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Denise Jean Cross
Whitney Young Early Childhood Center

Terri J. Swim
Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne, swimt@ipfw.edu

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A Scholarly Partnership for Examining the Pragmatics of Scholarly Partnership and Reggio-Inspired Practices: Provocations, Documentation, and Time

By Denise Jean Cross, Whitney Young Early Childhood Center, Fort Wayne Community Schools, & Terri Jo Swim, Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne

Abstract
Two competing perspectives of the child, one involving needs and the other as having rights, result in differential educational practices for young children. The authors conducted a collaborative, pragmatic action research project in a kindergarten classroom to investigate how documentation made for and by children could be used to facilitate learning. The pulley project was analyzed from the “rich child” perspective and resulted in our understanding 1) how children use documentation designed for and by them to guide their work, 2) how teachers need to support provocations from a number of sources, and 3) the importance of time for facilitating learning for all children. The results of this study are contrasted with the “needy child” perspective, the predominate view of education in the United States.

A child does not thrive on what [she] is prevented from doing, but on what [she] actually does.
— Marcelene Cox

Indeed, education without research or innovation is education without interest.
— Loris Malaguzzi

Introduction
As teachers, our educational approaches are inspired by the infant/toddler and preschool programs in the municipal of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Denise has taught in a large, urban school district for 13 years, eight years in multi-age primary classrooms, and the past
five years in an early childhood program (i.e., preschool and kindergarten) that is Reggio inspired. Since the program opened in fall 2001, she and her colleagues have engaged in ongoing research, questioning, discussing, and collaboration on how to implement the Reggio Emilia philosophy within the parameters of a public school system. This work has evolved into collaborative classroom research and study groups.

Terri began her investigation of the schools in Reggio Emilia in 1996 as she was finishing her doctoral program, at the suggestion of the director of the University of Texas at Austin laboratory school, Carol Armg. This initial introduction sparked great interest, but an intentional, focused examination was not undertaken until she began teaching at a university in Ohio. There, she was surrounded by colleagues and community members who shared her interest and engaged in provocative dialogue and discussion through a study group. In 2003, she traveled to Italy for a weeklong study tour of the infant/toddler and preschool programs. Her understanding of this approach led her to change her approach to teaching college students. As an outgrowth of this, Denise and Terri forged a scholarly partnership that resulted in one of Terri’s curriculum courses being taught on site at Denise’s school. The partnership also created space for this pragmatic action research study.

This project brings into view the rigorous process of reflection that Denise engages to ensure her own professional abilities are developed as a way to ensure learning equity for all of her early childhood students. As a scholarly partnership, this project examines the implications of two views of children (“needy child” and “rich child”) as identified by Moss, Dillon, and Statham (2000) and shows the problem with the prevailing outlook in the United States of a “child in need.” We take a stance for a “rich child” view as a teacher’s right as well as a child’s right.

Our Philosophical Stance: Informed by the “Rich Child” Perspective

Each person holds an image of the child that is influenced by their own experiences, identity, and society in which they inhabit. This image enables a person to recognize or not recognize certain qualities, value or devalue particular characteristics, and support or deny the potential of children (Rinaldi, 2001). For Italians, the image of the child includes the child as rich in resources, strong, and competent; they each have preparedness, potential, curiosity, and interest in relationships and constructing knowledge (Gandini, 2004; Rinaldi, 1998). Carlina Rinaldi (2001) elaborates by stating:

In synthesis, our image is of a child who is competent, active, and critical; therefore, a child who may be seen as a challenge and, sometimes, as troublesome. In some ways, this child is not easy. This child is a person, she is involved, both in the family system and in the social system. Think of how much could change in this society, when a child emerges as a
subject of life, a social subject, a citizen emerging on the social, political, and cultural scene as a subject of life and not only of need. To us, the child is a producer of culture, values, and rights, competent in learning and competent in communicating with all the hundred languages (p. 51).

This belief in the richness of children compels teachers and schools to consider that “[c]hildren’s rights should be recognized, not only their needs. Children have the right to high-quality care and education that supports the development of their potentials” (Gandini, 2004, p. 16). One crucial aspect of a quality program is carefully listening to the children before making educational decisions.

Pedagogy of listening and documentation. The “pedagogy of listening” distinguishes the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, from educational approaches at other schools (Rinaldi, 2001) because of the way the term “listening” is defined. Listening is about having the openness and sensitivity to listen with all of our senses, not just our ears; about listening outside of chronological time, allowing silences, long pauses, and quick movement; and about listening with deep awareness, and at the same time, without judgment (Rinaldi, 2001). Listening is akin to dancing as teachers carefully listen to the children as the basis for creating responsive curriculum that supports and facilitates learning for each child.

The pedagogy of listening, then, is closely tied to the rights of children. As Gandini and Goldhaber (2001) state, “All children have potential, albeit in different ways, to learn and to develop their own ideas, theories, and strategies. All children also have the right to be supported in these endeavors by adults. Teachers and parents, therefore, should observe and listen to them” (p. 125). When teachers allocate their attention and really listen to the children, they afford the time and the right to learn, and furthermore, embody respect for the work.

Documentation provides evidence of listening — it is the traces that make visible the children’s and teachers’ learning. Documentation is not merely observing or the recording of observations for later assessment; it is the construction and reconstruction of events, learning, and interpretations through the use of transcriptions, slides, photographs, work samples, videos (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001; Rinaldi, 2001). When documentation is prepared, it provides insight into the children’s work as well as the teachers’ work; it is used for understanding as well as being understood (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). The documentation becomes a “tool of the mind” for remembering, reflecting, revisiting, and learning and relearning as new ideas are explored in relation to the old ones (Forman, 1999; Forman & Fyfe, 1998; Hong & Broderick, 2003; Rinaldi, 1998). Documentation, then, not only provides a memory trace of past and current ideas, but it also sparks new ideas, and therefore, new directions for learning.
Curriculum. Teachers in Reggio Emilia use a flexible approach to curriculum, called *progettazione*, which involves laying out general educational objectives, but not specific goals for each project or activity, in advance (Rinaldi, 1998). Instead, the teachers meet at the initiation of a project to collaboratively formulate hypotheses of what could happen on the basis of their knowledge of the children, of their previous experiences. They discuss all of the possible ways that the work might evolve, preparing them for subsequent stages of teaching and learning, while leaving space for changes, unexpected events, and digressions (Rinaldi, 1998). Teachers carefully reflect on the children’s interests but also consider what they think will contribute to the children’s growth; in that way, the flexible plan is co-constructed by teachers and children (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). In addition, the teachers understand that they are not the only ones to provide provocations that facilitate learning: parents and children are encouraged to provide ideas, materials, questions, and otherwise engage in sociocognitive conflicts which influence classroom processes (New, 1998; Spaggiari, 1998). As such, the *progettazione* is not organized around a scripted curriculum or standards but rather projects provide the basic structure of children’s and teachers’ learning experiences because projects demonstrate that “…learning by doing is of great importance and that to discuss in groups, as well as to revisit ideas and experiences, is the premier way of gaining better understanding and learning” (Gandini, 2004, p. 23).

Wurm (2005) explains that there are four types of projects, which tend to overlap in practice, that teachers and children in Reggio engage in on a regular basis. The four types of projects are intended, daily life, self-managed, and environmental projects. In our study, the pulley project began as an environmental project, moved into an intentional project, and finished as an environmental project. Environmental projects are inherently built into the classroom as part of the learning environment (Wurm, 2005). In other words, these projects emerge directly from the space and materials in which the children live and work. Children investigate light and shadows, for example, because of the availability of a light table and materials that are opaque or transparent. Teachers support the emergence of intentional projects when they carefully observe and attend to the children’s environmental projects and provide provocations to extend the children’s thinking. An important feature of any project is the recognition that the social construction of knowledge takes time.

Time. In Reggio, time is valued; some projects last a couple of days while another may last multiple months or even years. Time, therefore, means allowing children the opportunity to explore materials and ideas in their own time both individually and with one another (Wurm, 2005). “One has to respect the time of…development; of the tools of doing and understanding; [and] of the full, slow, extravagant, lucid, and ever-changing emergence of children’s capacities” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 80). Children co-
construct their understanding and learn through their social interactions with each other and adults. Teachers are respectful of children's time, giving them the time they need to process information, to come to a new level of understanding, and to construct new knowledge (Tarini & White, 1998). Some children will immediately begin to explore and manipulate a new medium, such as clay, while others will hang back and watch. Watching is one way to learn — to construct meaningful knowledge. If the time the clay is available is limited to a day or two, all children are denied the richest opportunities for learning. Teachers must listen for clues about each child's approach to the materials and thus what time means for the individual children.

In addition, teachers engage in the practice of asking a provocative question and then waiting hours, days, or weeks to revisit the question and discuss answers (Wurm, 2005). The underlying assumption is that the teacher has provided ingredients and they will simmer in the children's minds without adult intervention.

**Our Methodological Stance: Scholar-Practitioners Engaged in Pragmatic Action Research**

Teachers, in Reggio, have the right to learn and continually grow in their competencies — to transform experiences into thoughts, thoughts into reflections, and reflections into new thoughts and new actions (Malaguzzi, 1998). They, then, are viewed as “rich” in a manner that is similar to the children; they are competent, capable, and possess the capacity to continually develop as professionals. The primary avenue for ongoing professional development is for teachers to research events occurring in their own classrooms. Malaguzzi (1998) elaborates by saying that teachers must “…feel a need to make predictions, to try things out, and then interpret them…. Teachers must learn to interpret ongoing processes rather than wait to evaluate results” (p. 73). He was clearly describing how teachers should engage in action research, from a scholar-practitioner stance.

**Scholar-Practitioners.** Scholar-practitioners continually test theory against practice, and vice versa, in an attempt to improve instruction, and therefore, schools for children (Mullen, 2002). According to Horn (2002), “Scholar-practitioners [are those who] engage in the interplay between theory and practice” (p. 83). In this pragmatic action research project, we reflected on our practices that support children’s rights to have a voice in their learning, through documentation, and how this influenced their learning.

Reflection in practice (Pedro, 2005; Schon, 1995, 1990) has been well developed in literature and is antecedent to the scholar-practitioner's perspective (Jenlink, 2002). The Reggio-inspired teachers are scholar-practitioners as characterized by repeatedly reflecting on their and the children's actions, reading and re-reading the literature to better understand children and approaches to education, questioning and re-questioning their classroom action, and evaluating and re-evaluating educational outcomes with the goal.
of facilitating learning for each child (Pedro, 2005; Schon, 1995, 1990). Drawing on the hermeneutical tradition, reflective teachers invest energies in understanding and making meaning of their practices, both for themselves and the children within the everyday life world in which they live. Thus, they often read research studies to understand teaching and learning on the micro — or classroom — level, their everyday life world. During these investigations, the primary foci for the teachers are generating and reflecting on “knowledge in the form of interpretative understanding which can inform and guide practical judgment” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 135). While issues relevant to democracy are a part of the history and philosophical grounds of the schools in Reggio Emilia, the primary emphasis is on teachers being reflective researchers and practitioners (Malaguzzi, 1998). Thus, the role of reflection to support child-directed learning projects defined the work of the scholar-practitioner teacher-researchers in the Reggio Emilia–inspired school and in this pragmatic action research project.

**Pragmatic Action Research.** This study employed a pragmatic action research design as we united “theory and praxis in an integrated knowledge construction process” (Levin & Greenwood, 2001, p. 104) to learn more about actual, not abstract, practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). The task we undertook was to better understand Denise’s construction of meaning in the context being studied (i.e., her classroom), because it is this construction that constitute her social realities and underlie her actions as an educator (Greene, 2000).

To accomplish this, we engaged in “planned inquiry — a deliberate search for truth, information, or knowledge” (Schmuck, 1997, p. 28). Such research designs involve a rigorous spiral of cycling between action and self-reflection: planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change; reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then re-planning, acting and observing, reflecting, and so on (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Marshall, 2001; Schmuck, 1997). In the case of this study, the process was designed for the teacher and her students to exercise their educational rights.

This method blends self-reflective inquiry (i.e., internal and subjective) and inquiry-oriented practice (i.e., external and data based; Schmuck, 1997). Scholar-practitioners engaged in a pragmatic action research project ask probing questions of themselves as they implement the project and ask reflective questions of the data once it is collected. The meanings constructed during these inquiry processes lead to “reflections in action” (e.g., thinking critically about one’s actions in the midst of action) and “reflections on actions” (e.g., thinking critically about one’s actions after they have had an effect), which results in the construction of new meanings (Levin & Greenwood, 2001; Schon, 1995, 1990). This recursive cycle of action and reflection is less likely to be engaged in as a lock-step, scientific ritual, but rather it is engaged in a fluid, open, and responsive
manner. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Marshall, 2001). For our project, Denise and Terri engaged in individual and collaborative reflections. The latter resulted in real and material changes in our knowledge and values because both parties’ contributions were taken seriously (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Levin & Greenwood, 2001).

**A Reflective Analysis of Documentation in a Reggio-Inspired Program — Denise Cross**

My initial questions which guided this inquiry were: how could documentation be made for and with the children, and how could the children use the documentation to lead their own investigations. The collaborative interactions between Terri and me as co-scholar-practitioners led to the questions of how the newly acquired information impacted our thinking, actions, and values, especially when considering the effect of documentation on our conceptualization of school readiness.

As with any action research project, our study is bound by time, place, and our educational philosophies (Creswell, 2002). I am a kindergarten teacher in a Reggio-inspired early childhood center within a large urban school district in the Midwest. The children in my school represent diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, in 2004, 49 percent of the children were white, 29 percent black, 15 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Asian, and 3 percent multiracial. Forty-seven percent of the children received free or reduced lunches.

As stated previously, the early childhood education center in which I teach was opened in 2001. Much research and professional development ensued as my colleagues and I began to investigate what the Reggio approach meant to us. We found ourselves fascinated by the 100 Languages Exhibit and documentation we saw in the model schools we visited. Our challenge became identifying the purpose behind documentation. We discovered we had to consider what to document, how to display it, our audience, the specific purpose behind each documentation panel, and finally, how to find the time to do it.

Our use of documentation has evolved over the past three years from simple visual and written “reports” of classroom activities to large panels, which include students with teacher dialogue and the state standards being addressed in students’ work. As we began to collect huge amounts of data on students’ projects, our staff learned to collaborate not only on telling the story, but what questions to ask to extend learning and how to help students make connections. Next, we discovered that it was important to find ways to include the children’s and teacher’s theories, thought processes, and dialogue — our collective voice. As our understanding and practice of documentation evolved, we broadened our “toolbox” to incorporate digital slide shows, area journals, and PowerPoint presentations. This enabled us to reflect more clearly on how children
learned; as a result, this reflection helped inform our teaching and guided our efforts to scaffold students’ learning. As I analyze my written reflections from the past three years, I can construct rich resources of knowledge about documentation and its effective use in the child-directed learning process.

Early in the 2004–2005 school year, however, my documentation took a new direction. As I reflected on our past documentation with Mrs. Sanders, our art teacher, we began to wonder how we could make documentation panels for and with the children. This was a change in our targeted audience; previous panels had always been created for adults. This led us to another question; how can children use documentation in their work and what format will they be most comfortable with?

Each morning we begin with a slide show of digital pictures from the day before to remind students of their previous day’s work and help them make connections to each other’s work. We were very excited in early October when some of the students’ projects began to carry over from day to day.

One of these projects began at the woodworking center where I observed Trenton making a Batman Hook to help lift supplies in and out of the bat cave. Each day I stopped to see Trenton’s work and he shared his progress. Unfortunately, on the third day I could see Trenton becoming quite frustrated with his project. When I asked him to show it to me, he explained it wouldn’t work and that things kept falling off of the sides of it.

Fearing Trenton was about to give up on his project I suggested he take a break and try something else for a while. I asked a parent volunteer to take Trenton and a group of his friends out to play in our gravel pit. I knew it had a pail and pulley system and wondered if using it would give Trenton any new ideas. Trenton ran into the room 20 minutes later announcing he had a new idea and could he please go to the art room for supplies. This provocation gave Trenton an idea and he rushed to redesign his project.

As I reflect back on Trenton’s project, I can see the importance of several key aspects our Reggio-inspired program has helped me incorporate into my teaching practices. One key component is the image of the child. As I have learned to view each child as capable and competent, my respect for their ability to solve problems on their own has helped me to stand back and allow them to take risks. I have discovered they often learn as much or more from the trials and experiments that do not work as from their final project.

Time is another key component of our program. In my previous teaching experiences
I would have pushed Trenton to move on to other assignments, but I have learned to give students the time they need to explore, create, test, rebuild, and retest a theory. Trenton was allowed to spend three days of his choice time working on his initial “Batman Hook.” Many teachers would not see the value of Trenton working with one half of a cardboard hoop and pieces of twine for several days.

Creating a learning environment that is child-directed rather than teacher-directed has given my students the power to construct their own knowledge. Rather than distribute knowledge, I now use provocations to help extend student interests and experiences and help them make connections. The next section shows how children can also be a source of provocations.

Using a margarine dish, dowel rod, twine, and ribbon spool, Trenton created his new Batman Hook. Trenton’s new design was a basket and pulley system. At the end of the day Trenton demonstrated and explained his project to his classmates. They were very impressed and one excited friend commented, “That’s cool. It would work in my fort on my swing set.” That was all it took to set things in motion. The following morning, when students arrived, we began our normal routine of daily slide show and morning meeting. My assistant and I had created a separate slide show about Trenton’s project showing pictures of his first invention, Trenton struggling to make it work, his trip to the gravel pit, the new design, and his demonstration to the class. After watching our daily slide show, we showed them the slide show of Trenton’s project. During our class meeting, students discussed Trenton’s new project, and a group of students quickly decided we should take it outside to test it on our outdoor equipment. They decided to use the basket and pulley as a way to deliver our morning snack to the top of our playground equipment.

Time once again played a role in this project as we decided to be flexible with our day’s schedule. Students were allowed to lead our curriculum as they spent the morning outdoors experimenting with the speed that could safely be used to bring the basket to the top of the slide without spilling the contents, the length of twine needed to allow the basket to be lowered far enough for someone to fill it, the amount of snack that could
be placed in the basket and number of people it would feed, and taking turns doing each of the jobs. The knowledge gained from this morning’s experience far surpassed any science unit on pulleys I had taught with previous classes in other programs.

This provocation for our outside experience was not from an adult; but rather a simple comment made by a child, “That’s cool. It would work in my fort on my swing set.” By allowing Trenton the time to share his experience and in preparing our class to listen and discuss ideas, we had empowered students to co-construct their knowledge. The upcoming section returns to how adults engaged in provoking the learning process, yet examines the role of parents in this endeavor.

Thrilled with his project’s success, Trenton couldn’t wait to share it with his parents, but his friends did not want him to take it home. Trenton agreed to leave it at school, and I suggested he tell his parents about it or invite them to stop by and see it. The following morning when he arrived, I asked him what his mom and dad had thought about his project. He shared that he had asked his dad to go to the hardware store and buy a pulley so he could make a similar project at home. His dad had responded that they could go buy a pulley as soon as Trenton wrote how he had made his project. I helped Trenton choose five pictures from those taken of the project, and he spent the entire day writing a sentence to go with each step of his project. At this point in kindergarten few students are writing complete sentences, but Trenton was determined to have something to take his father so they could shop for a pulley.

Allowing Trenton to spend the entire day writing meant he missed small group reading instruction, journaling, exploring math manipulatives, and free choice time. Prior to learning about this approach I would have allowed Trenton to do the writing, but on his own time when his work was complete. The Reggio approach believes children have the right to direct their learning. We respected Trenton’s choice to work all day on this project and supported him in the writing process.
Another key component of our program is viewing the parents as equal participants in their child’s education. Trenton’s father became the third person to provide provocation for this project. His challenge to write about the project before they could go buy a pulley would have an enormous impact on our classroom.

Using Trenton’s step-by-step directions, we created a “temporary project in progress” documentation board, and we hung it and the pulley for students and visitors to see. As a result of students “reading” this documentation panel and viewing the slide show of the project’s progress, we noticed students begin to incorporate more drawings with their projects. At this time only a few students were writing sentences to describe their projects.

As another provocation, in November I brought in a pulley from my father’s barn for students to explore and manipulate. To my surprise, Trenton had no interest in the pulley, but other children did. We had begun to notice one particular child, Burke, often explored Trenton’s original pulley and viewed the project slide show. Burke was fascinated with the barn pulley, and after much discussion about what a barn was and how the pulley had been used, we chose a place to hang it that would allow it to slide from one side of the room to the other. Students explored the pulley and used it to transport items they needed for other projects.

As I reflect on the introduction of the second pulley, I can see the importance of timing. Following an emergent curriculum requires careful planning and collaboration. We did not rush the students by bringing the barn pulley the day following exploring Trenton’s project outside. By waiting a month we allowed students the opportunity to learn new ideas as they reflected and revisited the knowledge they had previously constructed with Trenton’s project.

Although this provocation did not interest Trenton, it did generate interest with a new group of students. Burke and several of his friends were fascinated with using the barn pulley to transport objects from one side of the room to the other. Having observed and participated in Trenton’s exploration had provided them with the background knowledge necessary to hypothesize and test uses for the barn pulley. They explored the
size and weight of objects that could be moved, the speed they could be moved with, and learned how to create a clear path for items to be moved in. Believing that each child learns at her own pace and that each child’s previous experiences impact the connections she makes became a key point in our journey.

Having completed his work with pulleys, Trenton was ready to move on to something new and shared during morning meeting that he would like to build a robot at the woodworking area. The class had been going through an enormous amount of wood and our supply was low. I told Trenton I would get new wood if he would design a plan for this project that let me know exactly what he would need. Building on his experience writing about the pulley system, Trenton went to consult his previously written plan on the temporary documentation panel, and using it as a guide, drew his robot and wrote step-by-step directions of how he would make it. Trenton spent several days planning, drawing, writing, and building. When it was complete, Trenton once again shared his project with his classmates and we displayed his robot and plan. Several other students were intrigued by the idea of planning projects for woodworking.

Always having a group of students wanting to work at our woodworking area had become a big problem and one day it came up at our morning meeting. Imagine our delight when one student suggested that the only way you could go to woodworking was if you had a plan prepared. Even the children had realized the importance of becoming more intentional and more purposeful as they planned and as they worked.

Trenton’s father’s challenge to write about his initial pulley project continued to impact our classroom. Affording students the time to write plans provided them with a meaningful literacy opportunity. Students’ writing became more sequential, and their writing skills took off.

Reflecting on the provocation provided by a classmate, I can see how it led many students to begin creating plans for projects not only in our woodworking area but also in other areas of our room. Students began to draw plans prior to building at our block area, made lists of supplies they would need for art projects, and created to-do lists for planning parties in our housekeeping area.

As the interest in Trenton’s pulley and the barn pulley continued throughout December, one of the other teachers in our building mentioned seeing a tree house at Sam’s Club that had several pulleys to move items from one level to another. Our principal was easily convinced we had to have it and we introduced it to students as our third pulley provocation. Once again I was surprised to discover students who had expressed little interest in the barn pulley were fascinated by the tree house. They used its pulley to deliver supplies to all levels of the tree house.
As I shared about our pulley project at our kindergarten team meeting, my colleagues were as amazed as I was at the length of time students remained interested in the pulleys. Our district’s science kits arrive for a few weeks and then move on to another classroom. Some students’ interest in this project had now lasted for three months, while others were just now becoming involved in the exploration. What if it had been a kit that was only in our room for a grading period? It would have been gone before some students’ exploration was complete or before some students had even begun.

Not only can provocations come from teachers, students, and parents, but now a colleague who had observed what was happening in our classroom had provided a provocation. Once again we discovered this new provocation engaged a different group of students who were interested in pulleys, and to my surprise, Trenton began to show an interest in pulleys again. This time I observed students making comparisons as they tested moving items with the different types of pulleys and transferred the knowledge gained from one area to another.

Even after a two-week holiday break, children continued working with pulleys throughout the classroom. Burke could be found almost daily exploring Trenton’s pulley, the pulley from a barn, or the tree house pulleys. One day he asked if he could make his own. He independently consulted the slide show of Trenton’s project and for his supplies he chose to make a container similar to Trenton’s. He then used a CD to pull his rope through and lift his basket. The exploration and experimenting over the course of several months had been a necessary process for Burke. He was then able to construct a pulley of his own from found materials that really worked. Trenton was the first friend Burke asked to watch his demonstration.

Learning to celebrate each child’s uniqueness has taught me to accept each child’s timetable. Each provocation provided Burke with a new experience and connection in his investigation. Having a variety of pulleys to manipulate, a documentation panel to view, a digital slide show to watch and reflect on, and classmates to consult were necessary for Burke as he worked through the process to create his own pulley.
I discovered that by combining documentation panels with multimedia presentations, I am able to capture evidence of learning over time. This allows children to better understand the work of their peers and use it to construct their own learning. After revisiting area journals and visually representing their theories in personal journals, children often ask each other for help in testing their hypotheses. Slide shows offered students the opportunity to re-experience and recreate favorite explorations. As children viewed the different types of documentation, they were inspired to continue more in-depth research into discoveries. Each child’s voice has become a subtle force in the classes’ ongoing collaborative learning.

Over the past four years our understanding of what documentation is, who it is for, and how it can be used has evolved. Do we now have all the answers? Of course not, we continue to collaborate, assess, and grow. Just this month our parent group has decided to create their first documentation panel to show how their experience at our school has influenced their concept of the educational experience they want for their child. We will continue to grow with them.

Analysis of a Tension of Perspectives: The “Needy Child” vs. the “Rich Child”

— Terri Swim

As mentioned earlier, the current educational context in the United States views young children as “needy.” As a student and educator, I have experienced, and upon occasion, reproduced this perspective in my classrooms. My investigation of the Reggio Emilia approach to education has led me to my current understanding and opposing perspective of a “rich” child. Nonetheless, educators live in a climate fraught with tension over these divergent perspectives. In order to understand Denise and my “rich child” stance, this section provides an overview of the “needy child” perspective as a problem constructed by legislated education.

In 1994, the United States federal government signed into law the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (P.L. 103-227). This act established a framework for identifying academic standards, measuring student achievement, and providing support to students who may not meet the standards. The first goal, which is foundational to the achievement of the subsequent goals, stated “By the year 2000, all children in American will start school ready to learn” (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994). Goals 2000 ceased to exist as of 2001, and they are no longer part of official federal and state educational policy (Morrison, 2006), as they were superseded by the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. The NCLB law, however, retained an emphasis
on school readiness as it was explicitly aimed at closing the achievement gaps as defined and evidenced by black-white test scores (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, McLanahan, 2005).

Guided by the prevailing belief that there is a predetermined set of capabilities that all children must possess in order to be ready for school-learning, the research community has illuminated characteristics of children who were ready for school in comparison to those children who were deemed not ready. Family variables have received much attention, individually or in conjunction with other variables, because families create contexts that significantly impact the development and learning of children both before and after formal schooling begins. In 2004, 17.8 percent of all children under age 18 or 11.2 percent of white children, 33.1 percent of black children, and 27.8 percent of Hispanic children (of any race) in the United States were living in poverty (Children’s Defense Fund, 2005). The higher the socioeconomic status of a child’s family, regardless of how it is measured, the more likely it is for the child to be ready for school using math and/or literacy indicators (Chatterji, 2005; Duncan and Magnuson, 2005; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997).

Child gender has been associated with differences in readiness for school, including language and math readiness and achievement. Boys, especially those with summer birthdays from middle-class homes, are viewed as less ready for school, often because of social immaturity, and are often counseled to delay school entry (DiPerna & Graue, 2000; Graue, Kroeger, & Brown, 2003). Other researchers have found gender differences that follow stereotypical patterns with girls scoring higher on measures of language (e.g., Fiorentino & Howe, 2004) and boys scoring higher on measures of mathematics in Grade 1 (e.g., Chatterji, 2005). However, no gender differences were found in mathematic scores in kindergarten whereas poverty status had a consistently negative effect on achievement in kindergarten and first grade and prior mathematics preparation has a significant and positive effect on those achievement scores (Chatterji, 2005). According to this one study, gender may be less important in understanding school readiness than family and child care variables.

The majority of families in the United States hire non-relatives to care for and educate their children in the years prior to entering formal schooling; these experiences are not uniform nor are they equivalent (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Black and Hispanic children attend preschool programs less often, experience lower-quality care, and are deemed less ready for kindergarten when compared to white children (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Carefully designed studies have found that children who attend high-quality preschool programs, such as Head Start, are more ready for school, both cognitively and emotionally, and experience more lasting, positive outcomes later in life (Barnett, 2004; Abbott-Shim, Lambert, & McCarty, 2003; see Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000 and Zigler & Styfco, 2004, for other reviews).
Teachers and administrators who function from the “needy child” perspective would examine the family income, race/ethnicity, prior educational experiences, and oftentimes, gender to judge a child’s readiness for school. In addition, they would assess the knowledge and skills a child possesses (e.g., math and/or literacy indicators) prior to school entrance or immediately thereafter using standardized, norm-referenced measurements. When children are found to not possess these readiness skills, then they are counseled to delay school entry, labeled in need — in need of intervention, specifically a modified curriculum — or separated into specialized classrooms (e.g., developmental kindergarten).

These educational practices view time from a maturational stance: children are given the “gift of time” by keeping them out of kindergarten if they are age-eligible or by retaining them if they fail to meet expectations (Graue, Kroeger, & Brown, 2003). As mentioned previously, this “gift” is most often given to middle-class boys with summer birthdays (DiPerna & Graue, 2000; Graue, Kroeger, & Brown, 2003). Yet time takes on another meaning once children are in school as the race against the clock is set in motion. For example, teachers set the pace and timing of classroom events to implement the uniform, standard-based learning experiences and to adhere to the daily schedule. Time, then, is ultimately based upon the adult’s needs. These two views about time are contradictory: one believes in the power of waiting while the other rushes to keep children on task.

Scholar-Practitioner Stance: Problematizing the “Needy Child” View

Recall that children in the school in this study represent a great deal of diversity in their racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, over half of the children (i.e., 51 percent) are from racial or ethnic minority groups and slightly less than half (47 percent) receive free or reduced lunches. In addition, while implementing the Reggio-inspired philosophy has resulted in a high-quality program for preschoolers, some of the families do not enter the school until the kindergarten year; providing diversity in educational experiences.

In a traditional education program, between a quarter and a half of the children who were age-eligible for services would have been discouraged from attending school because of their combination of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, gender, and prior school experiences. While this may exaggerate the implementation of some school policies, it is certain that the children who were deemed the least ready would have received such consultation. The school district housing the Reggio-inspired school in this study has specific policies that bar this from occurring; yet, not all districts follow guidelines set forth by national education organizations (NAECS/SDE, 2000; NAEYC, 1995). The administrators in this district support the belief that viewing readiness as a
child characteristic places undue burden on young children and that, instead, “it is the responsibility of schools to meet the needs of all children as they enter school” (NAEYC, 1995, p. 1, emphasis in original) by tailoring curriculum and instruction to reflect the strength and needs of each child (NAECS/SDE, 2000).

The project, if viewed through the “needy child” perspective, would have been of much more limited duration and teacher-centered. The investigation of the pulleys would have lasted a few hours, days, or maybe a week. If this was the case, Trenton would have come to a very different level of understanding about pulleys and the power of writing. It is doubtful that a teacher working from the “needy child” perspective would allow him to spend the entire day working on writing sentences. Trenton would have been permitted to do the writing only after his “real” school work was completed. Turning to Burke’s experience with the pulley project, he would have never had time to begin his investigation. Burke took several weeks before he began his investigation in earnest. The class would have already moved on to the next curricular topic that needed to be covered. Moreover, he would not have been able to learn from Trenton’s documentation and slide shows because these types of data would not have been gathered. From a “needy child” perspective, then, both children would have missed out on learning experiences that supported their interests and were connected to valuable content according to state standards.

As mentioned above, the “needy child” perspective results in school-learning that is teacher-directed. The teacher controls the tempo, content, and materials available. In the pulley project, the teacher was not the sole contributor to these aspects. Following the children’s lead, the daily schedule was flexed to allow individual and small-group explorations to continue. For example, the teacher altered her schedule when she had the parent volunteer take the children outside to explore the pulley in the gravel pit and when the children delivered snacks to each other on the playground using the pulley. Her typical daily routine did not include outside exploration at these times. In addition, the provocations for the pulley project came from a number of sources: parents, teacher, children, and other teachers. No one person was in control of the content; it was shared by many people in the learning environment. Similarly, no one person was in control of the materials for designing the pulleys. While a variety of recycled objects were available in the classroom, the children could independently go to the art room to gather any other necessary supplies. This is the result of the “rich child” perspective.

According to the “rich child” perspective, teachers must learn to simultaneously consider and leave behind their ideas about an “average” child, or a particular “category” of children (e.g., those living in poverty) in order to listen to the children and orchestrate school learning. “The more we resist the temptation to classify children, the more capable we become to change our plans and make available different activities” (Malaguzzi, 1998,
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p. 79). As a scholar-practitioner, we have chosen to change our practices, moving beyond seeing categories of children to seeing each real child with all of his strengths, interests, and areas for improvement.

Scholar-practitioners working through the lens of the “rich child” perspective undertake work that respects their image of the child leading to multifaceted practices. Children have the right to demand nothing less from their teachers and their educational experiences. We have chosen to make that our scholar-practitioner stance as we work for children's educational rights and our own.

Conclusions

We cannot afford to use categories to pigeonhole young children into broad categories such as ready for school or not ready for school.

The concept of early childhood education as a foundation for lifelong learning or the view that the early childhood institution contributes to children being ready to learn by the time they start school, produces a “poor” child in need of preparation before they can be expected to learn, rather than a “rich” child capable of learning from birth, whose learning during early childhood is one part of a continuous process of lifelong learning, no more nor less valid and important than other parts (Dahlber, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 83, emphasis in original).

Teachers, and administrators, must begin to look at the competencies and capabilities of each child as they work to support the well-being of all children. While viewing a child as needy can result in additional educational supports, it also puts limitations on the child's potential. Scholar-practitioners informed by the “rich child” perspective can engage in pragmatic action research to carefully research, examine, and reflect on their educational practices with young children because “…practice is not only a field of action necessary for the success of the theory, but is an active part of the theory itself: it contains it, generates it, and is generated by it” (Rinaldi, 2001c, p. 342).

Notes

1 Provocative dialogue is characterized by asking questions of each other with the intention of sparking rich, deep, and stimulating conversation. Another intention of provocative dialogue is to bring about some action. Questions from this genre should cause a colleague to reflect on and closely examine his or her beliefs, practices, and knowledge bases. Our understanding of provocation is derived from the way that teachers in Reggio Emilia, Italy, seek to challenge each other as well as to provoke the learning of young children.

2 Pragmatic action research is discussed in the methodology section of the paper. Here we invite the reader to think of the complexity of action research in the context of a paradigm shift from

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a “needy child” perspective of teaching to a “rich child” perspective. This is the paradigm shift experienced by teachers and administrators when deciding to and actually implementing a Reggio-inspired philosophy in the school where this study took place.

Our use of the term “stance” in this paper reflects how qualitative researchers such as Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul (1997) would use the term: it is where we are coming from, our histories, our beliefs, our knowledge bases, and our reflections on influences on these. Our stance includes, for example, the belief that children have the right to learn through self-directed learning projects and that teachers use the pedagogy of listening to support this right of children.

The image of teaching and learning as a coming-to-know dance is developed by Heaton (2000), but is beyond the scope of what can be presented in this pragmatic action research project. We invite the reader to imagine a process of creative dance between teacher and students, and students and students. During such a dance, a teacher listens to the child's movements, words, emotions, and responses in synchrony with the child (Isabella & Belsky, 1991; Watson & Swim, in press). The modern dance movement requires dancers to utilize a broad range of techniques, styles, and source material (Smithsonian Education, n.d.). Teachers plan classroom activities that reflect their ability to engage different children in numerous projects, or dances, in chorus. Some children will be doing tap steps, some ballet, and some ethnic folk dance moves. In other words, children will be engaged in different types of projects simultaneously. Teachers must learn to dance with each child in her/his own style in her/his own time. This image is in contrast to a controlled, prescripted teaching that is evermore present as a march to the rhythm of No Child Left Behind.

The concept of scholar-practitioner has been linked with concepts such as critical hermeneutic, social justice, democratic practice, and change agent; scholar-practitioners are transformative intellectuals who take a critical stance on educational issues of social, cultural, and political importance (Jenlink, 2002). While this pragmatic action research project does not address all of these components, it does take a politicized stance on outcomes of the predominate perspective of education in the United States.

References
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