing a lot of opportunities in my opinion, both for us to be learning and for encouraging the child to be successful."*

Out of 26 participants responding to the summative survey prompt "I can observe children and locate where they are on a developmental continuum," 10 indicated "strongly agree," 13 "agree," and three "neutral."

Finding 4: Use of videos was consistently well received

Watching videos of colleagues and/or our children was a popular and sometimes positively emotional activity that allowed for all members of the staff to participate. Videos helped make learning the skill of nonjudgmental observation less challenging, because they could be watched over and over. Videos of our children were often fun to watch, funny, inspiring, and provided opportunities to experience pride in our work and to celebrate the group's and the children's accomplishments. As Judy, paraprofessional, stated in a summative interview,

Teachers rarely get to see other teachers engaged in teaching; video can offer a valuable glimpse.

> *"It provides us a way to observe the positive development and changes that we are seeing in our children . . . from the first day to the present day."*

For one set of inservice evaluations, 50% of participants wrote feedback mentioning the positive value of videos. Referring to a video of a paraprofessional, some comments included: "great example video of Crystal," and "seeing Teacher Crystal's work was inspiring!" Teachers rarely get to see other teachers engaged in teaching; video can offer a valuable glimpse. At the conclusion of an inservice, a teacher commented to the group,

"I absolutely loved watching Adelle's video . . . it's so interesting to think about doing it (Discrete Trial Training) in a group, I never even thought about doing that."

Finding 5: Some classroom teams developed common language about children and teaching practices and engaged in informal cycles of planning, doing, and reflection

"Let's face it, you are going to be in charge of other adults . . . and that is really hard, that is fundamentally the hardest part in a special education position."

—Sarah, teacher, summative interview

Providing clear expectations and opportunities for communication are repeatedly mentioned in the literature as good practices for leading paraprofessionals (Ashbaker & Morgan 2012; Jones et al. 2012). The work of a mindful teacher is articulated as the group participates in observing children; discussing and understanding the meaning of what they see and hear; selecting instructional strategies by drawing on experience, inference, and relationships; and then reflecting on outcomes in a continuous cycle. We now had an easy-to-use reference to frame our conversations of child observations. We had a common language to discuss strengths and needs, a continuum of abilities already mastered, and an understanding of which abilities were being independently explored and which would be appropriate to teach next.

The work of a mindful teacher is articulated as the group participates in observing children; discussing and understanding the meaning of what they see and hear.

This process is particularly useful for addressing dilemmas. As Brittany, paraprofessional, remarked in her summative interview,

"It's not about the intervention that I want to use, it's what's going to be successful for that kid. What is success right now?"

During one in-service, the participants worked in small groups to discuss characteristics of eight common preschool special education practices. The presenter then transcribed what each group shared on a large paper, and what others added. Out of 26 participants responding to the summative survey prompt "I have knowledge of a variety of developmentally appropriate teaching strategies," 11 indicated "strongly agree," 14 "agree," and one "neutral." As Rebekah, teacher, stated during the summative interview,

"I have felt empowered with my staff . . . to allow them ownership . . . not because the teacher's telling them to do it but because it's promoting growth and student learning."

Some classroom teams not only planned interventions, but implemented their plans and used a variety of data collection to reflect on outcomes and adjust plans as necessary. As Andie, paraprofessional, stated during her summative interview,

"We have been able to really stop and reflect on the work that we are doing in the classroom and where we differ in our opinions in how to work with the kids, and how to reconcile those differences."

One large classroom collaboration involved 10 paraprofessionals and two teachers. The group of 10 paraprofessionals observed a group of 25 children and described one child each, identified the child's need/s, and suggested teaching practices to address the area/s of need. Because a common language existed, the process was efficient. With the support of the teachers, the 10 paraprofessionals had an opportunity to demonstrate their current understanding of good practices. The teachers checked in with the paraprofessionals in both small groups and individually to measure progress and identify any necessary changes to the intervention plan. As teacher Liz stated during her summative interview,

"We commonly share successes and those successes feed our professionalism, which loops back onto repeating those same steps."

Our administration weighed in as well. Eric, administrator, noted that

"We come back and have more powerful conversations about what we are doing, is it working, and rather than be a team of nine teachers we are a team of 40+ teachers and instructional aides doing what's best for the kids."

Conclusions

I believe my research was beneficial to the whole school. Increased competency and capacity is demonstrated by many of Loma Vista's staff through a commitment to collaboration, meaningful conversations, and more balanced expectations of and interactions with children. One significant benefit of the research process has been the striking convergence of ideas expressed by varied staff members. The quotations embedded in this article are snapshots of the collective conversation that is occurring and which I attribute to the development of pivotal, open-ended skills: nonjudgmental observations, knowledge of child development, and collaboration. An unforeseen effect, and one worth further investigating, has been the positive impact of transformational rather than informational learning (Curran and Murray 2008) on our staff.

Some aspects of my research that I believe are beneficial to others in the early childhood special education field are the importance of developing a line of inquiry that allows for additional questions to arise; getting to know the background, strengths, and needs of one's paraprofessionals; identifying pivotal strengths/needs that are likely to create a chain reaction of positive change; and identifying times and places already accounted for that could be better spent.

If the trend continues, teachers will increasingly rely on paraprofessionals to make independent, in-the-moment decisions about interactions with children. The questions I am left with are: What skills and dispositions do teachers need to lead collaborative teams with their paraprofessionals? How are outcomes for children affected by the competency of the paraprofessionals working with them?

According to Wiggins & McTighe, enduring questions, "are meant to be explored, argued, and continuously revisited" (2011, 77). With this view in mind, I plan to continue my teacher research.

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Appendix—Data Collection Instruments

Results from paraprofessional in-service needs assessment, September 2013

Instructions: Indicate your level of knowledge by check-marking one box per topic.

	I want training	In between	I know it pretty well	In between	I am confident I know
Supporting Play	3	5	7	10	4
Modeling, prompting and fading prompts	4	4	10	9	2
Picture Exchange Communication System	2	1	8	9	9
Discrete Trial Training	10	2	8	6	3
Facilitating areas of deficit for Autism Spectrum Disorders	7	9	8	5	0
Behavior: Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence	9	1	7	8	3
Functionally Equivalent Replacement Behaviors	11	8	6	4	0

Results from post-research participant survey, 4/25/14

Instructions: Please answer by check-marking one box per statement.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have knowledge of typical early childhood development	8	17	1		
I can observe children and locate where they are on the developmental continuum	10	13	3		
I have knowledge of developmentally appropriate teaching strategies	11	14	1		
I have enough knowledge to begin choosing strategies to teach preschool children	11	12	3		
I have opportunities to collaborate with and contribute to my classroom	15	9		2	
I feel positively about staff in-services	19	7			
I feel positively about classroom collaboration	18	7		1	

Summative Interviews

Four paraprofessionals and three teachers were provided with seven open-ended prompts. Their responses were video-recorded:

1. Discuss trainings versus professional development.
2. Discuss the new professional development model.
3. Discuss collaboration.
4. Discuss nonjudgmental observations.
5. How did you benefit from the professional development/what would you like to get out of professional developments in the future?

In this piece by Nancy Bleemer, we read how very young children make sense of the routines and expectations of existing in a group care setting. Her poignant descriptions capture the openness of 2 and 3-year-old children who are trying their best to participate on their earliest days at school, yet miscalculate in small ways and then feel embarrassed and fearful. Bleemer then focuses on many small moments throughout the fall semester that helped her to understand how children's earliest experiences in early childhood settings feel to them as though they are entering an unknown society—the strangeness only reinforced by young children's emotional need for a secure base. Bleemer's reflections help all of us think more deeply about how to prepare for these delicate beginnings by working with our coteachers, preparing the classroom, communicating with families, and waking ourselves up to the importance of these transitions that take place before our eyes at the start of each school year.

—*Barbara Henderson*

Starting School for the Very First Time: The Stories of Three Young Children

Nancy Bleemer is an early childhood educator in New York City. She holds an MSEd from City University of New York, an MA from New York University, and a BA from Princeton University.

Photos courtesy of the author.

After six years of teaching 3- and 4-year-olds—first as a music and drama teacher, then as an assistant teacher—I have started something new. I am now the head teacher in my own classroom of older 2-year-olds and young 3-year-olds. Like my young students, since September I am experiencing something for the very first time.

In this new position, I have been struck by the difference between this group and my previous children. Most of my new class had never been to school before, and had no idea what school was. Previously, when I looked at the children in my 3's/4's classes, it was their stories and the ways that they told their stories that drew me to them—through their language, play, pretend, drawing, and dictation. I was fascinated by the trajectory, the how and why did it happen. When I think of the very young children in my class today, it is their stories that I am yearning to understand, especially as they start one of the most momentous tales of their lives: the story of starting school.

I wanted to learn just how these young children adjusted to the idea of school and navigated through separation, entering into a whole new world. Just as it's important in the preschool years to create a home/school connection, it is also important for very young children to understand the differences between home and school and to be able to cross the divide between the two. Inspired by Vivian Paley, I have attempted to discover and tell their stories partly in narrative form, striving for an in-depth understanding of

their individual experiences through reflection, observation, journaling, and documentation.

Through my teacher research study chronicling the stories of three first-time students in my class, I hoped to discover optimal strategies to facilitate a very young child's integration into the classroom, solidifying newfound identification as class members.

I focused on the following questions:

- **How do these very young children come to understand what school is?**
- **How do they make sense of what school is, and what it is to go to school and be a part of a class?**
- **What makes a child's integration into the classroom more, or less, successful?**

Review of literature

Children's difficulties starting school may "result from fear of the unknown" (Laverick 2008, 322). A key factor for a child's success-ful adjustment to school is developing a level of basic trust for this new environment (Erikson 1963). As stated by the Erikson Institute's Barbara Bowman,

> Erikson did not expect children to have basic trust (or basic mistrust) but to have a sufficient number and intensity of trust experiences to balance the mistrust ones and for the children to emerge from this stage with hope. (personal communication)

Yet, as Balaban states,

> Until children come to feel this sense of trust . . . the teacher and the classroom remain strange . . . until children are around three years old, they cannot retain a stable inner mental image of their absent parent, making words or explanations about caretakers' whereabouts ineffec-tive until the child trusts the new adult. (1985, 5)

This would have great impact on a child's initial entry to school; the resulting anxiety of a child's inability to truly understand "Mommy will come back" can prove a huge impediment to a smooth transition.

Laverick (2008) stresses the importance of prepping the child beforehand, through direct experience and information. Fabian also emphasizes that starting school would be smoother if the child and the child's family has had several "pre-entry visits" in which both children and parents can "develop confidence and trust in the school" through a familiar-ization and understanding of the school's culture and physical space (2000, 151). Indeed, the physical space of a school, a new and unknown envi-ronment, can be overwhelming and frightening for the young child, and support for gaining confidence in the new environment through pre-visits can affect their successful integration (Barrett 1986). The importance of

these "induction strategies" as a crucial part of the child's successful navigation through the enormous challenge of starting school is echoed in several studies (Fabian 2000; Laverick 2008; Dockett & Perry 2001), for

. . . prior knowledge of the building, organisational patterns, people or activities gave both children and parents more confidence in that they were able to think about, anticipate, and therefore have some control over the new experience. (Barrett 1986, 96)

Familiarity, on both the child's part and the parents', seems to have direct correlation to a more successful integration for the first-time student.

However, in a study that seems to contradict the importance of pre-visits and preparation for the child, Schwarz and Wynn claimed that a child's emotional adjustment to an early childhood program was facilitated not by a pre-visit to the classroom nor by the presence of the mother in the classroom for the first classroom visit, but that, indeed, "this particular combination of procedures may prolong or reactivate dependence feelings" in both children who have had experience separating and children who have not (1971, 879). The study cautioned against generalization in its findings about all early preschool populations, but did suggest that the seeming lack of "separation anxiety" in its findings may be due to the academic training and efficacy of the teachers guiding the transitions (880), an implication that teachers may be the more important link in a child's successful introduction to school.

In a study of 24- to 34-month old children, Highberger (1955) defined successful adjustment as

. . . the capacity to explore freely the nursery school environment of people and things . . . [and that] the number of hours a child had previously been away from his mother and the number of times he had been left with strange adults and children probably influenced a child's behavior during his first few weeks in school. (50–59)

Another assessment guide focused on the child's "coping with school" by using a scale consisting of just 12 items:

Settling in school, cooperating with other children, relationship with the teacher, concentration, use of play materials, self-reliance, verbalising in school work, following instructions, coping with personal needs, sociability, physical coordination and fine motor control. (Hughes, Pinkerton, & Plewis 1979, 189)

For the purpose of my research, these criteria proved useful in my observations of the three children selected for the study, with a special focus on settling in school, relationships with teachers, and use of play materials—data that provided valuable insight into the children's adjustment to the classroom in the first few months of the fall.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

Theo, Douglas, and Veronica (not their real names) were selected for this study because they had no previous experience with school or any structured setting requiring separation from a parent or caregiver. They were also only children, without the benefit of learning about school from an older sibling. They were part of a class of 10 students, all older 2-year-olds and young 3-year-olds. Our setting was Morningside Nursery School, a progressive, urban, play-based nursery school in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. The children came primarily from middle and upper middle class families; many of the parents were associated with Columbia University, as both students and educators. Along with professors and researchers, the school counts many artists, writers, actors, directors, and musicians among the parent body. As head teacher, I had an assistant, Alan, who was teaching for the first time. I came to early childhood education later in life, after experiences as an actor, singer, writer, TV executive, and an adjunct professor of acting and playwriting.

Data collection and analysis

I adopted a qualitative approach to exploring and documenting children's ideas about and understandings of school as they tried on the identity of "student" for the first time. I followed the trajectory of these children's experiences during the first four months of school—August, September, October, and November.

I systematically collected data through a variety of means, including:
- home visits where I interviewed parents and children,
- parent questionnaires,
- anecdotal observations,
- documentation through photographs,
- notes after relevant conversations with my participants, and
- journaling.

During home visits in the last week of August and the first week of September, I interviewed parents about their children. I attempted to learn as much as possible about the children's home life, including any major changes in the household that might have had an impact and could affect their transition to school. I also gave parents a written questionnaire asking about previous school experiences or lack thereof as well as family makeup, the child's routines and interests, early development, and what, if anything they had done to prepare the child for the start of school. This helped me understand the child's temperament and relationships within the family,

which might also affect their degree of comfort in starting school. During these visits I also asked the children about their concepts and ideas about school, with simple and direct questions. These included: "What is school?" "Why do we go to school?" and "What do we do at school?" These questions provided a baseline of understanding of what the children knew or didn't know about school from the very beginning.

My primary method of data collection was through observation. I observed the children's use of play materials, their comfort with separation, and their verbalization with other children in the classroom. I also observed their connection to the teachers, the materials, and the other children. These observations were a means to assess the children's integration, providing an in-depth picture of how the children were coping with starting school.

I kept a daily journal in which I took note of each of the three children, describing their interactions, play choices, challenges, and successes. I documented my observations with photographs and carefully dated each data source in an effort to keep my study reliable. I focused on three key times during the school day: morning drop-off (separation), play choice (free play), and morning meeting (classroom community). My hope was that these three settings would offer a rich picture of the children's comfort or anxiety regarding school, their understanding of classroom navigation and play with others or with materials, and their understanding of what it means to be a part of a class. I also noted my developing relationship with each of the three children, describing interactions and my own feelings about a connection or lack of connection with each child. I kept a notebook in the classroom and jotted down notes after each of the three daily data collection periods, during class when possible, or immediately after. I then transferred and elaborated upon my handwritten notes after class on the computer. In this way, I hoped to assess the children's classroom integration and learn which strategies might help a child having difficulty with the transition.

I collected my data until the middle of November. Each week I reviewed my observations, journal, interviews, and documentation in an attempt to find patterns and trends for each child. My data was then organized into three independent files for each student. I used color-coding to highlight themes, such as separation successes or challenges, connection with materials, connection with classmates, connection with teachers, successful strategies, and unsuccessful strategies. As I read and reread the data I was able to develop strategies for children struggling to transition, revamp or revise some of my ideas, and understand the arc of their journeys as they progressed from novice to more seasoned students.

"Snapshots" of the three participants

I created snapshot-like descriptions from my notes of each participant from the beginning of the school year to provide a sense of their personalities. Here, we see how foreign school was to them at first.

Theo

Theo (2 years, 9 months old) is at the snack table for the very first time. He has tolerated having hand sanitizer put on his hands, though he does not rub it in. The gel drips from his fingers, falling to the rug. I lead him to the snack table, and he looks about with interest, yet it is apparent that he is confused about what is happening, what is expected of him. I tell him "This is your spot, Theo," and I guide him to his seat. He gazes at the table, at the napkin, at the cup with his name on it, then smiles when he spies the goldfish cracker snack. Without words, he takes the goldfish on his napkin and, one at a time, eats them as the other children eat their snacks beside him. When his goldfish are all gone, he looks at the goldfish still lying on Rebecca's napkin beside him, and reaches for them, eating one. I stop his hand, saying "No, Theo. At school, we do not share food. This is Theo's snack; this is Rebecca's snack." He looks at me with a mixture of bewilderment and incomprehension, then turns his gaze downward towards the table.

Douglas

It is the first day of school. The door is closed as the teachers hastily make last-minute preparations for the arrival of the children. A few minutes before nine, the door opens and Douglas (3 years, 3 months old) enters. He has taken it upon himself to open the door on his own, and with a big smile he starts to enter the room. I say "Good morning, Douglas! We will open the door in a minute or two. Please wait on the bench until then." Immediately his smile is lost, he retreats, his eyes downcast, his face flushed. He looks wary, embarrassed, and when I open the door a few minutes later, he hides behind his father, refusing to enter the classroom he has so jauntily entered just moments before.

Veronica

It is Veronica's first day of school. Throughout the hour she hangs behind her mother, watching guardedly, but she does not engage with the other children. This child is a markedly different child from the little girl we visited a few days earlier on our home visit—where she had been chatty, independent, articulate, and relaxed. Now, Veronica (2 years, 11 months old) is silent and tentative. At Meeting Time, I shake the maraca to signal the transition. As other children gather on the rug to start meeting, Veronica pulls up a "grown-up" folding chair and places it in the circle. Legs dangling, she turns her attention to the meeting. I invite Veronica to join us on the rug. She thinks for a moment, then slowly, quietly, climbs off the chair and sits next to a classmate. It had not occurred to her that in the classroom the big chairs were for big people, and the rug was where small children sat for morning meeting.

These three children walked into my "3s and Nearly 3s" classroom early in September unaware of just what was expected of them and how it might differ from expectations of home behavior. *At home I can eat any snack I like! At home I can open doors and come and go into rooms as I please! At home I can sit anywhere I choose—on a chair, on a sofa, on the floor! Now you are asking me to not eat this, not open that, not sit there . . . . What's up with that?* Over the course of several months the children have explored a whole new world—sometimes tentatively, sometimes reluctantly, and sometimes with great, gleeful enthusiasm.

Findings and discussion

My findings included the following:
- the children's familiarity with the idea of school impacts their comfort in embracing the role of student;
- the children find unique supports to bridge their transitions to school;
- children were able to integrate into the classroom with the aid of something familiar from their home;
- children are able to integrate into the classroom more successfully when the parents' leaving and return routines are clearly established; and
- frequent communication between parents and teacher is the lifeline that supports successful integration.

Finding 1: The children's familiarity with the idea of school impacts their comfort in embracing the role of student

Notes taken during my home visits in the weeks before school reveal that each child has varying degrees of understanding about what school is. These varying degrees seem to directly impact the child's smooth transition to becoming a student for the very first time.

When I first meet Theo at his home I note that he is

. . . running down the hall to greet us. The door has been met by Theo's mom. She laughs as Theo comes bounding behind her. When his mom turns to Theo and says "Theo, these are your teachers, Nan and Alan," the little boy's eyes open wide, he backs up, and then turns around and hurls himself back from where he came. (8/29/13)

Throughout the course of the visit Theo seems frightened, does not speak, and refuses to interact with us, leading us to believe that his ability to integrate into the new world of the classroom could be challenging. He seems unnerved by the strangeness of the situation: Who are these people in his home? And what are "teachers" anyway? Later, I check the parent questionnaire I have handed to Theo's mom: in answer to the question "Have you had conversations with your child about starting school?" she responds:

> *Brief ones—I'm not sure he understands exactly what is going to happen— typical response is a wide-eyed stare and then change of subject!* (9/9/13)

When we meet Veronica for the first time, however, she is friendly, relaxed and articulate in a way that belies her young age of 2 years and 11 months. My notes relate this sense of ease,

> *"Well, would you like to see my room? I have a Pooh book there and I would like to show it to you." She settles into a chair and opens to the part of the book she would like to have read to her. I leave her with Alan, as she is chatting comfortably and asking questions about the story, which is about Pooh trying to be brave, though he is, in fact, very frightened.* (9/4/13)

Veronica's mother tells me that Veronica "plays school" with her older cousins:

> *They would sit in front of an easel listed with the days of the week, and the older children would tell Veronica what the schedule for each day would be.*

She is excited about the prospect of starting class in a week: they have walked by the school several times and happily pointed out the bright red doors that mark the entrance. After she reads the story with Alan, I tell her we will read lots of good stories at school, and I am looking forward to seeing her soon. I ask what she knows about school, and she replies "Pooh is very brave." Having been prepared for the journey through visits, discussions, and dramatic play all centered on "school," Veronica seems to be preparing herself to become a brave first-time student.

During Douglas's home visit, it is apparent that his shy nature will impact his ability to integrate into the classroom. When I tell Douglas "Alan and I are going to be your teachers at school," he runs and hides behind his dad. As my notes detail,

> *His father tries to push him forward, saying "Hey, buddy, you are going to have a great time." Douglas retreats further. He is not buying it. Douglas's mom says she thinks Douglas is ready for school, but they have not talked about school with him much at all. She thinks it may take him a while to become adjusted since he spends most of his time with adults. When it is time to leave, Douglas refuses to walk us to the door. As we leave the living room, his mother says to me "Douglas is very sensitive.'* (9/4/13)

It seems that sensitivity will have a profound impact on Douglas's ability to adapt and embrace the strange, new world of school.

Finding 2: The children find unique supports to bridge their transitions to school

Theo, Veronica, and Douglas all started school off-kilter, unsure, and afraid. Gradually, each child found a bridge to connect to the classroom and feel more grounded. For Theo and Douglas, that bridge was a connection to a teacher. For Veronica, it was a connection to materials and to the curriculum.

In the beginning, Theo was beside himself. He was confused and frightened, and didn't understand what was being asked of him. How could he stay in this strange place without the comfort of his mother, father, or babysitter? Why must he sit on a rug, get up, or get in a line when asked by people he neither knew nor trusted? For Theo, the first few weeks of school were bewildering and difficult. He sobbed when his mother left and cried when his father left; he grabbed their legs, pulled on their arms, refused to enter the classroom, and tried to stop his caregivers from leaving. All of this was without words. Through hand gestures, moans, cries, and body language, Theo expressed his discomfort and unhappiness.

The key to his comfort lay in his connection to our assistant teacher, Alan. A quiet, gentle man, Theo allowed Alan to sit with him and share his space, without words. Descriptions from my notes illustrate this:

On the second day of school, Alan and Theo sit playing with a large bead toy. (9/12/13)

Theo smiles at Alan and stays by his side as he explores the room, moving beyond his customary puzzles and trains to the art table and the blocks. (9/17/13)

When Theo allows me to take him to the bathroom for the first time, he calls out to the photograph on the classroom door upon our return. "There is Alan!" he cries, with a smile. (9/23/13)

At snack time Theo looks at Alan and says "What are you doing?" (9/23/13)

In fact, the most language I hear from Theo is related to Alan. Theo cries "There is Alan!" each time he enters the classroom. It is his touchstone, his talisman—the thing that grounds him, keeps him safe, and helps him to make sense of this strange new world. "Where's Alan?" "I am in front of Alan" "There is Alan!" are frequent refrains. As detailed in my notes,

Theo's babysitter, Louisa, tells me that when she asks Theo about school, the only thing he says is "I play with Alan." (10/19/13)

This is not the whole story—by the middle of October Theo does not need Alan in the same way. However, his relationship with the teacher has served him well, supporting him through the very difficult process of separation and starting the journey of learning what school is.

Douglas also found in Alan a bridge to the classroom. As I observed in my notes,

While at first Douglas seemed to run from me and not allow me to sit near him, he seemed happy to have Alan interact with him building with blocks or doing puzzles. (9/12/13)

Used to his father playing with him ("I'm his best buddy" Douglas's dad says to me the first day of school, "He's used to playing with me all the time"—9/12/13), Douglas allows Alan to take his hand and lead him to the meeting rug, then smiles at Alan a beautiful smile that lights up his whole face. (9/13/13)

During the course of the first few weeks of school, Douglas does puzzles with Alan (9/16/13)*, and takes his first trip to the bathroom with Alan* (9/19/13)*.*

While his father seems anxious about his separation from Douglas, Douglas's initial discomfort is assuaged by his connection to Alan. He seeks him out, and seems comforted by the assistant teacher's presence.

In thinking about how and why Alan served as such a successful bridge for Douglas and Theo, I reflected upon the different roles of the head teacher and the assistant teacher in the classroom. As head teacher, I constantly navigated the comings and goings of parents and caregivers throughout the separation process: directing, reassuring, helping parents understand what the process was and how and when to go away and come back. As assistant teacher, Alan had the greater opportunity and responsibility of interacting with the children themselves: playing with them, reading to them, talking to them. This highlighted the hugely important role the assistant teacher has in the separation process and phase-in period. This was a new realization for me, and will inform my planning for the separation process going forward. I will make sure I communicate this awareness to my assistant, mindful that initially it will most likely be this person upon whom the children will depend "if things are difficult or they are upset" (Hamre & Pianta 2006).

Veronica's bridge was not a connection to a teacher, but a connection to the materials and activities offered throughout the curriculum. I observed the following:

When Veronica first entered the classroom, she was tentative, frightened. She stuck close to her mother and did not let her out of her sight. After a

few days, she allowed herself to get involved with the material at the art table. Watching the girls pretending to have a "baby party" with the doll babies, she takes it upon herself to make "baby party invitations" at the art table, then hangs them in the pretend area. This baby party story continues through several days. (9/15/13, 9/16/13, 9/20/13)

This narrative served as a "through line" to her experience in the classroom, helping build her understanding of just what school is. It is apparent that Veronica internalized the curriculum in a way that supports her and allows her to be comfortable in the classroom. When she is inspired by Harry writing a "message" at the art table, Veronica emulates him. As I observed,

Veronica takes marker to paper. She then finds me, saying "I have a message, also." I ask her if she wants me to write down the words for her. She says yes. I ask her what it says, and she explains that "It says Mommy will come back." (9/25/13)

These are the words that we have repeated over and over, through songs and stories and games. She has taken those words and made them her own to aid her in building the bridge from home to school, becoming a student for the very first time.

Finding 3: Children were able to integrate into the classroom with the aid of something familiar from their home

Mindful of the importance of the home/school connection, and in an attempt to make school "less strange" during home visits in the weeks before school started, I instructed each family to create a "Family Book" and asked them to bring the books to school on the child's first day. I provided the families with a small blank board book with the phrases "This is me when I was a baby," "This is me now," "This is my family," "These are some of the things I love to do," and "These are some of my friends" written on the bottom of each page. The families were instructed to find photographs for each page, and together with their child, create a book that would be kept at school. Veronica's interactions with the Family Book are frequent and rich, serving as both a comfort and an anchor from which she can launch herself into the classroom. She often sits and looks at her book (9/12/13, 9/14/13, 10/2/13) and then shares her thoughts with others. When Veronica shares a picture of herself as a baby with Nellie, who is looking at her own family book, Nellie replies "Look, I was a baby too!" (9/24/13). In this way the Family Book serves not only as a grounding mechanism for Veronica, but a bridge to social interaction with other children in the class.

Theo returns to his Family Book again and again (9/24/13, 9/26/13, 10/2/13, 10/3/13), all on his own volition. One of the first verbal interactions I have with him is when he takes his book from the basket, sits

quietly on the rug, and turns the pages. I look at the front cover of his book and say "Oh, Theo, is that a train?" aware of his connection to all things railroad. He looks up and corrects me, saying "It's a tram!" then allows me to sit with him, all the while pointing out members of his family and answering my questions with one or two words. It is the bridge through which I am allowed to enter his world, thus allowing him to be more present in the new world of the classroom (9/24/13).

For Douglas, the Family Book is a source of comfort and grounding, though unlike Theo and Veronica it does not support socialization. Veronica's Family Book aids in her connecting to her classmates; Theo's Family Book helps in his connection to teachers. For Douglas, the Family Book has a sense of ownership and propriety. He sits quietly and looks at his book (10/8/13, 10/11/13) but when another child wants to sit with him and look at his pictures, Douglas gets up, thwarting the connection (10/11/13). When Eric looks through Douglas's Family Book (as all children are free to look at and share one another's) Douglas grabs the book from Eric's hand, wordlessly, and hides it under his shirt (10/15/13). When I scaffold the interaction of Douglas using words instead of grabbing, Douglas refuses again, even taking his Family Book to Meeting with him, so he can be sure no one else looks at it. This dynamic is repeated several times in the classroom and may speak to the general uneasiness Douglas feels in the classroom—a classroom, in which, Douglas still feels like a "stranger."

Finding 4: Children are able to integrate into the classroom more successfully when the parents' leaving and return routines are clearly established

A strategy implemented in support of the children's transitions in the morning is One Book/One Puzzle: the children are given a framework through which to organize their goodbyes by doing one book or one puzzle with a caregiver before their departure. This strategy allows Theo's dad to depart with more ease ("After we read this book, Theo, Daddy will go to work"—9/23/13) and makes Douglas's entry more successful. Instead of having to be cajoled into the classroom (9/13/13, 9/17/13) Douglas enters the classroom and goes straight to the book area where he selects a story for his mom to read (10/8/13, 10/11/13). By giving Theo and Douglas a framework through which to organize their goodbyes, there is less of the "unknown"—it is replaced with a temporal plan the children can understand and embrace.

Another routine used in support of the children's integration was the use of the picture book *You Go Away*, by Dorothy Corey, in which we introduced the refrain of "You Go Away, You Come Back," This idea is underlined throughout the day in the classroom—physically through hand gestures, games in the classroom and outside, and stories and songs. Theo's growing understanding that "Mommy will come back" was exemplified when comparing his initial exposure to the idea to his internalization of the concept several days later. My note on Theo's separation read:

At first Theo looks absolutely shocked that Mom has left the room. Then he looks like he is trying to process the situation. His eyes widen, he looks around the room with some dread and fear. His face turns white, he starts to sniffle. I try to comfort him, I pick him up saying "Mommy went away, Mommy will come back," but he fights me off, arms flailing. (9/13/13)

Ten days later, on a trip to bathroom, it is apparent Theo has internalized the concept; as he squirts soap on his hands he spontaneously speaks to me, using more language than I have ever heard from him. As I noted,

"Daddy left the stroller," he says in a quiet voice. "Daddy went to get coffee. Daddy will come back. Then Theo will be happy." He looks at me, and for the first time, gives me a smile. He is beginning to trust me, and that trust directly corresponds to the secure knowledge that Daddy went away, but Daddy will, indeed, come back. (9/23/13)

Finding 5: Frequent communication between parents and teacher is the lifeline that supports successful integration

Mindful that this transfer of trust from parent to teacher can only be achieved by working as a team, I kept the parents abreast of what was happening in the classroom through weekly email newsletters highlighting the week's events, along with copious photographs and daily reports on a white board outside my classroom detailing the day's events. During Curriculum Night I presented an extensive outline of the curriculum thus far and plans for the future, and followed up with a detailed email for those parents who could not attend. I also held Parent/Teacher conferences the second week in November, with each family allotted a half-hour conference time.

Looking at the feedback from the families, this frequent, open communication has built trust, which directly impacts the children's integration into the new world of the classroom. An extremely sensitive email from Theo's father reflects this, when he writes:

Thank you for your detailed message about Theo's week at school. He clearly loves being there, aside from the variable transitions when he sees us go. On Thursday when he cried I sat in the hallway and I know that he stopped a few minutes later. Of course I don't like to hear him cry, but I know these are occasions for him to learn something new. You should know that the way you carry yourself with Theo and the other children inspires great trust, and his mother and I are very happy that you and Alan are his teachers. Seeing you and Alan gradually join the small group of people who take care of Theo is a touching and wonderful process. (9/30/13)

By working together in a partnership, both parents and teachers have helped Theo on his challenging journey towards an understanding of how to be a student in a classroom for the very first time.

Conclusion

We are making "Group Soup" for our Thanksgiving Feast. After reading the book Group Soup *by Barbara Brenner several days ago, we have listed our ingredients and today each child has brought in one item to contribute to our soup. Now the children sit chopping carrots, celery, turnips, potatoes, green beans, and parsley with little plastic knives. They sit next to one another; they chat with one another ("Hey, look! I cut a carrot into a teeny tiny piece!"). They collaborate. They are a class. And within this class, they are individuals: Veronica sits, brow furrowed, intent upon chopping the turnip she was thrilled to contribute. Theo sits next to her, his potato sitting on the table, his eyes focused on the knife. He is interested more in the implement than in the collaborative process. And Douglas does not sit with the rest of the children at the cooking tables. He is next to them in the Pretend Area, making Group Soup from pretend vegetables. He smiles as he places the pretend carrots and pretend potatoes in the pretend bowl, and mixes the vegetables with a pretend ladle.* (11/26/13)

When these children first walked into my classroom they had absolutely no idea what a class was supposed to be or how they were supposed to behave. Now, three months later, they had an understanding of how to behave at school. They understand the fundamentals of how to line up, sit crisscross at meeting time, pick things up and put them away, raise hands, and be a partner. They've also gained the larger understanding of what it means to be a part of something—what it means to be a part of a class. In just three short months—one-twelfth of their young lives!—these children have adapted to and for the most part embraced an entirely new way of being. They have learned what it is to be a student, and what it is to go to school.

And what of the child who, still, did not seem completely integrated and comfortable at school? Theo, while not using much language, seems "at home" in the classroom—relaxed, happy, and engaged. Veronica, while not interacting often with her classmates, is always interested in and focused upon the materials and activities. Douglas, however, remains at times aloof and wary, although there are moments when he appears engaged as well. Douglas has separated from his home environment, but is not yet fully "present," though there are brief, joyful glimpses of this. For instance, when he is outside and Ramona chases him, he erupts into belly laughs. Will Ramona,

an extremely friendly and caring little girl, be his bridge to the classroom? After playing with the jingle bells at music time, Douglas looks at me and smiles his glorious smile, proclaiming "That was fun!" I feel like I have won the lottery. He's happy! He's engaged! And he told me about it! Will music be the bridge for Douglas's journey toward successful integration into the classroom? And given what I knew of Douglas's temperament, from the very first home visit when his shyness was so apparent, could I have been more supportive in his journey? Had I been more mindful from the very beginning, had I been more sensitive when Douglas opened the door on that very first day and marched in with a smile, only to be thwarted by my admonishment that we would "open the door in a minute or two," might Douglas's entry been smoother, less bumpy, less challenging? These are questions I will reflect upon going forward, as I strive to successfully introduce each child to the strange new world of the classroom.

Just as each child has their own personal history, temperament, and unique story of their young lives from birth to almost three years of age, each child has their own "starting school" story. Identifying the "bridge to the classroom" uniquely created by each young student and identifying strategies that aided in their integration helped me gain an understanding of and an appreciation for the individual child's remarkable journey of starting school for the very first time. Addressing my research questions and gleaning the answers provided a wealth of information that now directly impacts my planning, phase-in schedule, and curriculum as I guide my young students through their exciting, bewildering, confounding, and transforming journeys.

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Teacher Research as a Form of Inspiration, Influence, and Mentoring

There are labels that might be attached to Jason, but we'll neither define nor categorize him. None of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events.

—*Vivian Gussin Paley* (1990, xii)

I n my commentary, I focus on the potential of teacher research to serve as inspiration, influence, and mentoring for teaching, which has long been recognized as an isolated profession (Lortie 1975). While a classroom teacher may have occasional interaction with a coteacher or a colleague in his or her building, there are few opportunities in the complex working lives of teachers to share information and ideas and to learn from one another. Here, through looking at Nan Bleemer's work and process of learning about and conducting teacher research, I explore how teacher research provides an important tool for collaboration that can both help to overcome the isolation of the profession and also lead to better, more deeply informed teaching. The collaboration that teacher research provides can occur either in person with colleagues or with mentors' published work.

Nan began teaching young children after a career in the theater and a background in creative writing. While working on her early childhood master's degree she discovered Vivian Gussin Paley's writing, which "spoke to her" because of the way that it celebrates children's stories. Paley's widely-read work resonates with many of us in education. The well-known teacher researcher Cynthia Ballenger also cites Paley's work as an influence on her own teaching and research. Ballenger quotes Paley discussing her development into a teacher researcher, and how with the help of a tape recorder,

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"teaching became a daily search for the child's point of view accompanied by the sometimes unwelcome disclosure of my hidden attitudes" (2009, 6). Ballenger's work, which Nan read while she was a student in my teacher research seminar (because Ballenger "speaks to me") focuses on "puzzling moments," recording children in order to "stop time" and allow the opportunity for reflection on what the children actually say in the classroom. "Stopping time" is a phrase for documenting practice that was developed by the Brookline Teacher Researcher Seminar, a group of elementary teachers that included Ballenger that met weekly for 10 years.

Nan has stopped time in her work too. She has carefully and systematically documented three young children's first experiences with school in order to tell their unique stories. Nan stopped time by reflecting on the data in multiple cycles. First, she thought about the data as she typed her handwritten notes each afternoon after teaching and placed the data into different files. Then she reviewed the data herself and with others in our research seminar to rethink and reinterpret the children's and her own actions. In the way that Paley refuses to categorize Jason's unique narrative, Nan has been careful not to define, label, or categorize these children. Instead, she has analyzed her data (which she meticulously cites) and allowed the stories of three young children, Theo, Douglas, and Veronica, to unfold.

As Nan explains in her introduction, prior to her study she taught children for six years who were slightly older than those focused on in her research. When Nan first designed this study, during the first semester of my year-long research course, she intended to ask the children questions and to listen to their conversations with one another. Back in her classroom the next September, Nan returned to our graduate seminar (then in her second semester of the course) with the realization that many of the children didn't speak as much as she had hoped! She discovered that the children in her class, at 2.9 to 3.3 years of age, did not have the language skills to reflect upon and assess their situation, thoughts, or feelings. It's important to note that after three months of school (when the data collection period was over) there was much more language in the classroom as the children grew more comfortable and matured. Indeed, at the very beginning of her data collection, she had already learned important information about this new age group through her research process. Nan was forced to rethink her data collection plan, and decided to place more emphasis on observation.

It is through Nan's careful and thoughtful observations that this study shows the subtle aspects of these children's transition into the world of school. Nan's full study begins with her descriptions of the children at home, constructed from her notes during her home visits in August. These descriptions share a glimpse of the children's strengths and knowledge at home: Veronica is very verbal; Douglas shares his considerable knowledge of the New York subway system; Theo is found reading a book about trains by himself.

In contrast to the children's knowledge and behaviors at home, Nan's snapshots of the three children make visible tiny moments important to

the children's assimilation to school. Theo casually reaches over to take one of Rebecca's goldfish crackers when he finishes his own. Veronica sits in the one chair in the meeting area, not knowing it is the teacher's. These moments are only available—that is, they only become meaningful—as a result of Nan's many hours of careful observations. They demonstrate just how many subtle rules young children must learn, both explicit and implicit, when attending school for the first time. At the end of the piece, Nan writes "In just three short months—one-twelfth of their young lives!—these children have adapted to and for the most part embraced an entirely new way of being. They have learned what it is to be a student, and what it is to go to school." This study demonstrates, as Apple did with kindergartners in his seminal work on the hidden curriculum, that even at 2 and 3 years old children are able to "adjust their emotional response to conform to those considered appropriate by the teacher" (2004, 51). The adjustments the children make in this study are important in many ways in order to succeed in school, but as Apple reminds us, much is lost when children learn to adjust their impulses to school or classroom rules. In future research, Nan may want to explore exactly what is lost in this process.

In Nan's larger study she also documented her important work with the families of the children in her classroom—the informal communication, emails, and transcripts of in-person and telephone conversations. Most of her analysis was done independently, but Nan also used our research seminar as a sounding board from time to time, which gave her other perspectives to exploring data and offered her colleagues in class an opportunity to learn from her work. One way we analyzed data in the seminar was by practicing a version of the Documentation Studio at Wheelock College protocol for large group discussions about classroom documentation. We did this with a transcript of a conversation Nan had with one of her students' parents. Nan shared the transcript with minimal introduction, and the graduate students in the seminar read it carefully without talking. The class then gave feedback, while Nan remained quiet. The transcript was of a conversation with a mother about how her child was settling into school. During the conversation the mother shared that her child had sleeping issues. Some of the seminar students thought that the mother seemed anxious, and some thought that Nan should provide the parent with some sleeping-related advice. Eventually, Nan was permitted to share her point of view. She stated that she had refrained from giving sleeping advice because she felt the purpose of the conversation was about how the child was settling in, and she wanted to build rapport with the parent and learn about the child's home situation before presuming to offer advice. Nan also said she didn't think the mother was anxious. This gave us the opportunity to look carefully at the transcript to see if there was language that supported our ideas about the mother. The conversation was reminiscent of Ballenger and the Brookline Teacher Researcher Seminar's idea of "stopping time." We were able to look for evidence and carefully reflect, rather than make a quick analysis that was not based on evidence. It made many of us rethink our "hidden attitudes," as

Paley calls them. We needed to consider why some of us were quick to label the mother as anxious when there was no evidence of this in the transcript.

Nan's teacher research was also a vehicle for her own professional development. Conducting this teacher research study provided an opportunity for Nan to read the literature about young children starting school. She learned from studies on child development that some children this age might not be able to sustain an image of their absent parents. Some children may not be able to understand that their parents will return, which could result in understandable anxiety. Nan's greater understanding of child development has the potential to inform her expectations of her young students' transition to school and her reactions to issues that arise. In addition, Nan read in the existing literature about new strategies and routines to help young children adjust to school. She read about the "going away and coming back" mantra, which she tried out in her classroom. And finally, some of the literature Nan read confirmed what she already knew about teaching, which was also helpful to her. For example, the literature she read repeatedly stressed the importance of frequent communication between teachers and parents, validating her own beliefs and practices.

By systematically collecting multiple sources of data, Nan was also able to see her familiar classroom in new ways and to understand aspects of her own teaching that she had not previously understood. For example, when she analyzed all of the data she had collected from her communications with the children's parents, she was able to see their relationships in a different light. In the past she might have simply felt that she had a good relationships with the parents. But now, by looking at the data, such as emails, transcripts from telephone conversations, and notes in her teacher journal (from August when she first visited the families' homes to November when she finished the official data collection) she was able to see the history and development of the relationships over time. This perspective allowed her to reflect and to recognize that these strong bonds with her students' parents didn't just happen on their own, but developed in part because of her initiative, planning, and hard work.

By conducting her own study, Nan saw that she has the capacity to identify problems or issues in her own classroom and to find valuable information by researching what has been already published related to the topic. She saw that she could then study an issue in her own classroom and find solutions. Nan does not have to be told by "experts" what to do to in her classroom. She can generate her own knowledge by collecting data and through her research skills determine what works for her and her students in their unique context.

Through exploring how these three children experienced school for the first time, Nan was able not only to study their experiences, but also to share the unfolding of their unique stories. When teachers share their research, as Vivian Gussin Paley, Cynthia Ballenger, and now Nan Bleemer has done, it is not just the students' stories but their own unique stories about teach-

ers' day-to-day lives in the classroom that unfold. Telling stories that are of interest to other teachers is crucial; this can counter the isolation long documented as a widespread characteristic of the profession (Flinders 1988; Raphael et al. 2001). In this way, teacher research has the potential to "speak to" its teacher readers. It supports the teachers' experiences in ways that may not be accomplished by reading statistical studies that work to control variables and generalize knowledge (Falk & Blumenreich 2005). Documenting the power of teacher research as a form of inspiration, influence, and mentoring that is central for authentic teaching and learning is particularly relevant and important now, in this time of market-driven and accountability-based education for both children and teacher candidates. The teacher research of Paley, Ballenger, and now Bleemer reminds teachers to seek children's logic and ways of seeing the world instead of focusing solely on learning outcomes and testing, which can overshadow children's own important efforts to learn and understand.

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Supporting Teacher Research

CAROLYN POPE EDWARDS
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Teacher Research in Reggio Emilia: Essence of a Dynamic, Evolving Role

Many aspects of the Reggio Emilia experience are fascinating to American educators, but perhaps none more than the role of the teacher. How do teachers (infant-toddler and preschool) support, facilitate, and guide children to the complex levels seen in classroom interactions as well as in the creative works children produce? Certainly, the teacher's role has intrigued both of us ever since we began our studies in Reggio Emilia, even before we began collaborating on the three successive editions of *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1993; 1998; 2012). In each of those volumes, Carolyn contributed a chapter specifically focused on the Role of the Teacher. In preparing the third edition, we interviewed many teachers and administrative leaders, and thereby gained many new insights into the dynamic and evolving aspects of teachers' work in Reggio. In this article, we will summarize some of our thoughts about this issue, with particular focus on teachers as researchers.

Reggio Emilia: A transforming city

Reggio Emilia is a very old city, founded by the Romans in the second century B.C. It still has many buildings of great antiquity, as well as remnants of the old walls that surrounded and protected it. However, Reggio Emilia is also a lively city undergoing rapid economic growth and population and generational change.

Indeed, the whole Po Valley area in northern Italy has experienced rapid economic development, becoming one of the most industrialized parts of Europe. Reggio Emilia has grown prosperous in the food and fashion industries,

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and was recently linked to Italy's new high-speed railway system. Economic changes have also spurred social changes, which are even more notable. As stated by Piccinini and Giudici,

[i]n the course of this evolution, the city is moving away from consolidated traditions toward those that are new and unfamiliar. It is possible to see the signs of this change in the landscape and architecture of the city, yet the social changes are of even more importance, though not as visible. (2012, 90)

Influx of new families

Reggio Emilia today is a growing city, a young city, and a culturally and racially diverse city, experiencing an influx of new families from around Europe and the world. The most common countries of origin of the young children in the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools are Albania, Tunisia, Morocco, Ghana, Nigeria, and China. Because of the high level of immigration, Reggio Emilia is experiencing a new level of encounter between different cultures. For this reason, the city leaders are striving to create new forms of citizen participation and involvement, as well as educational services for all children in the community. They want to ensure that the longtime residents of Reggio Emilia do not react to change with fear—of outsiders, change, or losing a familiar standard of living.

City leaders are also aware that when people feel excluded from the community, the risk of conflict arises. The former mayor, Graziano Delrio, spoke eloquently of this at the North American Reggio Emilia

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Reggio Emilia is a forward-looking city, with many new inhabitants as well as new construction.

© Lella Gandini

Mothers gather in the park in the center of the city.

Alliance (NAREA) Conference in Chicago in 2012:

> Today when the zeitgeist tells us that difference is a problem, our society can choose between two kinds of relationships: bonding or bridging. We can stay within the group creating bonds that knit the group together, reinforcing a sense of belonging. Or we can stimulate openness to the other, to the different, thereby gaining knowledge and stimulating curiosity toward the others along a path of enrichment and positive change. This is the bridging approach, a multi-connection, which multiplies knowledge.

Tighter financial situation

Besides the influx of newcomers, Reggio Emilia also faces a tighter financial situation, with fewer resources but more competing needs. The world economic crisis that began in 2008 also affected Italy. In Reggio Emilia, the rising cost of public early childhood education and care has become a source of concern. At the same time, there are increasing family requests for high-quality services for children under three years of age. The city leaders have acknowledged these requests, and considered the fact that community unity depends on public services embracing everyone (not just some income levels or segments of society). Thus, the elected officials and governing bodies, along with the leaders of the educational system, have worked slowly and steadily to expand the amount and types of services available to the community. One innovation to accomplish this goal is the creation of new partnerships to expand services and to better network existing relationships. For example, in 2003, a public-private system was created with the goal to provide education for all the young children in the city. Called the *"Istituzione,"* it is an umbrella organization that oversees the municipal, state-run, and mixed public-private educational services for the birth-to-6 age range.

Generational turnover of educators

Finally, along with change in its population profile and organization of services, Reggio Emilia is also experiencing a generational turnover in its educators. As the founding generation of *atelieristi* (studio teachers) and *pedagogisti* (pedagogical coordinators) retires, this generation is being replaced by younger individuals with new outlooks and background experiences.

What does it mean for Reggio's high-quality approach to working in schools to experience so much change? It is not an easy matter to carry out this high level of functionality in the face of many changes: new families—many from abroad and not socialized to the Italian tradition of active parental involvement in school; new financial situations and cooperative arrangements; and a new generation of younger and less experienced educators.

Aspects of the teacher's role in Reggio Emilia

When Italian early childhood educators talk about their work, they do not break it down into elements or dimensions the way many Americans do. Instead, they might talk about philosophical themes that create goals for their

work and allow educators from different places and services to talk together, such as well-being, continuity, culture, and aesthetics (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 2012, 10–11). But when we look closely, we can find familiar elements of the teacher's role, just rephrased somewhat differently. The rephrasing strikes a chord; it promotes interesting ways to reframe the teachers' work.

In this article, we will consider one-by-one the aspects of the teacher's role in Reggio, with comments on how these interact with the transformations taking place in Reggio Emilia today. We will consider what it might mean for teachers' practice—for their methods of teacher research oriented to innovation—to deal with so much social, economic, and generational change. We will cover parts of the teacher's role familiar to Americans, including: planning curriculum and environment; interacting with and observing children to promote learning through play and appropriate instruction; providing nurturance and guidance to children; and promoting parent engagement and involvement. In suggesting how these aspects play out in a special way in Reggio Emilia, we draw from the excellent discussion by Susan Fraser, in *Authentic Childhood: Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the Classroom* (2000, chapter 3), and for many illustrative photographs, we draw from Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (2012).

The teacher as researcher

Research is a concept that underpins all activity of Reggio Emilia educators, in a general way of working aimed at generating new ideas, thoughts, and projects closely linked to the contemporary world. It is central to the teacher's role in all of the dimensions we will describe, and is actually more closely linked to the American idea of *innovation* than to that of systematic hypothesis testing. From this perspective, research can be considered a way of thinking and approaching knowledge oriented to the future. It is a way of understanding oneself in relation to the world that can produce the kind of innovation only derived from systematic pursuit of multiple perspectives on problems and rigorous examination of evidence at hand.

In chapter 13 of Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (2012), Carlina Rinaldi focuses on the differences between the kind of research that takes place in scientific laboratories and universities, and the kind

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Vea Vecchi and Carlina Rinaldi talking together in the atelier of the Diana Preschool, circa 1990.

of research or experimentation that teachers and ordinary citizens can and should do. She says that:

> When teachers make listening and documentation central to their practice, they transform themselves into researchers. (2012, 244)

Rinaldi goes on to propose the concept of normal, or everyday, research, defined as:

> . . . an attitude and an approach in everyday living—not only in schools but also outside of them—as a way of thinking for ourselves and thinking jointly with others, a way of relating with other people, with the world around us, and with life. (2012, 245)

We will show how a questioning and searching attitude, or inquiry process, pervades the work of teachers in Reggio Emilia. We believe this is "inquiry as stance," as defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle:

> . . . a continual process of making current arrangements problematic; questioning the ways knowledge and practice are constructed, evaluated, and used; and assuming that part of the work of practitioners individually and collectively is to participate in educational and social change. (2009, 121)

The teacher as colleague within a network and organization

In Reggio Emilia, the role of the teacher as "master of the classroom" is transformed into something much more collective or collaborative. The teacher's work is defined not individually but rather as a **colleague co-acting within a network and organization**. It is normal to have two coteachers per classroom, or even three in the first two years at the infant-toddlers centers. Together, teachers are continually researching: *What does each of us know, and what have we observed and considered, that can be usefully shared in an ongoing, mutual experience?*

Certainly, teachers and staff offer one another emotional support and encouragement as well as concrete suggestions and advice. In addition, however, a method of extended mutual criticism and self-examination is very much accepted. Indeed, an important part of teacher professional development in Reggio Emilia entails a small work group—composed perhaps of teacher(s), mentor teacher, *pedagogista, atelierista*—observing and documenting a group of children together, then meeting for lengthy discussion, analysis, and comparison of perspectives. This method of collaborating has been used for many years in Reggio Emilia, with variations according to the annual plans for professional development formulated by the Pedagogical Coordinating Team (see Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 2012, chapter 8).

The reflection process is often simulated for visiting study groups in the large plenary sessions conducted at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center. The process typically involves an introductory phase, where those who have planned, conducted, and documented an experience with children provide others with necessary background and context and also frame the reflections to follow. Next, *the documentation is shared.* The group (sometimes divided into smaller groups with a facilitator) engages in extended reflection

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Lella Gandini interviews Tiziana Filippini in the atelier of the Diana Preschool, 2009, to gain understanding of the role of the pedagogical coordinating team.

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Study tour discussing their day's reflections outside the Bruno Munari Preschool.

on that documentation, carefully listening to each voice, following an implicit ethical code, and affording each person the right to participate. Finally, each of the presenting educators acknowledges all the reflections *and offers final comments*, noting the many insights offered and new questions raised.

Today, this reflection process is also used in a modified form when international study groups visit the infant-toddler centers and preschools. All of the centers and schools are involved; the visits are considered important not only for visitors' learning but just as much for the educators themselves. Thus, it is intrinsic to ongoing professional development. A group of visitors (perhaps 30 in number) first receive an introduction to the school delivered by two or three "hosts" (usually a teacher or two, and an *atelierista* or *pedagogista*). Then, visitors fan out to observe and take notes for an hour or so. Finally, visitors gather again to share observations and reactions and ask questions of the host educators. Later, study group members meet on their own with others from their school or community and share what they learned that day.

In general, the process of teachers' ongoing professional development looks somewhat different today than in the past due to the increasing complexity of the system of services. The goal remains what it always was, to sustain quality education through reflection, inquiry, and innovation. Educators hold to principles that their research should be purposeful and systematic, public and transparent, and supported through strong organization and networks. For example, Reggio leaders have introduced some innovations in their organization of professional development. There are now three cross-cutting, or "transversal," *pedagogisti*, who coordinate the pedagogical system throughout its entire complexity. These transversals are responsible for the pedagogical coordination within the city of Reggio Emilia and for the professional

development of the staff. They are also responsible for collaboration with other educational initiatives in the city and the Emilia Romagna region.

Furthermore, other changes in professional development have been introduced due to the influx of new kinds of children and families, as well as the wave of newly-hired teachers (pedagogisti and other staff) entering the Reggio Emilia early childhood system. Paola Cagliari, the new Director of the Municipal Infant-Toddler Centers and Preschools, and Claudia Giudici, President of the Istituzione Scuole e Nidi Reggio Emilia, have worked closely to conceive and lead a transformation of the professional development system that they call a "diffuse pedagogical system." This "diffuse system" of professional development is not designed for linear and top-down transmission, but instead creates many collegial zones of knowledge creation and exchange. Competences are deepened and enlarged in a forum that ideally promotes learning between older and younger generations, across job categories, and around pedagogical issues of enduring concern. This new system amplifies tendencies of past years and sharpens earlier emphases, yet also reveals the capacity of the Reggio early childhood system to evolve and adapt to new conditions and challenges.

Today, the intellectual content of professional development is sometimes focused on "conceptual knots" that can be explored in collaboration across educational roles. These "knots" are those common-yet-enduring, thorny issues of everyday teaching, such as how and what to observe; how children interact and learn; ways to encounter the zone of proximal development of children, colleagues, and parents; and how one becomes part of and contributes to educational action. These topics represent a departure from a focus on long-term projects, such as those described extensively in the many publications and exhibit themes prepared by Reggio educators (e.g., "City and the Rain," "Shadowiness," "The Long Jump," "The Importance of Looking at Ourselves," "The Amusement Park for Birds," "Reggio Tutta," and "The Theater Curtain," to name a well-known few). Yet, the heritage of those projects is not to be lost; instead it is kept alive through contemporary study and revisiting some of those past themes with children, delving back for guidance into documentation preserved in the schools and the Documentation and Educational Research Center. In a time of economic stringency, instead of producing many new publications educators can study the productions of the past, with the intention of producing novel professional development for new personnel.

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Children experiment at the water table while constructing a fountain, as part of "The Amusement Park for Birds" Project.

The teacher, Marina Castagnetti, notices that children need help with something they are trying to do with the play. First, she points and tells.

Then she decides they need her to actually show them what she means.

The teacher's role in curriculum: Progettazione and pedagogy of listening

The familiar role of teachers in promoting learning and preparing curriculum in Reggio Emilia is discussed as **documentation and flexible planning**. The concept of flexible planning is covered by their term *progettazione*, which is roughly translated as "projecting on the basis of observed or documented action or interaction to be interpreted together." The concept applies to any aspect of curriculum or life of the school, and always involves multiple voices in decisions:

> The curriculum is at once defined and undefined, structured and unstructured, based more on flexible strategies than rigid plans. (Rinaldi 1998, 119)

We believe that there are two sides, or "faces," of *progettazione*. With both, the teacher researches these questions: *Why? What happened? What does it mean? What else could happen if . . .?*

The first side of *progettazione* involves what Americans often speak of as "emergent curriculum," with its strongest version the Project Approach— those big, long-term projects involving a whole classroom or school, or even many schools together. This is what many people think of when they hear the words "Reggio Emilia" and are reminded of projects such as "The City in the Rain," "Shadowiness," and so on from the exhibits *The Hundred Languages of Children and The Wonder of Learning*. A new example of such a long-term project is provided in the color insert "From Messages to Writing," by Laura Rubizzi and Simona Bonilauri, in Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (2012, 213–222). But long-term projects are not the whole story.

The second side of *progettazione* involves the "pedagogy of listening" (see Rinaldi's chapter 13 in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 2012). The pedagogy of listening means helping children find meaning in what they do, what they encounter, and what they experience. In the Reggio preschools today, we see

broad inquiry on topics of child well-being, such as *food and healthy eating; relationships with nature and the outdoors;* and *technology with children.*

Regarding technology, the school environments are now full of digital technology for children and for teachers' use in preparing documentation. One example is a little booklet published by Diana School. "Micropublishing" is a way for individual schools to share the results of their research and sell small publications to school visitors. Diana School's booklet is called *The Children and the Digital Environment*; in it we see children's experimentation on the computer, transforming their digital photos of the natural world outside their school. In fact, there are printers, scanners, video monitors, and video projectors in many of the *ateliers*. The children are taught how to use this equipment to produce images on paper and images, transformations, animations, and video clips on the computer screen. (For further information, consult Forman's chapter 19 on digital media in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 2012.)

Both sides of *progettazione* are alive and well in Reggio, but there has been a shift in emphasis from the first to the second. Much in-house professional development focuses on infusing quality into ordinary moments, not only in infant-toddler centers and preschools but also in laboratories, citywide events, and all sorts of learning encounters relevant to every age, from young to old. Yet the enduring research questions remain central: *Why? What happened? What does it mean? What else could happen if . . .?*

The teacher as creator of the environment

In Reggio, the familiar role of the teacher as "program planner" changes to creator of the environment as a third teacher. Providing a quality program naturally begins with preparing the space and environment, indoors and out. The quality and aesthetics of materials, furnishings, and images (their "taste" or "flavor") help the child appreciate, love, respect, and take advantage of the environment. Calm but stimulating environments promote well-being—that is, a sense of being fully at ease in the setting. This careful preparation, plus continuity of care (looping) are in our opinion what make possible financially feasible teacher/child ratios in Reggio. The teachers inquire: *How can we renew our older spaces and environments, and innovate design of new ones, to meet the learning needs of children today?*

The Villa Sesso Preschool illustrates a typical story of how space and environments are always scrutinized and revitalized in Reggio Emilia. The Villa Sesso was one of the historic preschools. It was founded at the end of World War II by a group of women, moved in 1960 and then again in 1972 when it was inaugurated as the Municipal Preschool of Villa Sesso at Botteghino (Ghirardi 2002). Because of its striking natural surroundings—beautiful fields, rich with vegetables and grapevines—in 1991 this school officially became a "green center," where children and teachers concentrated on the ecology of the countryside and taking care of the school grounds. Parents and visitors marveled at the richness of transformation of natural materi-

The cover of the booklet *Children and the Digital Environment,* produced by the Diana Preschool, December, 2012. It describes children's experiments with digital technology.

Children explore the grounds of La Viletta Preschool with a map they are using to situate the amusement park for birds they are constructing.

© Lella Gandini

als, especially in the *atelier* but also in the way the school kitchen became a place of participation for children and a focus of preparation and enjoyment of healthy food together in the group.

In 2010, following the donation of new land and funding for a new building, now called the Martiri di Sesso Preschool, planning started for the creation of a wide surrounding park. At the same time, the public administration of the city of Reggio Emilia established a research group of educators, parents, and technicians to reconsider and recommend improvements for the outside areas of all preschools and infant-toddler centers. The research group suggested that teachers of each preschool and infant-toddler center should carry out an inquiry, questioning parents as well. The intention was to find out how the children perceive, encounter, interpret, and live in the green areas in their courtyards and outside spaces, no matter what size. This teacher inquiry informed and helped orient atelieristi, pedagogisti, and the research group to make proposals for change.

Here are some of the questions the teachers asked in their inquiry:
• How do children of today enter into relationship with the natural green surroundings?
• How do children move within such spaces?
• Which gestures and words do they use?
• How do they make use of such spaces, and what is there?
• What mental images do they have of these places?
• Which aspects seem most attractive?
• How do they represent them?

In addition, many Reggio teachers today work in bold new spaces benefitting from the innovation of young architects. The new Giulia Maramotti Infant-Toddler Center, for example, was supported by a gift from Maramotti Foundation/Max Mara, in collaboration with Reggio Children, in a competition open to young architects and engineers under age 35. It was inspired by high-quality pedagogical and architectural criteria and values. (See Gandini's chapter 18 on space and environments, in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 2012.) The architects, Francesca Fava and Carlo Margini, innovated a striking design open to the outdoors that included movable *ateliers* that could be placed close to the building in winter and further out toward the grounds in summer.

In sum, today we see much more emphasis on children's relationships with nature and the outdoors, and on the relation of living plants to the

emotional and physical nourishment of human beings. In the design of new buildings, we see explicit elements to bring the outside in and take the inside out. We find booklets/documentation of projects where children investigate plants, the sea, the air, and consider the future of the earth.

The teacher as guide in fostering exchange and community

The familiar role of "providing guidance" is best understood in Reggio Emilia as **fostering exchange of understandings and promoting community of children**. Teacher research focuses on this question: *How can we make our centers and schools more inclusive of all children?*

Children with special rights due to their disabilities or unique learning needs have first priority for admission to the public services of Reggio Emilia. Today, educators actively seek to strengthen relationships with community health providers to increase quantity and quality of inclusive participation. They also seek to learn about new therapies compatible with their relational approach to pedagogy, and to understand the seeming increase in certain conditions such as autistic spectrum disorders. These inquiries are well described in Soncini's chapter 11 on "the inclusive community" in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman (2012). For many years, Soncini has been the transversal *pedagogista* with expertise in special education; she works with all centers and schools to support successful inclusion. She offers this remarkable example of the Reggio approach.

© Cathleen Smith

The outdoor garden invites children of different abilities to play together.

© Cathleen Smith

Sometimes a brush with a large handle and paint of a strong color help a child do satisfying work in the inclusive community.

When Marco arrived at Anna Frank Preschool, he had already spent a year at the Salvador Allende Infant-Toddler Center. . . . Born without eye lobes, he wore prostheses that needed to be periodically cleaned and reset, a process that may have been somewhat difficult for him. . . . In the infant-toddler center, the decision had been to get to know Marco better by choosing spaces inside and outside the classroom that were distinctive for the sounds and resonance of their materials. For example, the teachers had made available percussion musical instruments in one area, bells attached to a climbing structure in another, construction materials involving metal and wood in a third, and a pillow made of furry material on which to sit at circle time. They also found a rug with a thick border that he could easily feel when he was crawling, and they placed it where he could play with other children. The year at Salvador Allende was like a rebirth for Marco. He started to use verbal language, above all to construct utterances (phrases) that he used to ask for help. He also started to walk around accompanied by an adult . . . [but his language and] exploration of materials with his hands was very limited.

When he entered Anna Frank Preschool, Marco showed great pleasure every day in meeting his classmates, who liked to greet him at the door when he arrived and help him take off his coat. . . . The teachers and children at Anna Frank discussed and shared the challenges of Marco to find solutions that might help him move from place to place independently . . . the bathroom, the kitchen, the piazza? [After much discussion,] the child thought of the idea to create a tactile path, using a strip made with a solid plastic rug with bumps in relief that he could feel with his feet as he walked. They experimented with different surfaces and types of carpets by walking with their eyes closed until they found the one they thought would be best. For the pathway to the kitchen, they thought about a rope with bells attached, and this was set along the wall, starting after the door of the classroom. Finally, thinking about going between classroom and piazza, his schoolmates first chose elements in the piazza and the classroom with which they saw that Marco particularly liked to interact: a rocking horse near the door in his classroom and the piano in the piazza. Their ideas were many and demonstrated great variety; and they took into account Marco's needs, which were ever-changing, and the difficulties that they gradually encountered.

What was important to his teachers was that the children looked forward to playing with him and were trying to "think about Marco and think as Marco." They empathized with him and seriously pretended to have his limits and his possibilities. . . . Marco participated in the small group discussions, so that his opinion was involved. These discussions seemed to activate . . . Marco. . . . [He] used the piano keyboard and discovered the different tones. . . . He began to play with the sounds [with] one or two other children and . . . mov[ed] himself around at the piano, standing up to reach the keys of contrasting tonalities. He even created some games with a friend, consisting of a dialogue of sounds (stimulus and answer) and some patterns of rhythm. All of this was very encouraging in Marco's ongoing story. (Soncini 2012, 200–201)

The teacher as partner with families

The familiar role of "educating and involving families" is defined in the Reggio approach as **promoting participation and exchange**. In the United States, parent involvement commonly refers to parents becoming connected to schools. However, the term usually implies something one-sided: the parent contributes on the school's terms—the teacher is the expert and gets the parent to contribute in a helpful way. Parent involvement in the US is

often expected to produce "outcomes" (Edwards & Kutaka 2015); it results from "investments" leading to "payoffs."

In contrast, in preschools in Reggio Emilia and other Italian cities, the relationship between schools and families is generally referred to with the term **participation**. There is a formal election of parent representatives for each preschool and infant-toddler center, and from those representatives a committee of parents is elected to represent families directly with the city government. As the advisory system evolves, educators are researching this question: *How can we strengthen participation even as our community grows and develops, and the needs of children and families change?*

In all writing on Italian early childhood education, the term "participation" recurs over and over, incorporating the whole spectrum of meanings covered by the English terms involvement, engagement, and partnership. "Participation" is broad, implying that not only parents and teachers but also other members of the community participate. It covers all forms and levels of participation and contribution, without distinction, and frames issues connected to diversity in terms of multiple perspectives and invitations to dialogue. The following three quotations from parents in Reggio Emilia suggest the emotional value that parents derive from participating on the advisory council of their children's preschool:

> For me it's a looking for growth through times of shared reflection, through opportunities for exchange, comparing points of view, taking our reflections further, so that I am closer to my child as a parent, so that we grow together as people.

> It's a personal development, sharing points of view, friendship, wanting to help do things, telling our stories; because if we parents talk about ourselves a bit then that helps the teachers in their work with our children, which is of primary importance to all of us. It shows us that not everything is necessarily owed to us, and if we can learn that we can pass it on to our children for their growth and future.

> I understand participation in the City and Childhood Council to be an assumption of responsibility . . . which comes from the civic sense of belonging and contributing to a civilized community—collective—society. (Documentation and Educational Research Centre 2002, 9, 25, 34)

Thus, the reasons and motives that stimulate parents to participate are what have changed most from former decades. It is clear that nowadays people participate and become involved not so much out of idealistic fervor or political conviction, but rather out of a desire to seek opportunities for personal growth or for their children's growth. They seek meaningful experiences and to both give and receive enrichment and help.

As an example of how this affects the role of the teacher, consider how in recent years the increasing diversity of children and families in the schools has presented a focus of concern. Some members of the pedagogical team have demonstrated leadership in helping teachers cultivate sensitivity toward other cultures and increasing intercultural appreciation and respect in the schools. For example, Deanna Margini, a *pedagogista* with rich pre-
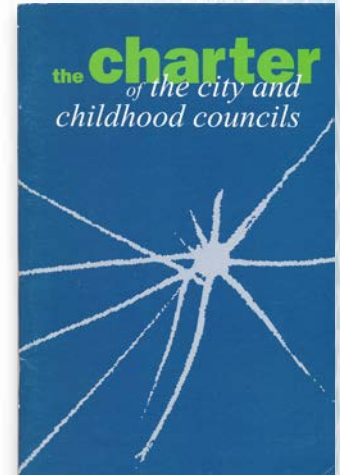
The Charter of the City and Childhood Councils was produced by a study group of stakeholders in Reggio Emilia in 2002.

vious cultural background, describes how the city government has hired cultural mediators for each foreign language group (2010). She also explains the importance for infant-toddler and preschool staff of weekly meetings with their *pedagogisti,* who can encourage the teachers to talk openly (see also chapter 8 on the Pedagogical Coordinating Team, in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 2012). The *pedagogisti* can ask the teachers about progress with particular families' participation. They can support teachers in describing the experiences of the children and sharing how relationships with families are developing. Any teacher naturally feels deeply affected when a misunderstanding arises or when it seems that trust is not growing with a family. The *pedagogisti* can encourage the teachers to talk about an episode that was not positive, that was uncomfortable for a teacher or in which she did not understand the intercultural nuances. At times, teachers may misinterpret a family member's behavior because that person is from a different nationality or culture. In counteracting this, it can be helpful for educators to reflect together in staff meetings in order to better understand and consider how to pay better attention to aspects of communication teaching staff might underestimate or overlook.

As a result of their intercultural experiences, all the educators—teachers, aides, members of the pedagogical team, and cultural mediators—attain a better sense of the points of view of immigrant parents, and thus are better able to partner with them. The teachers, for instance, realize how much insight they experience when families begin to emerge in their individuality, offering their personal and cultural resources and speaking about their lives. Families voice their particular paths as immigrants; their personal questions and worries about whether or not to create a family here; problems they may have in relation with families of their native country; or difficulties that the Italian laws and legal system continue to pose in the daily life of immigrants. The *pedagogisti* and cultural mediators play a facilitating role in creating a truly shared educational experience.

Conclusion

In sum, teacher practice (with a strong value placed on active inquiry) is constantly evolving in Reggio Emilia through experimentation and iterative, cumulative changes. These changes are visible in how Reggio teachers co-act within a network and organization of colleagues and design and use space and environments. The changes are also seen in how they inquire about promoting child learning and project curriculum through documentation and foster communication and community in an inclusive community. Finally, the dynamic and evolving role of teachers is visible in response to family diversity to strengthen participation and partnership with parents. In all of these aspects, the teachers flourish as researchers, seeking to do the best work possible by continually asking deep questions about their work

and reflecting with others on what has happened, what it means, and how to go forward. This kind of research requires much courage in the face of uncertainty, and confidence that everyone together has the necessary power and strength.

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