

Teacher Inquiry in Literacy Workshops

FORGING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH REGGIO-INSPIRED PRACTICE



EDITED BY JUDITH T. LYSAKER

Foreword by Louise Boyd Cadwell

*With immeasurable gratitude we dedicate
this book to the children who have taught us so very much,
to the families and friends who have supported our work, to the
administrators who have given us the flexibility to pursue our
ideas, and to Ena Shelley, who introduced us to the schools of
Reggio Emilia.*

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Foreword

One of the most intriguing concepts to me these days is the idea of an “ecotone,” the zone where two habitats come together. Biologists and ecologists call what happens in this boundary area between two ecosystems the “edge effect.” The edge effect produces a great diversity of species and unexpected relationships not found elsewhere. It is interesting to note that in the arts and across disciplines, two or more diverse elements bumping up against each other are among the conditions that spark creativity and innovation. *Teacher Inquiry in Literacy Workshops: Forging Relationships through Reggio-Inspired Practice* is a book about a learning ecotone, the rich and provocative zone between two educational approaches.

In this educational ecotone, Judith Lysaker and her colleagues were looking for opportunities for more meaningful teacher and student learning to emerge through their commitment to study the relationship between the theory and the practice of literacy workshops and of the Reggio approach to early childhood education.

To orient us to their shared study, Judith Lysaker opens with an introduction that explains the structure and process of the study group, followed by a chapter that outlines the principles and practices of each approach. The next six chapters tell real stories from real classrooms based on the teacher research that each participant engaged in during the year of their study. After each of these chapters, Judith leads a conversation to probe deeper into one of the aspects of each teacher’s story. She concludes the book with a reflective chapter on their pedagogical experiment.

The pedagogical experiment is clear at the outset and the reader is eager to see what will unfold. It is a privilege to enter into these teachers’ classrooms and learn from their journeys as they strive to deepen and enrich literacy learning for their students. The narrative voice of each teacher in this group brings the stories alive and transports the reader right into the middle of the daily life of these classrooms.

This book is based on the practice of research and the richness of relationships, two elements that are critical to both the Reggio approach and literacy

workshops. The vision of this shared study was to cross-pollinate these elements and thereby lift up the quality of the teaching and learning of all the teachers and children.

To engage in successful teacher research, it is necessary to be curious, to have a focus, and to collect data. Each of the teacher-authors developed her own burning question and her own strategies for collecting anecdotal notes, children's conversations and actions, photographs of children's processes, and children's work.

Authentic teacher research such as this requires a shift from our traditional understanding of *teacher*. In my opinion, one of the most significant things we can learn from the educators in Reggio Emilia, Italy, is to shift our understanding and practice from the "knowing it all" teacher to the learning, curious, wonder-filled teacher. This means that we both see ourselves differently and see children differently. Real, lifelong learning will be fresh and new only if we create the conditions as educators for this kind of learning to thrive. This requires an excited teacher who expects to be amazed by how capable, intelligent, and creative children are. We see that this shift has taken place in the minds and hearts of the teacher-authors of this book through their stories of transformation for themselves and their students.

The strength of the community of learners in the study group that authored this book is palpable. We hear about it in every chapter and hear it in every voice. Without this community of supportive learners, the stories you will read here would not be so rich and this book would not be in your hands.

This is another nugget to take from the Reggio approach—this idea of the web of connections between all parts of the system that make up a rich and dynamic learning community. This system encompasses the children and adults, the culture, everyone's ideas, the learning environments, the city, and all the patterns that connect them. In Reggio Emilia, the connections between all these parts form the central, underlying idea of community.

We are and can be inspired by the work of the Reggio Emilia educators, the Italian children, and the community of support in this remarkable northern Italian town. They have always been the first to say they do not recommend that other countries and contexts try to imitate them. Rather, they would like to be one example of what is possible when we truly value children's intelligence and creativity and our future, when we believe that we can create schools as places for meaningful, relevant, lasting learning.

Inventor Charles Kettering wrote:

Research is a high hat word that scares a lot of people. It needn't. It is rather simple. Essentially, research is nothing but a state of mind, a friendly, welcoming attitude

toward change. Going out to look for change instead of waiting for it to come. Research is an effort to do things better and not to be caught asleep at the switch. It is the problem-solving mind as contrasted with the leave well enough alone mind. It is the tomorrow mind instead of yesterday mind.

Judith Lysaker and her team of teacher colleagues have given us an inspiring collection of stories that are alive with research and persistence, patience and openness. They have learned about lasting literacy learning, and they have shared what they have learned with grace and skill. May they inspire us all to do the same.

Louise Boyd Cadwell
*Author of *Bringing Reggio Emilia Home**

Introduction

Key to all learning is relationships. Learning doesn't happen in a vacuum. A wide range of relationships facilitates inquiry and the teaching–learning processes. These relationships include relationships with people, with materials, with space, with time, and with text. How do these relationships develop? What supports deep relationships from which optimal learning can occur? Putting relationships at the center of my classroom created this opportunity and allowed the time and space for me and the learners to negotiate a curriculum that best met the varied needs of my learners.

—*Karen K. Goldstein*

Becoming a teacher-researcher has changed the way I teach and my thinking about how children learn. The term *research* conjures up thoughts of lab coats, sterile environments, and impartial scientists looking for the facts, the definitive answers in cold hard data. In the classroom just the opposite is true. Research in the classroom is incredibly messy, extremely personal, and the one true answer is never found. I have come to the conclusion that this process of questioning, listening, noticing, and looking back at the learning is essential to my growth as a teacher.

—*Patty Durbin Horan*

Open with these short quotes from contributors Karen K. Goldstein and Patty Durbin Horan because each articulates a central purpose of this book. Karen's words point to what became our group's common topic of inquiry—the role of relationships within Reggio-inspired early childhood literacy environments. Patty reflects on the meaning of teacher research in her life as a classroom teacher, in particular the transformative nature of her experience of engaging in this kind of work. As her words tell us, the process of teacher research led to new

personal understandings and a sense of empowerment. These two fundamental ideas—the importance of relationships in children’s early literacy learning and the transformative role of teacher inquiry in our lives as teachers—come together in the work we put forward here. Like our colleagues in Reggio Emilia, Italy, we view these two ideas as *integral* to each other; the work and the stance of inquiry are definitional to teaching–learning relationships as they are enacted in daily classroom life (Rinaldi, 2006).

Our teacher research group began informally as a way to support one another as teacher-researchers. We were all conducting classroom-based studies and met as a group to talk about them so that the hard work of data generation and analysis as well as the emotional demands of teacher research could be mediated by the companionship of others. We hoped that if we could meet regularly, this companionship might help us sustain our new, somewhat fragile forays into teacher research.

As we talked on those late, sultry August afternoons, we discovered the joy and comfort of conversation centered on our own evolving questions, our attempts at a rich classroom life, and the children we cared about. We avoided the conversations that tended to absorb us in our buildings: testing, standards, mandates, the latest and greatest strategy or assessment technique. We talked. We talked a lot. We told stories of the children we loved, the children who perplexed us, and the moments that filled us with nearly unmanageable emotion. Those stories were crowded with points of inquiry, where questions would arise like the fog on a pond in the fall, misty not-yet-completely-formed questions full of mystery and the power to provoke our thinking.

Our teacher research group became the place where we engaged these questions. Our shared thinking allowed us to unearth disruptive anomalies, the “puzzling events” (Phillips & Gallas, 2004) of our teaching lives, and allowed us to meet and to know them, rather than allowing them to settle into our bones undiscovered and unexplored. We found we could navigate the fog in the company of others, wonder through the stories, and finally land on our questions long enough to make important discoveries about them. We invited others, and soon we were a developing community of nascent teacher-researchers. Ralph Fletcher tells us that “every teacher must find a place from which to speak” (qtd. in Buckner, 2005, p. xii). Our teacher inquiry group gave us such a place, a place of shared understandings and ongoing caring conversation. This book is the result of finding that place.

As we met and talked, sharing our data and our budding insights, we discovered a developing sense of solidarity and strength. We soon realized that our original purpose for meeting—to support ourselves in the challenges of teacher inquiry—was being superseded by a different set of purposes, purposes more

moral and political than practical. We began to consider our work as important not just because we might help one another develop useful insights about young children's literacy learning, but also because we were bringing the voices of children front and center, assigning them new weight, new consequence, and an importance in their own right that was somehow different from anything we had experienced before. We found that we wanted our work to amplify the voices of children so that many more people might hear them and notice their beauty, wisdom, and meaning. We talked about our students as inquirers pursuing their own hypotheses, not only about the worlds they inhabited but also about literacy itself, this new powerful resource for connecting to others and to ideas. We thought of our children as coresearchers as we tried to document and describe our explorations of literacy and curriculum.

We soon came to realize that our work together was a way of providing ourselves with a new kind of professional development, professional development with personal and social authenticity that invited us to adopt new ways of knowing through which to view learning and ourselves as teachers. We weren't simply adding a different set of activities or strategies to our repertoire as teachers; we were experiencing the epistemic shifts of transformative learning (Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

By January our Thursday gatherings had evolved into a coherent group of regulars, all of whom were teachers of young children. Most of us were educated in the Reggio Emilia approach and some had been to Reggio Emilia, Italy, on study trips. All but one of us were from the same school district. This district had recently opened four early learning centers purposefully designed to reflect the principles of education present in the schools of Reggio Emilia. The centers have open spaces, high ceilings, and large windows to bring the natural world inside. In addition, different textures such as block glass walls, large circular concrete tables, textured walls, and glass classroom dividers support thinking and provoke curiosity. Curricula rich in project-based learning experiences, literacy workshops, and opportunities for artistic expression were encouraged by building principals and provided for with large blocks of uninterrupted time. We shared a commitment to the idea that children are capable, competent, active learners who have their own inquiries and are filled with ongoing and developing hypotheses about the world; a conceptualization of environment as teacher; an inquiry perspective on curriculum; and a view of relationships as important to learning. These principles directly influenced our early childhood classrooms and are discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

We also shared a commitment to our understanding of teachers and teaching in Reggio, where research and teaching go hand in hand and where teachers are viewed as intellectually competent and politically empowered. For us

this meant that being Reggio inspired wasn't just about children, but about us and our view of ourselves as teachers. We were challenged to more seriously consider the idea that our children's talk, actions, ideas, and play are worthy of our research, and that our careful attention and documentation of children's learning is all part of good teaching. We were challenged to take ourselves seriously and embrace the belief that our time is worthy of the pursuit of our own questions, the demands of data generation and analysis, and the development of new understandings.

At the same time, our district involved us in reform efforts aimed at bringing writers workshop (Calkins, 1994; Ray & Cleveland, 2004) into our districts. We became interested in readers workshop also, inspired by our own work with writers workshop and school visits by Lester Laminack. We devoured books and articles by literacy experts such as Lucy Calkins (1994), Katie Wood Ray (Ray & Cleveland, 2004), Kathy Collins (2004), and Cathy Mere (2005), as well as by researchers like Elizabeth Sulzby (1991). "Little books" for writing were filling our classrooms, kindergartners were inventing their own version of readers workshop, and projects were flourishing.

What were the connections between the curricular construct of workshop and our Reggio-inspired beliefs? How could we make sense of the commonalities and points of difference to deepen our pedagogy? How would articulating the life of "workshop" in a Reggio-inspired environment bring new life to our understandings of young children as learners, inquirers, and literate people? These are the questions we have pursued and which we explore in the following chapters.

The purpose of this book is to share our investigations of enacting literacy workshops in Reggio-inspired environments. These investigations consist of both content—the ideas that we developed, particularly around relationships—and process—the ways in which we developed these ideas through the practice of teacher research. To reflect these two prongs, this book is organized by chapters in which each teacher research project is described by the teacher-author, followed by a section called "Research Conversations." In these accompanying sections, I talk with each of the teachers about her work, focusing on a particular aspect of the inquiry process that was most central to her research. We include these conversations because they illustrate the ways in which teacher research became personally relevant classroom practice that connected us to children and to our own growing knowledge. It is our hope that these dialogues make the processes—the relational action of teacher research—more visible and therefore more useful to others.

In Chapter 1, "First There Was Reggio," I provide a more detailed background on the philosophy that supports teachers' work in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Specifically, I describe the belief system and practices that inspired us as teachers in the US Midwest. In addition, I summarize our view of workshop and the people who have made a difference in our thinking about literacy.

In Chapter 2, Amanda Angle begins the presentation of teacher research studies. As a kindergarten teacher concerned with the reduction of time available for play in the kindergarten schedule, Amanda sets out to observe, document, and describe the ways in which children use play as a tool across the curricular structures of project work and workshop to develop literate capacity and skill. In her study, “Project Work Meets Workshop through Play in a Kindergarten Classroom,” Amanda uses developmental play theory to understand the importance of play and imagination to provoke the uses and practices of literacy within project work. She asks the question, “In what ways do kindergarten children use play to develop understandings and become literate beings?”

In Chapter 3, Karen K. Goldstein tells the story of a five-year-old English language learner who navigated his way to literacy in a monolingual kindergarten setting using blocks as a context for meaning making. While narrating his journey of becoming part of this English-speaking community, she also tells us of Eric’s influence on her own journey, in which she becomes a teacher-researcher and political advocate for all children. Karen documents and describes these parallel journeys in her study of language learning, “Building Identity as a Language Learner: How Reggio Foundations Inspired Workshop Flexibility.”

In Chapter 4, Patty Durbin Horan describes her use of teacher research and the practice of reading aloud to build a peaceful community during a difficult year. Inspired by the work of our Italian colleagues, Patty set out to view her classroom as, first and foremost, “a place of relationships,” and to investigate the ways in which reading aloud might strengthen and bring children together. “Navigating Rough Waters with Read-Alouds” tells a story of transformation for both teacher and children as they used stories to develop more peaceful relationships with one another.

In Chapter 5, “Thinking across the Curriculum: The Importance of Children’s Connections to Peers, Materials, and Home,” Alyssa Hildebrand examines the ways in which children’s thinking becomes visible in her Reggio-inspired workshop settings. Informed by the Italian educators’ focus on relationships, the negotiation of curriculum, a supportive social atmosphere, and a pedagogy of the environment, she describes three kinds of relationships that her kindergarten children draw on as “thinking tools” as they develop as thinkers and authors in writers workshop.

In Chapter 6, Jennifer Wheat studies the ways in which relationships support literacy learning in her multiage K–1 classroom. In “The Power of Relationships,” she explores this idea through observation and “layers of writing,”

focusing on one child as a case study to describe the complex web of relationships that supported him in his literacy learning. Framing her thinking about relationships with ideas from both Reggio Emilia educators and Donna Skolnick, Jennifer asserts that Thomas's relationships with the classroom environment and materials were his entry point into the curriculum, and that peer relationships provided the critical scaffolding that sustained these relationships.

Kristin Scibienski looks closely at the development of readers in her readers workshop in Chapter 7, "A Look at Cultural Tools in a Reggio-Inspired Kindergarten Readers Workshop," investigating the particular aspects of environment that appear to support emergent readers' use of this curricular structure. Focusing on the Reggio principles of "environment as third teacher," "relationships as mediation," and "cultural tools," Kristin analyzes her students' reading work, asking, "In what ways do children use cultural tools during readers workshop and how does their use relate to literacy development?"

In Chapter 8, "Our Pedagogical Experiment," I sum up our developing views of "relationship" within Reggio-inspired workshop environments and articulate an integrated view of relational pedagogy that grew out of our collective investigations. We call this integrated view *relationality* and define it as "the living out of a complex set of intersubjective relationships within the classroom community." Grounded in this view, I argue for a revaluing of the human dimensions of early learning to push back against the pervasive culture of achievement that currently holds sway in early childhood classrooms.

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First There Was Reggio

JUDITH T. LYSAKER

The pedagogic experience of Reggio Emilia is a story so far spanning more than 40 years that can be described as a pedagogical experiment in a whole community.

—DALMBERG & MOSS (2006, p. 3)

Historical and Political Contexts of the Reggio Approach

The Reggio approach to early childhood education grew out of a response to the devastation of the Second World War in Italy. Parents, primarily mothers, in the town of Reggio Emilia, located in northern Italy, were determined that nothing like that war would ever happen again. They believed that the place to begin building a new peaceful world, one in which fascism could not gain a foothold, was with the education of children. So the community of Reggio built municipal schools dedicated to the education of children that were energized by a new liberalism, progressive educational thought, and a burgeoning women's movement. In this way, the Reggio approach—its founding beliefs and purposes—is intimately tied to the place that is Reggio Emilia, Italy. Reggio parents and educators established a caring community in which the dignity of all children and their engagement in that community and in the world were encouraged and honored.

Basic Tenets of the Reggio Approach

Grounded in political and social ideologies, the new municipal schools of Reggio quickly embarked on a particular set of pedagogies that grew out of them, and the “pedagogical experiment” was begun. Under the leadership of Loris Malaguzzi, the educators of Reggio explored a set of educational practices

grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that drew on social constructivist learning theories, principles of architectural design, and philosophical assumptions about beauty and love. Reggio educators were influenced by the thinking of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and others who emphasized the child as an active learner, one who thrives on engagement with others and with the environment. Likewise, the teacher was also seen as engaged with others and the classroom environment, particularly through research (Cadwell, 2003). Later, Jerome Bruner and Howard Gardner were visitors and influences on the development of the Reggio approach. Gardner sums up the Reggio approach in his introduction to *The Hundred Languages of Children*:

The Reggio system can be described succinctly as follows: It is a collection of schools for young children in which each child's intellectual, emotional, social and moral potentials are carefully cultivated and guided. The principal educational vehicle involves youngsters in long-term engrossing projects, which are carried out in a beautiful, healthy, love-filled setting. (qtd. in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, p. xvi)

The Reggio approach is thus both a philosophic and a pedagogic approach to the education of young children that rests on the central ideas, summarized here from Cadwell (2003): (1) an image of the child as protagonist, collaborator, communicator, coteacher, and coresearcher; (2) the environment as "third educator" in the classroom along with the teacher and the child, one that sets up conditions for learning; (3) the teacher as partner, nurturer, guide, and researcher; (4) the valuing of multiple languages that children use to make sense of their world; and (5) an inquiry approach to curriculum in which meaningful, relevant learning unfolds with accompanying documentation supporting and communicating that learning.

From these elements organically at play in the classroom rises what is called the "pedagogy of listening." This is, as Rinaldi (2006) describes it, "an ethical relationship of openness to the 'other,' trying to listen to the 'other' from his or her own position and experience and not treating the other as the same" (p. 15). For us this means that relationships become the sine qua non, the nonnegotiable, the critical pivot of everything that happens and might happen in our classrooms. We believe that as teachers, when we are able to listen, to take an empathetic stance, good teaching happens. We work as Noddings (2005) tells us, to "apprehend the reality of the other" (p. 14) with the expectation that the other will not be like us.

Image of the Child

As we learned about the ideas and practices developed in Reggio schools, certain aspects of the Reggio approach became important to our thinking. First we found ourselves influenced greatly by what is referred to as “the image of the child,” addressed by Carlina Rinaldi:

One of the focal points of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, as Loris Malaguzzi wrote, is the image of a child who, right from the moment of birth is so engaged in developing a relationship with the world and intent on experiencing the world that he develops a complex system of abilities, learning strategies and ways of organizing relationships. He produces change and dynamic movement in the systems in which he is involved, including the family, the society and the school. A product of culture, values and rights, competent in living and learning (2006, p. 83).

Like our Italian colleagues, our image of the child is one in which children are resourceful, competent constructors of knowledge and active agents in pursuit of their own understandings. We assume that as active agents, children have their own inquiries, that they develop ongoing hypotheses about the world, and that they are the best informants for our teaching. In our classrooms and our research, we saw them as coteachers, coresearchers, and curriculum collaborators as we jointly investigated questions and constructed the structures for learning in our classrooms.

This image of the child naturally led us to think about children’s rights—the right to learn in ways that make sense to them; the right to exist in a system of nurturing relationships. This view of children was particularly important to us as teachers who wanted to push back against the No Child Left Behind Act, with its focus on teacher-directed classrooms and deficit views of young children.

Teacher as Researcher

In a related vein, we embraced a strong image of the teacher. In the Reggio approach, the teacher is viewed as an active agent in pursuit of personal understandings about teaching and learning and is considered a competent professional capable of producing knowledge through research. At the outset of our work together, we were most familiar with one aspect of research, the practice of documentation. The Reggio Emilia approach views documentation as the ongoing and indispensable work of making children’s learning visible and public. Documentation involves the careful collection of children’s work, the meticulous

recording of their thinking, and the construction of a visual record of the work of the class. Each of us had constructed documentation panels—large boards on which we arranged children’s data, in a way that both made their learning visible and appealing and placed their voices vibrantly and prominently in our classrooms and in the hallways of our buildings.

However, perhaps most critical to us as a teacher research group and what pushed us to take our own thinking more seriously was the Reggio recognition that teachers are *theorists*.

Reggio’s theories are rich and provocative, not least the pedagogy of listening and the hundred languages. But at the same time, Reggio challenges the “arrogant idea of the continuing separation between theory and practice,” arguing that they are inseparable—one without the other is inconceivable. By so doing, Reggio also revalues the practitioner, indeed questions the very term as implying that there can and should be a distinction between those who practice and those who theorize. (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 17)

We began to view our role as thinkers and researchers as integral to who we were as teachers, and to more earnestly consider our abilities to generate ideas from our classroom work.

We were also beginning to navigate the teacher research literature and found colleagues in people such as Ruth Hubbard and Brenda Power (2003), Karen Gallas (1994, 2003), and Karen Hankins (2003), who document and describe the work of teacher-researchers. From Hubbard and Power (2003) we learned that our worries about teaching, the things that caused us to question what we were doing, or why, were worthy of exploration and of systematic study. Karen Gallas (1994, 2003) taught us that our research journals constituted data, that deep thinking could come from them, and that like the documentation of children’s work, our research journals could make teaching and learning visible. Karen Hankins (2003) helped us to see there was an important place for the personal as well as the theoretical in our research, and added to the Reggio definition of *teacher as researcher* by bringing the personhood of the teacher into research alongside the personhood of the child. All of this fit with our new dedication to teacher research and our developing identities as intellectually competent and politically empowered coresearchers.

Environment as Teacher

In addition to these new conceptions of ourselves and our students, we found the idea of “environment as third educator” compelling and useful. This notion

suggests that children learn not only from each other and their teacher but also from the objects, materials, and features of the spaces that surround them. Materials and objects have particular affordances; they make certain kinds of learning possible. We valued the idea that the classroom environment within which young children work and play should feel safe and comfortable, have beauty and inspire learning, and be a place to grow into themselves as complex human beings. So we redesigned our classrooms as aesthetic spaces, environments of beauty as well as utility, dynamic spaces that invite interaction and relation. Inspired by our Italian colleagues, we built collections of natural materials and interesting objects for children to explore, draw, and manipulate. We placed mirrors and light tables in our classrooms, which allowed children to play with the physics of light, space, and shadow.

Our interest in early literacy also led us to Brian Cambourne (1995) and his conditions for natural language learning. We considered the notions of immersion, demonstration, and engagement and found them compatible with our Reggio-inspired views. Our classroom environments would immerse children in literacy practices, provide ongoing demonstrations of language use, and offer opportunities for relevant literacy engagements. Cambourne's concept of approximation was particularly helpful as we prepared environments that would support risk taking, environments in which children could construct their own versions of reading and writing as legitimate in their own right. We filled our classrooms with tubs of books for children to explore, to get to know, and to use as "teachers of reading." We created inviting spaces for young writers, complete with a broad array of writing materials and utensils. We also made sure that these environments contained spaces for dialogue between ourselves and the children as well as between and among children.

Inquiry Approach to Curriculum

Our teacher research group adopted the idea that curriculum unfolds because it is driven by inquiry. Often this inquiry is represented by sustained, child-centered projects in which children and teachers collaboratively pursue a topic of genuine interest that arises out of the daily experiences of children. As Gandini (1997) states,

Projects provide the backbone of the children's and teacher's learning experiences. They are based on the strong conviction that learning by doing is of great importance and that to discuss in groups and to revisit ideas and experiences is the premier way of gaining better understanding and learning. (p. 22)

The driving force behind children's curiosities and inquiries in the curriculum was familiar to us from Dewey (1938), who advocates for the child as an active constructor of his or her own knowledge through experience. We had read Katz and Chard's (2000) work on the project approach and had experienced the curricular power of children's projects in our own classrooms. Our literacy education background included Short and Harste's (1996) *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers* in which the notion of inquiry is applied and integrated with the work of learning to read and write. Our conversations included thinking about literacy as a project itself, an intense, self-motivated investigation of learning to read and write.

Relationships

Finally, our Reggio influences led us to allow ourselves to revalue relationships as underlying all learning. Like many teachers of young children, we were already won over by the importance of our relationships with children, parents, and families and of children's relationships with one another. The sociocultural views of Vygotsky (1978) influenced our thinking about the essential relational quality of all learning, particularly literacy learning. The idea of scaffolding suggests that all learning happens when a more able other mediates the learning through language and through the use of materials. This common idea gained even more credence as we viewed it from our Reggio lens. In addition, many of us were familiar with Donna Skolnick's (2000) work, which outlines a set of relationships that teachers might consider when planning for literacy learning: teacher to curriculum, child to curriculum, teacher to child, and child to child. All of this led us to consider relationships as the first and foremost concern of teaching, and so the promotion and facilitation of children's relationships with us, with one another, and with materials in the environment became critical.

And Then There Was Workshop

Working within this set of beliefs, we were introduced to the workshop approach to literacy (Calkins, 1994; Ray & Cleveland, 2004). After learning the structures and tone of workshop teaching, we set up our classrooms so that the supports for workshop were ever present, through the availability of beautiful and just-right books, a variety of small teacher-constructed blank books, and a wealth of material for drawing and writing. We began our workshop teaching with the simple and predictable structures suggested by Calkins:

Mini-Lessons. We began each readers and writers workshop with a mini-lesson that provided a focused look at some aspect of reading or writing. We decided on the topics for mini-lessons based on our observations of our students, as well as from our reading of authors like Katie Wood Ray and Lisa Cleveland (2004). Most often our lessons addressed a teaching point through the purposeful use of children’s literature. Inspired by Ray and others, we referred to these as mentor texts. We regularly photocopied the covers of mentor texts, labeled them for what they offered us as writers, and displayed them at the children’s eye level. The material of text became a valued and lovely way of supporting skill and strategy development in our young students. Often our mini-lessons were organized into units of study that allowed us to stay with a particular idea or author for an extended period.

Independent Reading/Writing. Mini-lessons were followed by independent reading or independent writing, though we found that our students often effectively merged the two. In our early childhood classrooms, independent workshop time was neither silent nor independent. Children worked as readers and writers by reading and thinking aloud, by helping one another, and often by inventing new and interesting ways of co-reading and co-writing. During this time, we held reading and writing conferences and documented these conferences through anecdotal notes and other teacher-created record-keeping strategies.

Share Time. Independent reading and writing ended with share time. Children often gathered together at a carpeted area in front of a big book easel and whiteboard to talk about their reading and writing work of the day. If writing had been the focus, we used share time to have the children read their work to peers and get feedback from their young collaborators. As teachers we used this time instructionally. We noticed aloud, in front of and with the children, what the author had done well that day as a writer. Similarly, at the end of a workshop focused on reading, children volunteered to tell their peers about what they had accomplished as readers that day. And with careful teacher responses, we acknowledged and built up the good reading work the students had done.

Our Own Pedagogic Experiment

Within this pedagogic richness, questions about literacy and, in particular, the use of readers and writers workshops within our Reggio-inspired environments arose loudly. After all, the Reggio approach is in large part an approach to very young children, who are not necessarily at the point of being print focused. In fact, we noticed very little specific attention to reading and writing in the Reggio classrooms we visited in Italy. How would this set of beliefs fit with our American dedication to promoting the development of readers and writers in kindergarten classrooms? What were the connections between these approaches to curriculum?

As we considered these questions, how we might pursue them and to what end, our distant colleagues in Italy once again came to mind. In Reggio Emilia, educators refer to their innovative practices as their “pedagogical experiment” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 3). We were inspired by the qualities of this work: (1) the unequivocal focus on understanding children’s thinking and children’s being as the primary source of curricular design and (2) the active intellectual role of teachers in making pedagogic decisions based on observations of children. As we met in our study group, we began to see that our inquiry into readers and writers workshops within Reggio-inspired early childhood environments was becoming our own pedagogical experiment.

Our shared backgrounds, eagerness to learn from children, and questioning spirits drew us closer together. Each week we lugged our bags brimming with “raw data” to study group meetings. We thrived on the conversations about data, the children, our questions, and how to pursue those questions. We began to play with data-generation, collection, and management strategies and supported one another in our modest initial attempts. As we learned about our students and about ourselves as researchers, we found that we returned to our classrooms more hopeful and more dedicated to the work of inquiry with children.

Over the course of two years, we engaged in our pedagogical experiment, studying the curricular structures of readers and writers workshop, as well as the idea and structure of project work, and immersed ourselves in the social constructivist views of early literacy that are foundational to these curricular structures. We worked with Vygotsky’s (1978) ideas of mediation and the zone of proximal development. We considered the meanings of “relational potentials” and “quality of space” suggested by Carlina Rinaldi (2006), and wondered how we could break open those ideas with Parker Palmer’s (1983, 1998) work on relationship and community. We began to notice that the Reggio principles we embraced highlighted and accentuated particular aspects of readers and writers

workshop for us, adding new dimensions to the ways in which we regarded the meaning making and authoring of our students. Our image of the child as capable and competent, our regard for the role of the environment in learning, and the importance of relationships took on new meanings as we experimented with readers and writers workshop.

We started to view the documentation of children’s learning as a vital part of the literacy environment, a personally relevant provocation for literacy learning and for the development of authoring in our emergent readers and writers. We began to understand inquiry both as a central characteristic of the active learner and as a way of *relating* to others and to the world. We saw children’s inquiry into the world of text in particular as the driving force of literacy learning in our workshop classrooms. Most important, we began to notice the web of relationships that constituted our classroom communities in ways we had not before. Children’s relationships with people (both peers and adults), materials (particularly texts), the environment (particularly documentation), as well as children’s developing relation to the processes, practices, and “idea” of literacy, took on new and substantive meanings as we immersed ourselves in this pedagogical experiment of working with readers and writers workshop in our already established Reggio-inspired classrooms.

As we talked about these ideas, something of our own, something we have come to call “relationality,” began to take shape. We were aware that the relational perspective we were developing was a kind of synthesis of our particular encounters with social constructivism. At the core of our beliefs, however, was the idea that *relationships* broadly defined were the most compelling, complex, and important aspect of the classrooms we had and the classrooms we wanted to have—not *relationships* defined in some clinical, neutral way; rather, relationships driven by love, care, and making sense of the world with and for others. Thus, we found ourselves launched into a kind of meta-study of the relational as we each pursued our own teacher research project. As a group, our work converges on this particular set of ideas, with each piece of teacher research highlighting some aspect of our developing relational perspective.

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Project Work Meets Workshop through Play in a Kindergarten Classroom

AMANDA ANGLE

*P*lay is a common word and one that is very familiar to most early childhood educators. Unfortunately, despite its familiarity, academic demands of the “new kindergarten” (Hatch, 2005) make play more and more difficult to include in the kindergarten curriculum (Da Ros-Voseles, Danyi, & Aurillo, 2003). Because of the constant pressure to raise standardized test scores, playtime is being pushed out of daily classroom life for kindergarten children.

As a kindergarten teacher, I have had many opportunities to see children play and have come to value the importance of play for children’s development. In light of the need to defend play, I began to wonder what role play might have in children’s learning, particularly in children’s inquiries and their literacy development. This chapter reflects the teaching and research done in my kindergarten classroom over one year. The question that guided this work was: *In what ways do kindergarten children use their play to pursue inquiry, develop understandings, and become literate beings?*

Context

Like others in my study group, I teach in a public kindergarten that is housed in an early learning center within a metropolitan area. Like my colleagues, I embrace much of the philosophy behind the Reggio schools discussed in Chapter 1.

The pedagogical principle that was most important to me as a teacher at the time of this study was the image of the child. When I view children as competent, curious protagonists in their own learning, it makes sense for them to be important collaborators with me in constructing curriculum. Another significant belief for my work culled from the Reggio approach is the importance of the environment as a teacher. To me this means that the environment “makes

room” for children to be active in their own learning. The physical environment of my classroom is child centered, with many open spaces set aside for building, playing, and exploring materials. In addition to these physical characteristics, aspects of environment such as talk and activity are critical supports that shape learning. I am particularly interested in play as an environmental influence on learning.

Finally, inquiry-oriented projects, in which children pursue interests over time, are part of my Reggio-inspired environment. The belief that supports this approach to curriculum—that children learn by doing—is one we embrace in my district. In addition to our Reggio background, we have also studied Sylvia Chard’s (1994) project approach to extend our knowledge of an inquiry curriculum. In my classroom, I look for and respond to children’s interests in ways that I hope will help them pursue topics and ideas they are curious about. Like the others in our study group, I use the curricular structures of readers and writers workshops, which I believe also reflect a strong image of the child as well as the idea that children learn by doing.

Data Collection

In terms of demographics, the children in this study represent diverse races and ethnic groups as well as all levels of the socioeconomic spectrum. Almost one-fourth of my students spoke Spanish as their first language.

I collected various forms of data for my study. First, I took photographs throughout my study to highlight different examples of how the children were using play to support their inquiries and literacy development. Second, I collected student artifacts that showed the literacy learning happening during our projects. Some examples of student artifacts include books the children created that related to our projects and written labels made for block sculptures. I also took anecdotal notes on a daily basis. Many of these notes consisted of direct quotations of children’s language (see the “Research Conversations” at the end of the chapter). I also took anecdotal notes of the children’s actions.

When it was time to analyze my data, I first organized it by separating our bug project data from our airplane project data. I then read and reread my data to identify patterns and connections across the two projects, looking specifically for patterns connected to play that I could use to show others how children were using play to support learning. When it came time to start writing, I decided to use a narrative approach; I wanted readers to be able to picture the play in my classroom. In fact, narrative is a common way for teachers to share their teacher research (Hankins, 2003). Here is the first of my two stories.

Project Meets Workshop through Play: Bugs

CHILD 1: Look, Miss Angle! There is a bug on the floor by your desk!

CHILD 2: What is it?

CHILD 3: I think it is a beetle!

CHILD 1: Hurry, can we catch it? We can have another class pet!

CHILD 2: What should we name it?

This conversation took place one day in early September as the school year was beginning. Our class had just come in from the playground when a small group of students noticed something very small and black crawling on the floor by my desk. As much as I disliked bugs and insects, the children's excitement made their interest impossible to ignore. After finding the small beetle, which was quickly named Carl, the children were on a mission to find as many bugs as possible for our room! Little did I know that we were beginning an intense investigation of bugs that would turn into a semester-long literacy-rich project, one that would spill into our readers and writers workshops. The playful act of finding "Carl" proved to be the provocation that launched some critical literacy learning for my students.

I began gathering as many books as I could find on insects. Soon we had tubs and tubs of books about different bugs. Children's questions filled the room. "What is an insect? What do beetles eat? Where do insects live? How many kinds of insects are there?" I posted the children's questions on large chart paper in a prominent place in the room where we could refer to them repeatedly.

Bugs and Books

The children began bug research naturally and intensely. During readers workshop, we were reading books such as *Bugs, Bugs, Bugs!* by Bob Barner, *I Love Spiders* by John Parker, *Bugs* by Nancy Winslow Parker and Joan Richards Wright, *The Best Book of Bugs* by Claire Llewellyn, and *About Insects* by Cathryn Sill. During independent reading, children read alone and with one another to find answers to the questions we had posted earlier on our chart.

Before this, I had begun the practice of using "little books," teacher- or child-made blank paper booklets, to encourage young writers. Now the children began making little books about bugs during workshop. The project work guided mini-lessons on generating questions, finding facts, and comparing and contrasting insects. Of course, many of the children's books were nonfiction and filled with their newfound knowledge. But some children were writing fictional

stories and using the different kinds of bugs they were learning about as characters. Project work had completely merged with workshop.

Along with creating books and the playful fantasy about Carl, the children kept working to find more bugs outside around the school. Their list of questions kept growing. At one time we had between ten and fifteen different kinds of bugs in our room: spiders, crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, and a praying mantis affectionately called Sunshine. In fact, every bug we caught received a name that same day, determined by a class vote.

These new, tiny members of our class received lots of attention. The children were constantly drawing pictures and writing notes for the bugs, and stacks of these communications soon piled up, which posed an organizational problem. But, believing that problems can become new provocations for learning, I asked the children, "What can we do with all of these notes?" Immediately they suggested that we make each bug its own mailbox for all of their "mail." Mailbox construction became another daily event that provided important literacy experiences. Once a week we took all the notes out of the mailboxes and read them to the bugs.

CHILD 1: We are making so much stuff for Carl and Sunshine! We need to make them mailboxes to put it all in!

CHILD 2: I am sorting the mail for Carl and Sunshine!

The pictures and notes the children made for the bugs during their play in project work and workshop provided important practice for my emergent readers and writers. The children were constantly using oral and written language together when creating mail for the bugs. Even children who were not yet able to write all the words to represent their thoughts were able to express them through talk and pictures. My view of children as capable and competent, as well as the ongoing data collection of my teacher research, helped me to see and value the important learning that was happening in these children's playful approach to project work and workshop.

Bugs and Blocks

CHILD 1: We need to build a bigger bug house for Carl!

CHILD 2: Can we paint some blocks for our new bug house? We need to paint the blocks for the bug house! It has to be perfect for Carl!

Children continued their play by launching Bug City in the block area for the

bugs. They decided we needed to write a letter to our assistant principal to see if it was okay to paint some blocks. With her permission, we immediately got busy.

CHILD 1: We need to lay the blocks down in the front!

CHILD 2: If we don't we won't be able to see Carl!

CHILD 3: Come on! We need to work together!

CHILD 4: I knew if we painted the blocks the bug house would be perfect!

Building Bug City provided ample opportunities for the children to have meaningful play experiences to support their literacy development. During this play, a great deal of interesting talk took place. Children were learning about bugs and using content-rich vocabulary to make sense of what a bug city might look like. This purposeful use of oral language in the building of Bug City is perhaps the most obvious example of children practicing literacy in their play. But the representation of Bug City shows something even greater. In building Bug City from blocks, the children used a variety of materials, including blocks and math manipulatives, to create a visual representation of what they envisioned as a Bug City. They then used this representation to talk about their creation. The blocks and math materials represented a city—one thing stood for another—just as letters, words, and sentences work together to represent meaning in a book. These symbolic play experiences were helping children understand the central concept of written language.

Bug Restaurant

Bug City became a provocation for the next major step of our bug project—the creation of the Bug Food Restaurant. After constructing many different Bug Cities with various restaurants, the children decided that we needed to turn our entire dramatic play center into our very own Bug Food Restaurant.

CHILD 1: We could make the restaurant like this. I want there to be a water fountain!

CHILD 2: We have to make a refrigerator! It is for the food!

CHILD 3: I want the restaurant to look like this!

CHILD 4: What if the bug wants a drink? Maybe he can use this cup for the drink! I am so smart!

CHILD 5: I think the bugs will want chicken too.

CHILD 2: We need some owners to wash the tables.

CHILD 1: We need wallpaper and a nice floor for the restaurant.

CHILD 4: This can be the grasshopper town!

CHILD 3: This can be where all of the neighbors live.

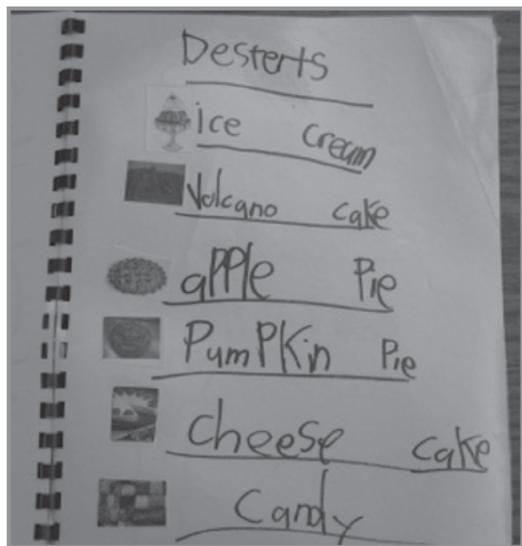
CHILD 1: We need to have a menu.

CHILD 4: What is the name going to be for our restaurant?

CHILD 3: I am trying to think of an idea. Hmmm . . . maybe “Bug Food”?

The creation of the Bug Food Restaurant, just like Bug City, provided a playful context that supported children in becoming accomplished literate beings. They had many opportunities to exchange and compare their own experiences of restaurants through talk. In addition, they did a great deal of reading and writing during play-infused project work and workshop. For example, the children made “Open” and “Closed” signs because the restaurant could not be open all day long!

A particularly rich literacy experience presented itself when the children decided that the Bug Food Restaurant needed a menu. After making a list of food and drinks they wanted the restaurant to serve, the children had to figure out how to sort the items so the menu would make sense. We then searched online together to find pictures to match all of our menu items. Finally, the children decided that we also needed to make multiple copies of the menu because no restaurant has only one.



Bug Food Menu

But the influence of the Bug House Restaurant on literacy work didn't end there. The students decided that they wanted to use the menu items to create an ABC chart: *A* stood for apple pie, *B* stood for bread, and so on. This alphabet chart gained relevance and practical value because it was now grounded in the bug project and because the children themselves had created it. We hung it in our room, where it was used daily as a resource for reading and writing.

Throughout the course of the project, the class spent many hours “playing restaurant.” Because the children had created so many texts, this play involved regular reading and writing. Naturally, over time the excitement died down.

However, even after many conversations as a class, the children did not want to turn the Bug Food Restaurant into anything else. Even when their interests had moved elsewhere and only a few children played in this area every day, they were not ready to say goodbye to their creation. This shows the power of play to allow children to create their own personally relevant curriculum. They provided their own scaffolds. They reconstructed the organization of the school day by merging their inquiry about bugs and restaurants with readers and writers workshops. This changed the way we used time, so that reading and writing were happening across the day and not just in workshop.



Alphabet Chart

Numerous meaningful literacy learning opportunities became available to the children with these changes.

Project Time Meets Workshop, Round Two: Airplanes

CHILD 1: How do you make a paper airplane?

CHILD 2: I can't figure out how to fold it.

CHILD 3: Look! Mine won't even fly!

CHILD 4: What is a paper airplane suppose to look like?

CHILD 1: How do you make it fly?

CHILD 2: Can someone help me?

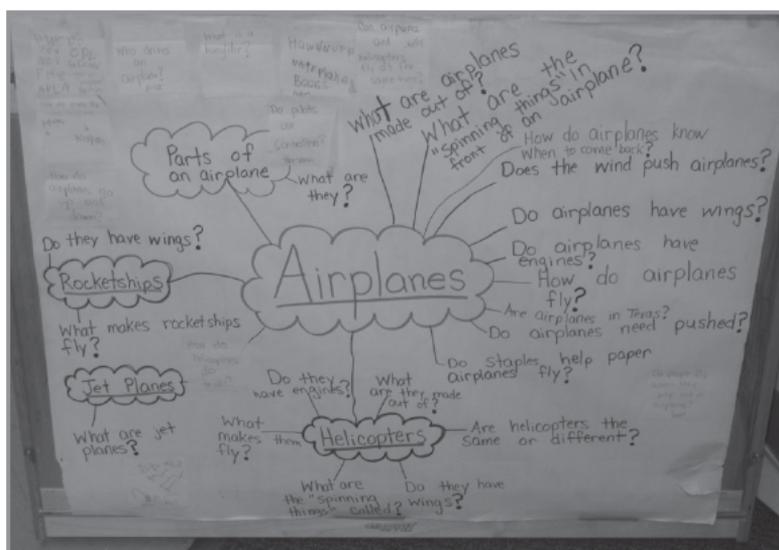
Before I knew it, the entire class was surrounding a small round table, everyone working frantically on the puzzle of how to make a paper airplane. I was not sure who started this conversation or where it was headed. But with so many children interested in this quest to make a paper airplane, and with the energy of their conversation, I had the feeling that something useful might develop. So of course I grabbed my notebook and camera and sat in the back to listen and watch closely and to look for opportunities to facilitate learning.

I observed the students for almost two weeks to see if their interest in airplanes was worth pursuing through a more deliberate inquiry, in which I would take a more active role. Then, one Monday morning during our group time on the carpet, I talked to the children directly about what I had seen. I told them about the things I had noticed during their airplane play and showed them the many photographs I had taken of their paper airplane construction. Before I could say much, hands were flying in the air. It seemed as though everyone had something to say. I quickly grabbed chart paper and began recording their comments and questions. By the end of our conversation, we had a web of all of their thinking about airplanes.

I no longer wondered about the nature of this play. It was apparent that we were beginning a real inquiry into airplanes; an airplane project was evolving.

Once again, pretend play had become the provocation for meaningful literacy learning. I was ready to see where the play of paper airplanes would take us.

The children's paper airplanes continued to present one major problem—they wouldn't fly! Of course they asked me for help. In this moment, I saw two choices, the easier being to make a paper airplane for them so they could all copy



Airplane Web

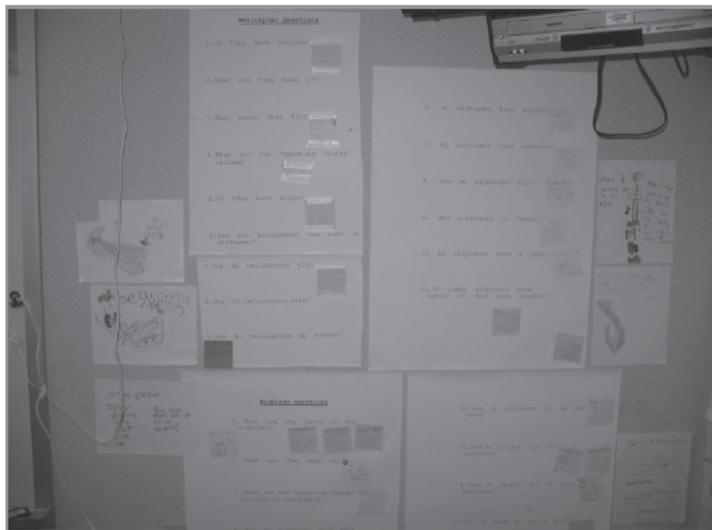
my model. But, I thought to myself, where is the learning in that? Instead, as I listened to the children, I recalled the bug project and how important talk had been in that inquiry. Therefore, I encouraged the students to work together to figure out the paper airplane problem independently. In addition, I filled the room with books about airplanes to help provide guidance in solving their problem. The airplane project overflowed into readers workshop.

Research in Kindergarten Workshop

Books became a new resource as the class continued to construct paper airplanes. During readers workshop, we read different nonfiction books together,

including *Helicopters* by Jeffrey Zuehlke, *Airplanes* by Darlene Stille, *How People Learned to Fly* by Fran Hodgkins, and *If You Were A . . . Pilot* by Virginia Schomp. We revisited and revised the chart paper web with new information and lots of new questions. I encouraged the children to use Post-it notes as they read to jot down answers to questions on our web. Working, talking, and reading together, the students filled up sticky notes with information about their questions. Soon, Post-it notes were everywhere!

As I observed the children pursuing this inquiry, I noticed that two questions kept coming up: “What are the parts of an airplane?” and “How do airplanes fly?” To support the students’ interest and curiosity, I read part of a book titled *Airplanes* by Hal Rogers. In response to this book, many of the kids created pictures of planes as a way to sort out and represent their new understandings. We posted these on a large class collaborative mural under the question, “What are the parts of an airplane?”

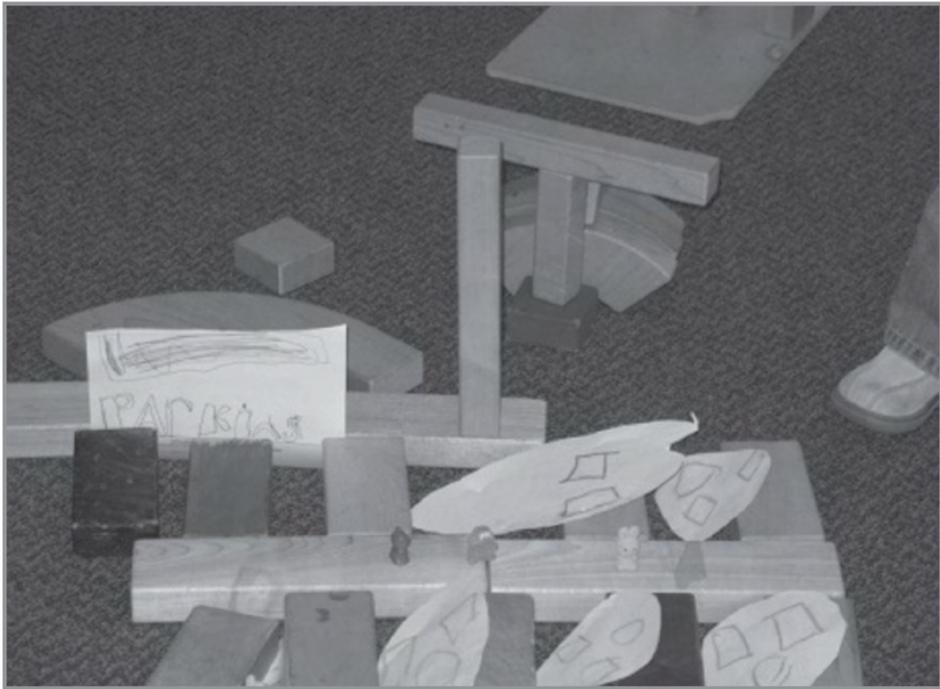


Sticky Note Research

At the same time, airplane books were becoming popular constructions during writers workshop. In these artifacts, the children explored the idea of how planes fly as well as how the parts of an airplane work. This is where all the information seemed to come together for the children. Their airplane play provoked questions, which led to research, which in turn led them to document their hypotheses about airplanes in pictures and words. Project work had once again merged with both readers and writers workshop through play.

In the midst of conducting research and writing about airplanes, the children were also collaboratively constructing an airport in the block area. This new round of play provided more opportunities for talk, reading, and writing as the students created labels for each part of the airport. Both oral and written vocabularies were developing through this project.

After about a week of reading and writing about airports, the children wanted to build another one; they had learned new things and wanted to represent the changes in their learning.



Labeling the Airport

CHILD 1: This can be where they get gas.

CHILD 2: We are using teamwork and working together!

CHILD 3: We need to make more airplanes for our airport!

CHILD 4: Airplane alert! That means that the airplane is out of gas and needs to go get some more!

CHILD 5: Here is where they go.

CHILD 1: These airplanes are parking here because there are no more people.

CHILD 2: More people will come to the airport tomorrow.

CHILD 4: We need to build this wall higher.

The new airport looked nothing like the first one! This time the children's focus was on making a parking garage for the airplanes and a place where they could get gas. Even though a great deal of planning went into this, soon they wanted to take this second airport down and build again. The more they learned about the parts of an airport and how it worked, the more they wanted to make new airports to show what they knew. In my observations and noting taking of students' conversations, I noticed many of the children using the vocabulary they

had gained during their research and that now flooded the room in class charts, webs, and other written artifacts. The labels on the airport were another example of written language children used to show their learning. They were demonstrating meaning making through block constructions as they used these objects to represent the ideas they were learning through their reading and research. This kind of fantasy play gave them ample opportunity to practice separating objects from ideas through representation.

As the building of airports continued, the children decided that we needed airplanes that were not made of paper.

CHILD 1: “We need to make airplanes out of wood!”

This effort became the next step in our learning process. We wrote a letter as a class to our families asking for wood and other supplies for our airplanes. We organized teams to plan this process: two teams would sand the wood and get all the supplies ready; two teams would do the construction, actually putting the airplanes together; and the final two teams were in charge of painting the airplanes after they were built.

All of this work organizing teams and materials gave children even more opportunity for relevant talk and social interaction to support their literacy learning. As in the bug project, the creation of representations functioned like symbolic play; wood was used to represent an airplane, just as earlier the blocks represented an airport. The ability to use objects to represent other things for a specific purpose was practice for the children in understanding that words can also represent “things” in their environment.

The students’ final quest in the airplane project developed when the children decided that we needed to make an airport that could be saved forever. We had already made a lot of airports out of the blocks in our room, but these could never be permanent. The children wanted to make a 3-D representation of an airport that could be saved forever. So we began collecting old shoe boxes, toilet paper rolls, and small cardboard boxes to help with this process.

In about a week, the children were ready to build their airport. Using what we had learned from our reading in readers workshop, we first made a list of the different parts of the airport that we would construct. These were the Jetway, bathroom, control tower, parents’ room, game room, game store, candy store, food court, baggage claim, and check-in counter. Then each child chose one part of the airport to work on, with two people on each team for each part of our airport. The first mission of each team was to draw a plan of exactly what they wanted their part of the airport to look like. After this plan was finished, the building began. After two weeks of hard work, the children were finished and

we put all the pieces together. At last the children had finished their airplane research.

The cardboard airport, our culminating project, sat on a very special shelf in our room, a daily reminder to all of us of the hard work and learning that happened during our airplane project. Once again, as in the bug project, children's learning was authentic, meaningful, and full of literacy experiences. In both projects, children were inspired by play that then served as an essential provocation for learning, providing energy that pushed our inquiries effectively into readers and writers workshops.

My work as a teacher-researcher, particularly the ongoing close observations of children and documentation of their talk, helped me build a detailed, data-based image of children as capable, curious, and active; to stay connected with their inquiry; and to see the relationships they were building (see Figure 2.1). Teacher research enabled me to keep track of their learning and respond thoughtfully as the students reconstructed and integrated the curricular structures of project work and workshop through play.

What I Learned

Through this study, I learned a great deal about how children's play influences inquiry and the project work that grows from it, as well as how it can fuel both readers and writers workshop in authentic ways. In our bug project, children's play led them to many literacy opportunities. Content-rich talk permeated their play, affording many possibilities for oral vocabulary development. As part of this play, the children were also continually using different objects to represent something else, thereby practicing a concept foundational to literacy: one thing can stand for another, like letters for sounds. Of course, the students also had lots of experiences with written language: wide reading of nonfiction, construction of class webs and charts, labeling mailboxes and block buildings, writing the Bug Food Restaurant menu and ABC chart, and endless writers workshop little books.

My study supports the idea that play can be viewed as what our Italian colleagues in Reggio Emilia call a "provocation"—something that inspires learning. Playing with insects, building with blocks, creating the Bug Food Restaurant, and making paper airplanes led to more learning than I could ever have imagined. In addition, this study shows that play can be a way in which children meaningfully integrate the curricular structures of classroom life, in this case project work and readers and writers workshops.

Data Source	Data	What Relationships?	Interpretation	Curricular Decision	Research Decision
Children's Talk	Talk about the bug restaurant	Child to Curriculum	Children are using fantasy play and talk to extend their inquiry from bugs to restaurants.	Provide time and guidance for the creation of the bug menu.	Watch for further extensions of inquiry, make note of fantasy, photograph written artifacts, type up children's talk.
Written Artifacts	Bug ABC chart	Child to Curriculum and to Subject of Literacy	Children are merging their project work with the tools used in workshop.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow flexibility; follow children's lead. • Provide materials and guidance for ABC chart construction. 	Note interest in extending project into workshop through materials, photographs, written artifacts; type up children's talk.
Children's Talk	"How do you make a paper airplane?"	Child to Materials and Child to Subject of Airplanes	Using talk to investigate an idea.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide time, space, and materials for further talk and experimentation with paper. • Provide books to support new inquiry. 	Document talk and photograph exploration of materials; record titles of books.
Written Artifacts	Notes to bugs	Child to Curriculum	Children using fantasy to extend project, resulting in merger of workshop with project work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage note writing as new genre; follow children's lead in constructing mailboxes. • Continue to provide time, space, and materials for play. 	Document talk and photograph artifacts; make note of use of fantasy play.
Photographs	Pictures of block constructions of airport	Child to Materials and to Curriculum and Subject of Airplanes	Children using building to make sense of new information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to provide time, space, and materials to explore idea of airplanes and airports. • See if a visit to the airport is possible. 	Document talk and photograph constructions regularly; note use of materials to investigate ideas learned through reading.

Note: Children's relationships with one another are a part of all their work. Here I tried to highlight other kinds of relationships.

Figure 2.1. Relationality chart for Amanda's classroom.

Flaxman (2000) tells us that "[p]lay is a necessary part of growing up" (p. 39). For me it is also a necessary part of classroom life, particularly one in which the child is seen as a capable and competent inquirer. Play is also an essential component in transforming children into literate beings. As Owocki (1999) says, "Play is like a gold mine in its potential for facilitating literacy" (p. 3). This gold mine should be mined daily in all early childhood classrooms to promote meaningful literacy across the day for children. Play is not just important; it is essential.

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© Research Conversations: Focusing on Classroom Talk

WITH AMANDA ANGLE

JUDY: As you know, I am talking about how all the teacher-researchers in our group have developed an interest in one particular kind of research strategy in the course of their work. When I was looking at your work, it struck me that keeping track of children's talk and really looking at their language was an important part of your study. Can you talk a little bit about the history of that, how you came to do that?

AMANDA: When I taught preschool, I taught threes and fours. I was really trying to encourage my threes to talk. I found myself taking pictures of their play and other things they were doing and hanging their pictures up in the room or putting their pictures in binders so they could look at them. I hoped it would start [them] talking, to really get them forming sentences and developing their oral language.

JUDY: And using the children's own experience as a provocation for talk makes sense.

AMANDA: Yes, they loved it. They were very interested. Of course, my four-year-olds were already talking some. But I still sat and listened to them talk. I wrote down their conversations when they played and then read those conversations back to them. It would get them talking and remembering what they [had done] and even get them talking *more* about their experiences. When I came back to kindergarten, I realized how important that was and thought if it was important with threes and fours, it's going to be even more important with fives.

JUDY: It seems that one of the things you learned with your preschool group was that in revisiting their play in the talk you recorded in writing and in photographs, not only did they remember things but the documentation served as a provocation for further thinking. Whereas maybe they would have dropped what they were thinking about, what they were talking about, if you hadn't done this. Talk a little bit about how you started to take down children's talk in your kindergarten classroom.

AMANDA: I would sit with a group of children during free choice time, usually in the block area, sometimes in other places, but usually in blocks.

JUDY: So you did this during free choice time? How about project time?

AMANDA: Well, our project work would happen during free choice time. Usually whatever project we were doing, they would naturally "play" that in free choice time.

JUDY: So this was a natural overlap that the children created.

AMANDA: Absolutely. So I would sit there with my notebook and my camera and I would write down what the children were saying. I would never get concerned about who was saying what. I was just concerned with the conversation going on and what was happening, and having the pictures to go with the dialogue. If I felt it would be useful or if it was a great scenario, I would type up the talk that I wrote down and insert the pictures with them and make a book. The next day before free choice time, we would revisit their play by reading the book together, and it would provoke more play during [free] choice time that day.

JUDY: So you used the book you created from observing their play as a shared reading?

AMANDA: Yes.

JUDY: In your study, “Project Work Meets Workshop,” you refer to Child 1, Child 2, and Child 3. You don’t use names. I guess that this is an artifact of you watching the *group* rather than one individual. This seems important. In American culture we focus so much on the individual; how that individual does lots of things, that individual’s test scores and benchmarks and all that. So this is like one of those times where you really see how a group is doing and how a group is helping each [child] think together, play together, pursue a project or ideas together.

AMANDA: Yes. And I would always write down the [names of the] group of children that was there just in case they weren’t captured in a photo. It was interesting to see if the group grew over time; what was the common thread? Who was the leader? If one of the leaders was absent, sometimes the group would be smaller. It was interesting to see the patterns over time, just by writing down who was playing but not really worrying about who was saying what.

JUDY: It’s so apparent in your study that the *social interactions*, particularly the play of children, drove the project and helped them make these links across the curriculum. They brought play into project [time] and workshop. They moved things around through the social interaction, so it makes sense that the group interaction was important for you to focus on. Can you describe just physically how you recorded children’s talk?

AMANDA: I had a three-ring binder and I would just very informally, and not very neatly, write down what they said. Well, you know, they talk really fast! But two or three times a week I would go to the computer and type up my notes. I didn’t type up every conversation I wrote down. But at least

two or three times a week, I would go to my computer. I put it all in one document so that it ended up being a timeline of the progression of our project in pictures and in dialogue.

JUDY: Did you date the entries?

AMANDA: I dated every conversation in my notebook, but not on the computer, because it was more the evolution I was interested in.

JUDY: But in your notebook?

AMANDA: In my notebook I would date the conversation and write the names of all the kids I was observing at the top of the page.

JUDY: Did you try to get their actual words?

AMANDA: Yes, their direct language, even if it was not Standard English or grammatically correct. I wrote what the children said verbatim.

JUDY: So let me go back to the computer. You had everything in one file and you uploaded the pictures from your camera.

AMANDA: Yes, I took the pictures that matched the dialogue and inserted them in a Word document.

JUDY: It seems like in doing this that you also got a chance to revisit the learning that happened, and you probably noticed things you hadn't noticed even though you were right there taking down the conversation.

AMANDA: Yes, and it helped me when I created the documentation panels that everything was in chronological order. I could just cut and paste the important aspects of the children's work into a PowerPoint, which is what I use to create the panels.

JUDY: You know, Amanda, as you talk it makes me think about what the Reggio educators call the "pedagogy of listening." I wonder if you could talk a bit about how this put you in touch with the kids as opposed to if you were just going through a structured curriculum.

AMANDA: Taking the time to actually sit and listen is so important in getting to know your kids. In the past five years, since there are more and more things coming down from higher up that we *have to do*, [. . .] I've seen my playtime shrink. But I really make a point to take at least thirty minutes a day to just sit and listen. I have a black comfortable chair in my room that is right by where most of [the kids] play, and I just sit there and watch and write down their conversations. Of course, you don't write down conversations every day. It may be one day you have someone on your lap telling you about what they did last night or what they're going to do this weekend. But the relationships that you build and things that you learn

are just amazing. If you don't take the time to do this, if you're always pulling small groups so they can learn their letters or some other skill, you never have these relationships. So I just make it a point that thirty minutes of every day I am just going to sit and listen or have a conversation. It's just like you do when you go to the coffeehouse with your friends, just a conversation about life. Because if you don't know the children, you can't really reach them academically anyway.

JUDY: So it's almost like a relational investment in the children. An investment that you want to make both because you're a human being and you want to know who they are and also because in the end it helps you instruct them in even the most discrete things like you suggested, like learning their letters.

AMANDA: Right. And it just lets them know that you care. They're only five and six years old. They need to know that you really care about them. I feel like once they realize that, then they talk to you all the time during the day. So you can sit with them and conference about their writing in writers workshop, but at the same time they're telling you lots of other things about themselves—because you have that kind of relationship.

JUDY: So even in workshop you end up learning more about them because of the listening you've done earlier. I wonder if that even promotes a different kind of writing. They are talking to you more, which is giving them all kinds of oral language practice, which we all know helps them in their writing. But they're also maybe more willing to talk about a wider variety of things with someone who really cares about them. I would imagine that would help generate ideas.

AMANDA: Yes, and I feel that there is just so much now going on with accountability, and it's not that I don't think we should be accountable. We should be. But one of the things that happens is that school is more pressured and there is the pressure to move—BOOM, BOOM, BOOM—through the day. I feel that the children need to know that I am their teacher, that I am going to take the time to sit and talk with them, joke around, and play.

JUDY: Ms. Angle is going to pay attention to us.

AMANDA: I have heard many of my colleagues in the past few years get really frustrated during choice or playtime because they think it's just this crazy, chaotic time when the kids are just running around and chasing each other. Sometimes I wonder what *they* are doing during that time. I know

that if I sit at [my] computer or [am] busy with something, the children start thinking, what's the point of what I am doing right now?

JUDY: So you validate the activity of play for them.

AMANDA: Yes, and they are engaged and purposeful in their interactions.

JUDY: This is one of the things we've talked about in our teacher research group, the idea that the data collection process actually benefits children. It reminds me, of course, of the Reggio educators, who believe that when we observe children, they come to know how important they are. Observing is a way of honoring them. You're observing them because it's interesting, because you're curious, because you want to know them. You care about them.

AMANDA: I want them to play and interact with each other nicely on a daily basis. I don't want them to do it when I just happen to be sitting and watching them. I want it to be a natural thing for them.

JUDY: It also seems from your work that that regular time for play is what allows them to bring their other work into play, like their project work and their readers and writers workshop books.

AMANDA: Yes, and you wonder what their play would look like if they didn't have large blocks of time to play regularly.

JUDY: You wonder if they would develop these cross-curricular connections, or a sustained interest in something. The Reggio educators talk a lot about the use of space and time, and it occurs to me that what you are doing with your observation and taking down children's talk, with your listening, is that you are creating space and time for children to use play to make sense of a lot of what goes on in school and what goes on in their worlds.

AMANDA: Yes, most recently they are playing "city bus." I don't know if someone has been on a bus recently, but they'll set all the chairs up in lines and rows. Somebody's the driver and they've got the blocks for the pedals. When you ask them where they're going, some of them are going to the mall and they've all got tickets. Someone in the group knows the procedures. It's a bus that has seatbelts, because they all have blocks on their laps for seatbelts. Whether it's classroom things or things in the world, it is their time to figure out this crazy world.

JUDY: They have time to sustain an interest, like this exploration of the city bus or in the work you did in the bug project, where they continually built in the block area these bug cities. If they didn't have regular time, what would that work have looked like?

Well, Amanda, I wonder if you have any tips for teachers, something you might tell people interested in doing this kind of observation and documentation as a part of teacher research work.

AMANDA: I would just say that if you skip out on doing the observations, the listening, and the noticing of children's talk, it's going to hurt you in the long run, especially in terms of community. I'll never forget my first year of teaching. I had a tough group. They were great individual kids, but they had so much trouble being together. I remember, with the help of colleagues I spent a couple of months integrating all my literacy work with building community. Had I not spent the time doing that I really don't think there would have been much learning that year. If you don't take the time to sit and listen, know your kids, and build trust, those academic skills are never going to happen. The kids that I am working with now don't have a lot of adults in their lives that they can trust. It takes a long time to build that trust, longer than any of us would like. But if you don't build that trust, they're not going to get their letters or numbers and they're not going to care. If you don't show them that you care, why should they care?

JUDY: Observation, listening, and creating documentation as a part of your day lets them know you care.

AMANDA: Yes.

JUDY: Well, that sounds like a great place to stop. Thank you, Amanda.

The challenges and rewards of early childhood education come alive in this collection of narratives by a community of nascent teacher-researchers who share their investigations of enacting literacy workshops in Reggio-inspired classrooms. Teacher educator Judith T. Lysaker and her classroom teacher colleagues observed and documented their students' talk, actions, ideas, and play in order to develop insights into young children's literacy learning, improve their own instruction, and move the voices of children to the center of the curriculum.

In classrooms infused with the child-centered approach practiced by the educators of Reggio Emilia, Italy, these teachers sought to make connections between the curricular construct of reading and writing workshops and their Reggio-inspired beliefs. Their narratives highlight issues of content, especially new understandings they developed about the importance of relationships, as well as issues of process, the ways in which they developed their ideas through the practice of teacher research. Each narrative chapter is followed by a "Research Conversation" that illustrates the ways in which teacher research becomes personally relevant classroom practice that connects teachers to children and children to their own growing knowledge.

As these teachers pursue their individual research questions, they model the rich potential of teacher research: teacher empowerment, student empowerment, and supportive instruction that sees and encourages the possibilities in every child.

Educators often feel they are standing with one foot in the world of effective literacy practice and one in the world of supporting children's intellectual growth. Judy Lysaker opens a window into the thinking of a remarkable group of teachers who bridge these worlds as they nurture their students' literacy growth through meaningful, inquiry-based experiences. In-depth case studies in real classrooms show the harmony between how the teachers value their own process of research and inquiry and the in-depth thinking of their students. *Teacher Inquiry in Literacy Workshops* provides a much-needed focus on what is truly important in supporting children as readers, writers, and thinkers.

—Matt Glover, author of *Engaging Young Writers*

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