

Teacher Research Initiatives

Inquiry Work by Early Childhood Teachers

Teacher research is increasingly recognized nationally and internationally as a critical part of early childhood professional development and noted for its role in advancing knowledge about teaching and learning. This section of Voices of Practitioners highlights the wide range of early childhood teacher research initiatives and inquiry communities through brief summaries. They include contact information for educators interested in learning more about specific project goals and methods. Teacher Research Initiatives is an ongoing series in which we will post new projects as we receive them. The four projects that follow are excellent examples of recent and ongoing inquiry work.

To submit a summary of your teacher research, contact Gail Perry, gperry@naeyc.org.

National Association for the Education of Young Children

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**Las Americas Early Learning School Teacher Research Initiative:
San Francisco Unified School District and
San Francisco State University Collaborative**

Isauro Michael Escamilla
San Francisco, California

After a year of close collaboration with Professor Daniel Meier, from San Francisco State University, our Teacher Research Inquiry Group has accomplished several objectives in accordance with the goals we set.

The group comprises seven members: two head teachers, one support teacher, two associate teachers, and two assistant teachers from the Las Americas Child Development Center. All are bilingual in English and Spanish, Cantonese, or Mandarin. With different areas of expertise in the early childhood education field, some members have worked only four years in the classroom, while others have been teaching for almost 20 years.

We meet about once a month, for one hour and a half, to discuss the progress of our class projects and the content of assigned readings. In order to create a common experience, we decided to read *Learning from Young Children in the Classroom: The Art and Science of Teacher Research* (Meier & Henderson 2007) to help us reflect about our job as educators, develop a common professional language, learn specific data collection strategies, and further our understanding of classroom-based research.

Each teacher received a copy of the book; a teaching journal in which to record the development of class projects, observations, and pedagogical reflections; a notebook for note taking during meetings; a calendar; folders; and one digital camera per classroom, in addition to a tape recorder and a computer.

An important aspect of the inquiry group is the relaxed atmosphere of our meetings with teacher-researcher Isauro Michael Escamilla, who serves as group coordinator. The meetings are not mandatory and have become a forum for presenting ongoing projects to colleagues, including samples of children's work, emerging documentation panels, and the challenges members face in moving the projects forward. During the meetings, we give and receive constructive feedback, ideas, and strategies, and we set goals for the next meeting.

More than anything else, these meetings have given us the framework to acquire a common language. They offer the opportunity to learn or redefine the meaning of the terms *observations*, *reflective practice*, *pedagogical reflections*, *teaching journal*, *documentation of children's learning experiences*, *classroom-based inquiry*, and *active listening*, to name a few.

Although most of the staff has embraced the principles of teacher research and the role of the teacher as observer, recorder, and interpreter of children's learning experiences, the premise of teacher research remains the provocation of thought. Perhaps this is because embracing the role of teachers as researchers invalidates the view of teachers being unable to engage in deep thinking or construct theories. In many ways, teacher research explodes the myth of teachers as holders of knowledge and students as recipients of information. It encourages critical thinking, along with self-reflection, as common teaching practice.

One of the themes to emerge from our discussions is how to listen to the children and to ourselves. This theme has led us to explore the *pedagogy of listening* in the teacher research context (Rinaldi 2006). The more we investigate this topic, the more we discover that the traditional roles of teacher and learner as opposites tend to come together and blend. The inquiry process helps us understand that these roles can and should be interchangeable.

Being a part of the inquiry group gives us each a sense of responsibility not only toward the children but also toward one another. Thus, when we commit to carrying out a specific task, most of us tend to follow through and come fully prepared to the next meeting.

These gatherings may also count as professional growth hours toward fulfilling SF CARES (San Francisco Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Educational Standards) requirements for obtaining a monetary stipend once a year. As an additional incentive for attending and actively participating in these meetings, Professor Meier is to investigate how staff could gain one unit of college credit for every 15 hours of professional development through San Francisco State University or Community College of San Francisco.

References

- Meier, D.R., & B. Henderson. 2007. *Learning from Young Children in the Classroom: The Art and Science of Teacher Research*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- Rinaldi, C. 2006. *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching, and Learning*. London: Routledge.

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Making Learning Visible at the Lee Academy Pilot School

2009–2010

Ben Mardell

Boston, Massachusetts

For the past three years, the Lee Academy Pilot School, a pre-K through grade 5 Boston Public School, has partnered with the staff of the Making Learning Visible Project—a research project of Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education—to promote learning communities among children and adults. During the 2009–2010 academic year, instructional coach Marina Boni of the Early Childhood Division of Boston Public Schools joined our effort. We are focusing on how to best support conversations and storytelling among the 3- to 5-year-old children in the school’s early academy.

Our guiding inquiry questions are,

- How can teachers best support the oral language development of a diverse group of young children at an urban public school?
- How can a school faculty come together to build knowledge and improve their instructional practices?

Every other week, Marina or Ben Mardell and Mara Krechevsky, staff of the Making Learning Visible Project, facilitate a discussion among the six preschool teachers and two kindergarten teachers during their common planning time, a forty-five-minute period during the school day. Teachers take turns bringing a question about their practice and a related artifact to these meetings. For example, a teacher who wondered what questions to ask to extend his students’ conversations brought a transcript of a conversation from his class. A teacher wanting to refine her prompts to promote storytelling brought a videotape of her eliciting a story from a child.

The protocol guiding our conversations includes the following steps:

- The presenting teacher describes her question and provides a brief context for the artifact she is sharing.
- Teachers carefully review the artifact, make observations, and discuss the material the presenting teacher shared.
- The teachers answer the presenting teacher’s questions.
- During a few minutes of silent, individual reflection time, the teachers consider the feedback provided during the session and think about how it might influence their teaching practice. The facilitators encourage the teachers to share their reflections.

Each session builds on the preceding session’s conversation. Teachers report on strategies related to the previous meeting’s topic that they have tried, and they discuss new questions that have emerged.

Kindergarten teacher Erin Daly feels that the time to reflect at the end of the conversation, even if only a few minutes, is very valuable, giving her a chance to plan how she can move her practice forward. Preschool teacher David Ramsey appreciates the chance to talk to colleagues about teaching and learning.

Building knowledge and influencing practice through collaborative teacher research requires a culture in which teachers are accountable to themselves and each other. The facilitators, Marina, Ben, and Mara, support this culture in several ways. As noted above, we bring teachers’ ideas and practice to the forefront by beginning each session with teachers’ descriptions of how they have tried to support conversations and storytelling in their classrooms since the last meeting. We reproduce the teachers’ insights in several documents (for example, a list of prompts for supporting storytelling) and bring these documents back to the group for feedback. We check in with the teachers—individually and as a group—to see if there are ways our work can better support their teaching.

Given the multiple demands teachers face, helping them focus on one topic is a challenge. However, real learning comes when teachers have opportunities to carefully track, collect evidence, and reflect on one aspect of children’s learning over time. It is a process for which teacher research is well suited.



For questions concerning this project, please contact Ben Mardell at ben_mardell@pz.harvard.edu.

For more information, visit *Making Learning Visible: Understanding, Documenting, and Supporting Individual and Group Learning* at www.pz.harvard.edu/mlv. See also Project Zero & Reggio Children’s *Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners* (Cambridge, MA: Project Zero, 2001).

Information about the Lee Academy can be found at www.bostonpublicschools.org/files/reportcards/SCH4291.pdf.



Kent State University Child Development Center, Ongoing Teacher Research

Carol Bersani

Kent, Ohio

The teachers at the Kent State University Child Development Center, a laboratory school for children 18 months through kindergarten, are engaged in teacher research with children and families about the nature of relationships formed in the outdoors. The context for this research is a campus full of hills, trees, and gardens and an adjacent wetland area with a variety of plant and animal life, creeks, ponds, and woods.

The goals of our project are to understand the child’s approach to natural outdoor spaces, to engage families in dialogue regarding the value of nature experiences, and to support preservice teachers’ knowledge of the integrated learning opportunities when children explore natural spaces on campus, in the wetlands, on the school playground, and in their own neighborhoods.

The following are some of our findings:

- As small groups of children and teachers explore natural places, they can listen to each other on a level not always possible indoors. This ability to listen closely to others supports the group decision-making, negotiation, and problem solving experiences that naturally occur in the outdoors.
- As the children establish their own landmarks in the outdoors, they begin to form an identity with these outdoor places (for example, a drainpipe covered by a grill becomes “a bear cage”; a group of trees becomes the “whispering woods”). In these places, the children engage in rich, imaginative storytelling that blends science and fantasy. They also desire to bring the outdoors back to their classroom through dramatic play and the creation of maps of the wetland using the landmarks as points of reference.
- Children engage in more positive risk-taking in the outdoors. They test their physical capabilities and share their thinking and stories. We observe that children who engage in less verbal communication indoors often become eager to talk when outdoors. Individual learning styles often become more visible in the outdoors.
- Children are able to slow down, observe carefully, explore intentionally, and make many discoveries that are later shared with other children and adults. Gardening on the playground becomes an opportunity for children to study the life cycle of plants.

- Children become caretakers of their outdoor environments. They develop habits related to honoring and protecting the natural environment. In a book written by a group of preschoolers, they stated their rights and responsibilities in the outdoors (for example, “We never pick anything that is living”).

As the children document their encounters in the outdoors and represent their findings through drawing, painting, and other forms of expression, they begin to understand the connectedness of all living things.

These teacher-and-child research projects depend on a support system for conducting teacher research with children. Teachers have studied teacher research methodology, including framing the question, observing and documenting, interpreting, and communicating findings. They have organized themselves into critical friends groups, small groups of teachers exploring a particular aspect of the schoolwide nature studies—for example, two teachers are studying the ways toddlers and preschoolers communicate their findings to each other about the birds that feed just outside their windows. Other aspects of the support system include resource people to support the process of teacher research and time for study together.

One of our research projects was published in the July 2009 issue of *Young Children* (“We Need a Way to Get to the Other Side: Exploring the Possibilities for Learning in Natural Spaces,” by Galizio, Stoll, and Hutchins). We also share research projects with families and visitors by displaying collaborative hallway panels that communicate the importance of outdoor explorations for young children’s learning.

On Our Rights and Responsibilities in the Meadow

*All children have the right to run down the hill
 All children have the right to play in the meadow
 All children have to keep themselves safe
 All children have the right to hold hands
 All children have the right to check on each other
 All children have the right to sing
 We love each other!
 We love each other!
 We love each other!*

*When we go to the meadow, we stay together. We hold hands
 until we are past the parking lot.
 We take care of each other.
 We never pick anything that is living, but we can pick up leaves
 or plants that have fallen.
 We don't kill anything in the meadow.
 We always pick up trash.
 We go to the places we love and play there.
 We always draw in our sketchbooks to remember.*

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For questions about this project, please contact Carol Bersani, Associate Professor, Director, Kent State University Child Development Center, at cbersani@kent.edu.



RECESS—Reflective Early Childhood Educators' Social Seminar

Jeff Daitsman

Chicago, Illinois

The term *research-based practices* often refers to the practice of teaching based on theories and philosophies rooted in a scientific understanding of children's early development. But as theories become more abstract, so too do the researchers developing them. Educational research thus moves farther away from the practical classroom applications of the theory. In order for there to be research-based practices, there needs to be practical research.

One form of practical research comes from practicing teachers. Teachers who reflect on their practices and consider the implications not only for their own classroom, but for others as well, can make unique contributions to the field of education. By collaborating with other reflective teachers, teacher researchers gain insights about the minds of the children they teach and about methods of improving classroom practices.

It is in this vein that the Reflective Early Childhood Educators' Social Seminar (RECESS) was created. A collective of reflective teachers of young children in the Chicago area, we dedicated ourselves to improving the quality of education in our classrooms. Through visiting each other's sites and regular meetings, RECESS members shared teaching experiences to gain a greater understanding of our students and how they learn.

Each member of the group investigated a particular focusing question in his or her classroom. When we met, we focused on one of these questions. We shared stories of our classroom experiences as they related to the topic of inquiry and raised questions based on these stories. As we discussed the questions, group members gained insight not only into the investigation presented at the meeting, but also into their own question as it related to the topic.

After each meeting we wrote up the stories we shared and the summaries of our discussions and posted them to the website at <http://sites.google.com/site/areaarsig/Home/action-research-world/recess>, where they can be accessed for review.

Here are some examples:

- Allison Ashley of Covenant Nursery School investigated how teachers can create an atmosphere where children's questions and exploration are encouraged and welcome.

- Jeff Daitsman of McGaw YMCA Children’s Center investigated children’s understanding of the concept of death.
- Pearl Frantz of North Park Preschool investigated how aggressive play can be positively implemented in a preschool classroom.
- Roxanne Junge of Glenview New Church Preschool investigated the impact of nature on children’s aggressive behavior.



For more information, contact Jeff Daitsman at revdolphin@gmail.com.



MSIP—Math and Science Inquiry Project for ECE Teachers

September 2009–June 2010

Judy Kysh and Daniel Meier

San Francisco, California

Math and Science Inquiry Project (MSIP) consisted of a group of seven early childhood educators focusing on aspects of math and science learning for young children. The group formed in September 2009 and was coordinated by Drs. Judy Kysh and Daniel Meier of San Francisco State University. It was funded by a grant from the Center for Math and Science Education at San Francisco State University. The group was composed of three teachers from a campus-based preschool (who work with infants to preschoolers), two preschool directors, a kindergarten teacher, and a community outreach coordinator at a local children's museum.

Project goals

- To support improvement in teaching science and mathematics by working with teachers to develop their understanding of the subject matter and implementation of teaching methods
- To help group members develop skills for conducting their own classroom-based research on effective science and mathematics instruction
- To build a community of teacher researchers in local schools who share their research and provide the leadership to sustain an inquiry group of supportive colleagues

Project activities

Each project member received a stipend for participating in this yearlong inquiry group. Group members also received complimentary copies of two texts on inquiry/teacher research. In addition, they attended a mathematics education conference at Asilomar, California, to provide additional background on current mathematics instruction.

The group met once a month for two hours. Each project member brought a piece of the data from their particular math/science inquiry focus that they conducted at their sites. Two group members who teach together collaborated

on their data collection. Project group meetings included discussion of key ideas and methods from our two inquiry texts.

The group meetings served as a way to focus on issues of data collection, data analysis, development of peer support and feedback, and final research project dissemination. Each participant wrote a short report on their inquiry project at year's end. Six members of the group have submitted a proposal to the Teacher as Researcher Special Interest Group at the 2011 Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

Project findings include:

1. The varied nature of the group (from teachers to administrators to a museum outreach coordinator) promoted an intriguing range of perspectives on children's math/science learning as well as the inquiry process
2. The combination of data samples and the reading of sections of the two inquiry texts helped integrate data and analysis/reflection
3. The age/developmental range (from infants to kindergartners) of the group participants provided data on children's math/science learning across the 0–8 age span
4. This kind of inquiry project served as an important form of professional development for promoting math/science knowledge and inquiry methods
5. The project provided opportunities for cross-site discussion and collaboration.



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