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Crossing Boundaries: A Variety of Perspectives on Preschool Stories

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Abstract

Emergent curriculum is present in many early childhood classrooms but sharing the deep thoughts, reflections and actions of young children engaged in emergent curriculum is often hindered by the use of traditional report cards. Through the use of year-long preschool stories, teachers write about these young children using the children's thought processes and experiences as the central data source. This practice illustrates trust of the child and the child's daily actions as critical in understanding the child. The purpose of this paper is to re-visit previously written preschool stories from multiple perspectives including the child featured in the story, the family of the child, the creator of the preschool stories, and a co-teacher within the community. This re-examination offers another way to consider the preschool stories, opening the work to revision and rethinking.

Traditional report cards and assessment systems often impede creative ways of sharing the wonder and thought of a child engaged in an emergent curriculum. Emergent curriculum "emerges from the ideas and actions of the children; plans come from careful observation of the children rather than drawn from a predetermined curriculum book" (Kantor & Whaley, 1998, p. 325). Negotiation is part of the curriculum process, encouraging child origination and teacher framing through the presence of children's design as a means of communication of ideas (Forman & Fyfe, 1998). The use of discourse in the negotiation supports engagement in discomfort and evolution while documentation details process and explanation.

Writing year-long preschool stories based on everyday documentation represents an attempt to create a means of reflecting the complexity of children's experiences and thought processes within emergent curriculum as well as the nuances of each individual student and the teachers working as researchers within the preschool community. These stories imply trust between the child and teacher. The teacher trusts the child's experience as the primary data source for the preschool stories and does not look outside the community to pre-constructed assessment tools as a means to understand the life of the child. The purpose of this paper is to re-examine two preschool stories from the perspectives of the original creator of the story concept (a head teacher in the preschool), a co-head teacher within the same community, the child featured in the selected stories, and the family of the child. Through crossing the boundaries past the teachers' viewpoints, a space is created for the development and possible rethinking of preschool stories.

The beginnings of the preschool stories: Jeanne Marie's viewpoint

Upon beginning my work as a preschool teacher at a university laboratory school I was confronted with a previously created portfolio describing children's experiences and development during their preschool years at the center. The portfolio in use consisted of a large loose-leaf notebook divided into separate

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sections of learning including social learning, physical learning, and various other disciplines. When a child had four or five examples of each section, she or he was considered to be proficient in this area. Reading through the portfolios made me feel uncomfortable. Although the preschool community was engaged in an emergent curriculum, the assessment and reporting system did not reflect the negotiations and deep thinking of the curriculum. Instead, it disconnected experiences, boiling them down and losing their meaning by maintaining separateness not connectedness.

This discomfort has followed me throughout my teaching as an early childhood and elementary teacher. Working in environments inspired by progressivism and constructivism, the dilemma of assessing and reporting mechanisms that did not represent the richness and complexities of the curriculum and environment was always present. When I began teaching, the reporting trend was narratives. However, these narratives always appeared to take on a report card façade, returning to separation of subject matter in order to be accepted in traditional constructs of school. The power children embodied in these programs was pushed aside in assessment and reporting, as the interpretation of the child by the adult and the adaption of the methods for acceptance in the larger world became prominent.

This tension became part of my every day, forcing me to look beyond what was known into the unknown and often not easily accepted. I would fight for the use of the narrative when public school districts tried to leave it behind in favor of the traditional report card. During my Master's program I engaged in a research study (Iorio, 2000) using children's and teachers' understandings of what was 'best work' in an attempt to design an aligned reporting system. My own conclusion was entrenched in the discourse of what was best work and who decides what is best. I continued to try new versions of narrative and protocols, desiring to create assessment and reporting methods that included the child's voice and emergent curriculum.

The confrontation of the preschool loose-leaf notebooks at the university lab school was a turning point. In an environment that recognized questions, discomfort, and evolution as common place, I began experimenting with the assessment and reporting system. During my first year, the use of letters addressed to each child at the end of the year emerged as reporting method. As the teacher engaged in the writing, memories and the everyday documentation notes became the data sources for the letters. Despite this, these letters still did not represent the complexity and beauty of the child's experiences in an emergent curriculum. In the following year, an exploration into

the work of Project Spectrum (Chen, Isberg, & Krechevsky, 1998; Chen, Krechevsky & Viens, 1998; Krechevsky, 1998), an alternative approach to assessing early childhood age children (preschool-early primary) centered on the tenet that each child is unique in her or his abilities or intelligences, began within the university lab school. The assessments presented within Project Spectrum can be used for both assessment and curriculum development. This became a catalyst for assessment alongside the daily documentation notes. Graduate assistants, work-study, and practicum students began using the assessments and finding data. These experiences created detailed banks of information, but due to the transient nature of the graduate students who either left to student teach or were at the end of their practicum, the sequence and use of these assessments was not always consistent and often hard to complete.

However, consistency was present in the form of daily documentation notes written on small clipboards and displayed so parents could read them at the end of the day. Beginning as a means of communicating with parents, these documentations detailed the everyday world of the preschooler including dialogue, descriptions, and questions from the child as well as interactions with peers and adults. The rich and detailed data captured real-life in the preschool room as assessments without separating the everyday from the practice of assessing.

Documentation is not a new tool in early childhood education (Katz & Chard, 1996). For example, the municipal schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, have engaged in documentation as a means of reflecting and developing curriculum (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001) for many years. Viewing children as "competent and strong" (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 79) is part of the documentation process enabling "reading, revisiting, and assessment in time and in space, and these actions become an integral part of the knowledge-building process" (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 84).

A question that occurred to these authors also occurred to me: If these documentation notes depict the everyday of emergent curriculum, how can this information be shared while honoring the process and aesthetic of documentation? As a doctoral student and full-time teacher, I was also thinking about the enactment of teacher-researcher. I wondered whether the structures for teacher-researcher were only present in the pursuit of higher education. This led me to question what it means to engage in the everyday as a teacher-researcher.

Compelled by these questions, I presented my colleagues with an idea of creating preschool stories out of the documentation notes, depicting each child

in our community with the writer fully recognizing her or his presence in the interpretation of documentation. This is how our journey into preschool stories began. The process began with each teacher (this could be the full-time salaried teacher, graduate assistants, work-study students, or practicum students) deciding on at least one child as a focus of her or his preschool story. Towards the end of the year, the writer would review the documentation notes. Using the relationship with the child in collaboration with experiences and documents, the writer would then construct a preschool story based on her or his interpretation of all of the data. These preschool stories resemble Carr's (2001) conception of Learning Stories. Learning Stories offer "families a window into the often invisible life of the classroom [and offer] children a way to revisit and reflect on their experiences and to set new goals for their learning" (Carter, 2008, p. 120). Teachers are present in the writing of the stories as their interpretations are part of each Learning Story. A focus on the child's strengths moves the traditional deficit perspective aside as the stories depict children's learning. Learning Stories also encourage families to voice their experiences and stories as part of the process. Preschool stories, as presented through this research, include the context, relationships between teachers and friends, daily activities, and interpretation of the child by the teacher-researcher. Centering on children's strengths, the stories describe children's learning and developments through the classroom experience.

I was joined in creating these stories by my co-teacher Hema, who had previously worked in the room as a practicum student and a graduate assistant. We then began to converse about the preschool stories and families' reactions to the stories. Based on these conversations, more questions emerged: What did the child think about the story someone else had written about her or him? What were parents'/families' responses to these stories? What did the teachers learn, develop, or question based on the process? We set out to explore these questions and to open ourselves to other emerging ideas as the inquiry developed.

Research Participants and Theoretical Frames

Sarah (alias name), the child in the study and the original subject of the preschool stories, is now 7-years-old. She is part of a white, upper middle class family where both parents hold advanced degrees. Sarah is a fraternal twin to one sister and also has an older sister, separated in age by approximately one year. The relationships between Sarah and the original teacher and researcher have continued beyond her preschool experience.

The teacher Hema (who has chosen to use her real name in this study) is a 29-year-old Asian-Indian female with a background in psychology and advanced degrees in both Early Childhood and Special Education. Hema has been part of the preschool for six years. She began her work at the center as a practicum and work-study student in the preschool and infant communities, continued as a graduate assistant in the preschool, and is currently working as a co-head preschool teacher. Throughout her work at the center she has developed projects with the children and has documented the thoughts and ideas of the children through various means including photography, anecdotal records, and collaborative conversations with colleagues.

The researcher Jeanne Marie has a connection to the center as she was a previous preschool teacher for four years and co-taught with Hema. She has over 12 years' teaching experience with a variety of ages and has completed advanced degrees focused on Arts and Education and Early Childhood Education. The use of emergent curriculum has been a dominant theme in her teaching from the beginning and continues to be present even in her college-level courses. Inspired by Vygotsky's (1962) theory on social constructivism, the researcher believes that participants construct knowledge and that development cannot be separate from its social context. This belief frames her methodologies, which always involve studying people, processes and experiences within the context in which they occur and creating spaces for participants to share their voices. The researcher questions accepted early childhood practices and attempts to see alternate possibilities and interrogate positions of power between children and adults (Ellsworth, 1997; Foucault, 1978; Lather, 1991). Re-thinking early childhood practices to include voice, identity, and social justice (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Kessler & Swadener, 1992) also form a consistent part of her framework.

The researcher, teacher, and family have relationships outside of the school setting that have continued past the original preschool experiences. Writing together has become a ritual that the researcher and teacher engage in based on their belief that practice and theory are connected.

Limitations of the Study

Although Sarah's mother and father were both asked to complete collages as part of the data collection process, only Sarah's mother chose to participate. Sarah's father was uncomfortable with the use of collage. Although other mediums were suggested, time constraints from the father's work and the research impaired his participation in this research. The absence of the father's voice may have an impact

on the representation of the family's perspective with regard to preschool stories.

This study examines the stories of one child and one family. This child is part of a family that uses conversation and reflection as part of daily life. The findings may therefore be representative of only one sector of the population. Further, strong relationships exist between all the participants in the study. At times, this can be considered a strength of the study, but it may also function as a limitation as the responses could be biased.

Methodology

This study was framed by the following research questions: In the interactions with the stories, what do teachers, parents, and children experience? What is developed, debated, and questioned through the stories? What did the teachers learn, develop, or question based on the process*?*

We drew data from two preschool stories (one at 3-years-old and one at 4-years-old) written about a female named Sarah, her original documentation notes, interviews with both Sarah and her family regarding visual art responses, and personal reflections on our role as teacher-researchers. We believe that the participants (teachers, child, family) within the study "have nested, interacting epistemological perspectives" (Lyons, 1994, p. 198) imperative to the discussion and evolution of the preschool stories, contributing to the creation of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) and interpretations reflective of all participants engaged within the study. Documents (including preschool stories and documentation notes) were collected and re-examined by teacher and researcher. The two preschool stories were examined by the child and the child's parents.

Using an art-based and phenomenological method, the child, parents, teachers, as well as researcher responded to the preschool stories, creating visual images of the child using drawing or collage in an attempt to see multiple perspectives from the stories. This choice of methodology was based on the belief that "visual art can jar people into seeing something differently" (Leavy, 2009, p. 220). The inclusion of the visual arts in collaboration with the story and interviews results in an intertwining of information that leads to the development of a deeper meaning of the experiences retold (Sumsion, 2002). Commonly referred to as a/r/tography, this methodology encourages the presence of self as well as connections between participants, offering further perspectives of the world (Sinner, Legg, Irvin, Gouzouasis & Grauer, 2006).

The process for working with the child (the subject of the two preschool stories) included the original teacher reading sections of the preschool story to the child while the child responded through drawing, a preferred medium for the child. The researcher, teacher, and family of the child chose to respond through collage. Each collage was created independently. Collage as an art form offered the participants a chance to combine daily experiences with the stories of the child, possibly revealing fresh and multiple significances of the stories (Diaz, 2002; Vaughan, 2002).

Interviews with the participants formed part of the review of the visual pieces in an attempt to develop detailed descriptions and explanations of multiple perspectives and experiences of preschool stories (Weiss, 1994). The interviews were 'active' and collaborative, allowing for dialogical interaction in order "to produce meaningful stories" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 28) surrounding preschool stories. Interviews were documented through note taking.

Perspectives from the subject: Sarah responds to Hema

Since I (Hema) am one of Sarah's teachers during the original writing of both preschool stories, I collaborated with Sarah during her response to the stories. As I read Sarah's narrative aloud to her, she listened intently, frequently saying, "I did that!" (personal interview, 3.3.2009) with a smile on her face. When posed with the task of representing herself through a drawing, Sarah immediately focused on the tangibles in her story. She began by drawing an image of make-up, and then pictures related to cooking, fashion and art (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: _Sarah's Drawing Experience_

Sarah said that she drew them because those were the things that she did in preschool. Then, without any prompting but almost as if on cue, she went on to color the entire paper with one colour. This was documented in her first preschool story, "'Cause if

you don't [colour the whole page], it's not beautiful. Only if you cover the whole page is it beautiful". She explained each object in her drawing as she had heard it in her story.

She drew the mirror first and commented that it was her reflection that she was drawing. When she added the eye-shadow, I asked what she was making and Sarah responded "I am putting on make-up because that's what I like to do" (personal interview, 3.3.2009). I watched quietly as Sarah drew and Sarah narrated some of her drawing saying that she was making a dress and a scarf because she likes "clothes and fashion, and getting dressed up, you know?" (personal interview, 3.3.2009). Sarah paused briefly and asked, "What else did I do?" (personal interview, 3.3.2009) I responded that there was a part in the story that talked about her liking to bake cakes and a large section about her art work.

At this point, she raced to collect her art portfolio, originally created in preschool, but added to over the years. She pulled out various pieces of work from the portfolio and categorized them as 'from preschool' and 'after preschool'. She very excitedly looked through the overflowing folder and took out some laminated pieces. She recalled that a certain piece was a placemat she had made in Kindergarten. When she got to a paper covered in pastels of all colours, she remembered that she had done that piece in preschool because the pastels were a medium she liked to work with.

She then went on to represent her interest in art by drawing a miniature recreation of a piece that was referenced in her story, the reindeer drawing. She paused from drawing for a moment and appeared to be thinking about what else to add to the page. She then began to draw an apron, pot and spoon. She said that she added these because she liked to bake cakes. I offered memories of when Sarah would bake and how she loved to taste, particularly when it came to chocolate. After having drawn all of the objects on the paper, Sarah asked, "Is that all?" (personal interview, 3.3.2009) I responded, "It's finished whenever you think it is finished." Sarah then took the paper back to the table and coloured all of the white space with blue crayon. Then she said that she was finished, and added her name and date on the back.

For her second story, she saw many pictures of herself in the story involved in various activities, cooking, baking, drawing, and sculpting. She said "I see myself" (personal interview, 3.3.2009). When once again posed with the task of creating an artistic reflection, she said that she would draw a picture of her whole face (see Figure 2). She went on to do a self-portrait and then questioned "Should I wear

make-up?" (personal interview 3.3.2009). I responded "draw yourself as you see yourself", and she went on to add colour and make-up. She searched and searched through boxes and boxes of crayons to find shades that matched her as she saw herself, even holding colours up to her eyes and hair to verify the match. After looking over her portrait one last time and smiling, she passed the paper to me and announced that she was done. I asked her why she drew a picture of herself, and Sarah responded, "Because I see myself" (personal interview 3.3.2009). When she looked at the story itself, Sarah saw the photos of herself throughout it. She vividly commented on the different activities that she was involved in within each picture, but noticed that it was her likeness in each picture taking part in something that she greatly enjoyed.
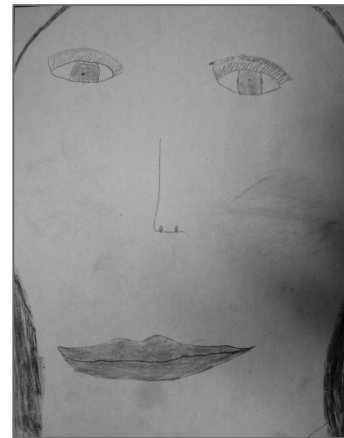

Figure 2: *Sarah's Self Portrait*

Perspectives from the Family: Mom Responds to the Stories

Sarah's mother Dianne (alias name) actively engaged in the process of creating a collage in response to Sarah's original preschool stories. During her interview with the researcher (Jeanne), Dianne shared two collages, one for each story. The collages used words and photos collected from magazines and positioned throughout the paper, usually not touching one another (see Figures 3 and 4). Jeanne began the interview by asking Dianne to describe each collage.

According to Dianne, "they (the collages) are both sort of the same. There were similar themes in each one" (personal interview, 3.24.2009). The themes included three ideas – nurturing, styling, and Sarah's love for particular food. Dianne defined two of the terms from her viewpoint. She defined nurturing as "always willing to help out with someone" (personal interview, 3.24.2009), citing how Sarah would play with babies and take care of them for extended periods of time, "if she chose to play, she would stick

with them" (personal interview, 3.24.2009). Dianne also noted Sarah's consistent choice always to be helpful to the younger children in the class. The concept of styling related to Sarah's concern with her looks, her cautious nature when picking out her clothes and wearing high heels around the classroom as well as her obsessions with shoes and nail polish.

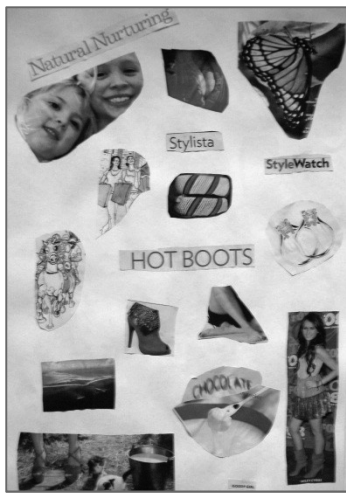According to Dianne, "everything is an outfit" as far as Sarah is concerned (personal interview 3.24.2009).

Figure 3: *Dianne's Collage* 1

Figure 4: *Dianne's Collage 2*

The actual collage process for Dianne included first reading the stories again and then "finding things that reflected the stories – specific concrete pictures" (personal interview, 3.24.09). Yet in the process, Dianne began to add her own knowledge of Sarah to the stories. For example, on one collage Dianne added the word 'icy', which is not part of the original preschool stories. Her choice to include this word was based on her own experiences with Sarah, knowing

that Sarah is often cold in body temperature but that this word could also be reflective of Sarah's styling with regard to the sparkle of diamonds. This also reflected for Dianne how the themes that emerged from the preschool stories were still relevant in Sarah's life today.

In another instance, Dianne added a photo of firemen and dogs. Her choice for this addition to the collages related to Sarah's own shyness, another concept not directly shared in the original preschool stories. Dianne's decision to include this photo was based on her idea that these large, tough men may not look approachable but "they still love and care for people and dogs – much like Sarah" (personal interview, 3.24.2009). When questioned about whether Dianne felt if her own voice was part of Sarah's stories, she proclaimed, "My voice was totally in there."

For Dianne, the tone of the stories also was something she responded to as the reader and parent. For example, in one collage Dianne added the statement 'What a card', which she felt reflected the tenor of the story through the actions and accounts of Sarah shared, again reflecting her own interpretations as part of the story.

As Dianne continued to describe the stories, she stated, "I could see her (Sarah) living in the room" (personal interview, 3.24.2009). These ideas were further supported as Dianne shared how the stories reflected the strong relationship between child and teacher, "The teachers really knew your child. They knew Sarah – they knew how she interacted with things in the room and people in the room" (personal interview, 3.24.2009). The relationship, according to Dianne, was full of love and care and allowed for Sarah's passions to develop. In addition, the presence of Sarah's identity was not 'boxed in' and multiple identities were allowed to exist and be fluid.

The conversation continued, comparing the preschool stories with traditional report cards. Dianne discussed her frustrations with traditional report cards currently used in Sarah's schooling, citing the fact that often the report card can give the impression that a child may be doing better or worse than what is actually stated in the report card. "With the number – meets expectations, exceeds expectations — sets it up to be more controversial. You have more of visceral reaction to these numbers. I am more concerned though that the child is not captured genuinely" (personal interview, 3.24.2009). Assessment, a word chosen by Dianne, is "the natural way" (personal interview, 3.24.2009) to describe the report card while the preschool stories seemed more reflective, more based on understanding rather than judging the child. The preschool stories are "amazingly non-judgmental – observations by the teacher instead of

judgments. For example, someone could have made a judgment regarding Sarah's style, but instead noted her keen sense of observation" (personal interview, 3.24.2009). Further, the stories were reflective of what was happening daily in school. "If we received a score card report card, it would have been bizarre" (personal interview, 3.24.2009).

Perspectives from the teacher: Hema Responds to the stories

In reading Sarah's narratives 3-4 years after they were written, while still interacting with her on a regular basis, I was struck by how many aspects of her stories are still a part of her day to day activities. Her passions and interests, the context that fueled her everyday endeavours and interactions as a preschooler, are still salient parts of life as she comes to the end of her early childhood years. Watching her react with the same flair and enthusiasm for a paintbrush or marker the way she did a few years ago and observing the recognition in her face as the story was read aloud to her speak volumes about how this narrative, so carefully documented and written, truly reflects the essence of this young girl.

As I read Sarah's stories and envisioned how to represent them, the obvious pieces stood out. She loves chocolate, art, cooking, fashion, make-up and pretend play. However, the more I thought beyond the obvious tangibles the more I came to consider the way in which Sarah strives to affect things. She wants to make things better. At such a young age, she wanted to be a caretaker, whether it was to her friends, a stuffed animal or even a dispute. She wanted to teach, how to make a certain food, how to apply make-up, how to dress for fashion and function. She wanted to beautify herself, her friends, her teachers, her environment. Her efforts always came from her genuine passions, but the impact of her passions almost always led to bettering something around her. Whether she was aware of it or not, Sarah had an eye for how she saw the world and she took it upon herself, without being affected or swayed by others, to pursue her vision. She still continues to be this way today; fiercely independent, but with an understanding of how her actions affect others. Those actions more often than not are positive, beneficial and pro-social, much as they were when she was in preschool.

As her teacher then, who still interacts with her now, I continue to observe the same essence of a child-centered preschool experience within her to this day. During her preschool years, she was given the freedom to pursue and share her vision and voice. She took that privilege to heart and nurtured passions within herself that are still a strong part of her person today. As a teacher who stresses the influence of teachers on a community, I am truly impressed by and curious as to how Sarah managed herself as a young self-motivated individual with insight regarding how to affect others in a positive way.

My collage was created in response to the way that the story framed itself around Sarah's individuality rather than putting her within a structure that could be used in a generic fashion. Her unique vision (shown through her eye) was about pursuing her passions, but was also significant for the way that she used ideas combined with her actions to affect the world (people, things, situations) around her. Despite reading two separate stories, I chose to create one college because I view Sarah's time through preschool as a continuum (see Figure 5). There were differences in Sarah from one year to the next, but I perceived the changes to be more representative of her growing into the person who she will be rather than her changing as an individual. As I described before, the stories are unique to Sarah as an individual, from my view as her teacher for two years and as someone who still interacts with her regularly. I see her growing within the person who she is and nurturing her skills and qualities in a harmonious manner, not changing them in an unpredictable way.
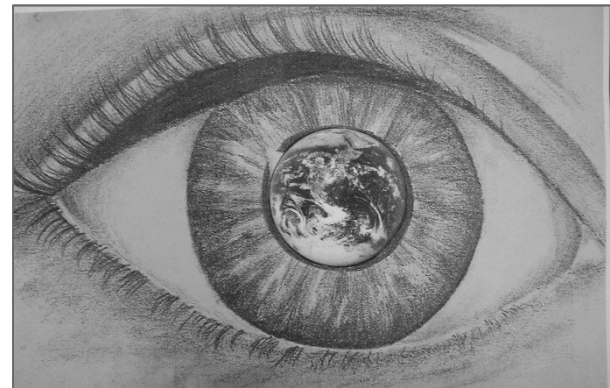

Figure 5: *Sarah's Far Reaching Presence for Hema*

I had a vision of Sarah, the individual, with definite thoughts, desires, and passions, and the manner in which they affected those around her. I have known Sarah as someone with great regard for how her actions affect others. With these two components in mind, I chose the eye to represent a part of Sarah that was about her, and the earth to represent her far-reaching presence.

After reading both of Sarah's stories to her, talking to her about them and watching her draw her pictures, I realized that Sarah truly seemed to identify with her stories. These were pieces written about her a few years ago, but the content of them still resonated with her. From her drawings it appeared that the stories captured aspects of Sarah that were significant to her.

She commented on and drew about herself in a way that she saw herself through these stories. In a sense, the story was a meaningful way to relate to Sarah years later.

The vivid daily anecdotes were compiled and written in a way that was unique to Sarah and her drawing showed that she identified with these aspects of herself. Keeping such a detailed daily record and using those as the substance for the stories required the teachers to search for patterns specific to each child, therefore identifying the essence of the child rather than placing the child within a prescribed pattern. I found that Sarah created a mould for herself that was recognizable through her daily anecdotes and she continues to identify with this view of herself.

Perspectives from the Researcher: Jeanne Marie Responds to the Stories

The process of reviewing the preschool stories started with reading and re-reading the stories over several days. I focused on one story at a time and created the first collage before concentrating on the second story. As I read the stories, I immediately began to analyze for large themes. Although Sarah had a great many interests, I looked for overarching ideas stretching throughout the stories.

Figure 6: *Jeanne's Reflected Themes*

For the story created during Sarah's 3-year-old year in preschool, I noted her strong foundation, nurturing nature, exploration of a variety of subjects, and creativity. These themes are reflected in the collage (see Figure 6). I used a sturdy, linear bottom to describe Sarah's overall base. Creating a large skirt out of many small pieces offered a vision of her investigations into an array of subjects as well as using the skirt as a metaphor for care, enveloping anyone who needs nurturing. Sarah's upper body includes four arms, reaching out towards her many

conceptions of creativity and compassion towards others.

In the second story, I was immediately drawn to the dichotomy of care and creativity presented in the story. The split face echoes this dichotomy, one side painted in a multiplicity of colour while the other side includes flowers, only grown through the careful care of a nurturing person. On the nurturing side of the face, I included hands and more flowers, again creating a metaphor for care. Through the use of colour, design, and placement on the creative side of the face, I wanted to reflect the infinite number of possibilities through creativity. Eyes are present throughout the collage (see Figure 7). Within the story, although the ideas of care and creativity are prominent these are only implications of how Sarah has come to develop her own vision of the world, always curious, always learning. The eyes are symbolic of this idea.
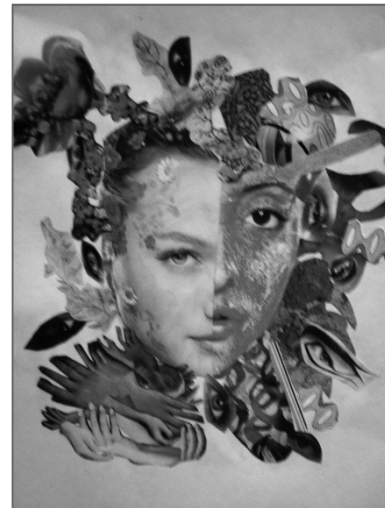

Figure 7: *Jeanne's Eyes as a Vision of the World*

As I consider both stories along with each collage, I am struck by my choice not to focus on the acquisition of Sarah's basic skills but instead to consider the larger characteristics of the person Sarah is becoming. This may be based on my own viewpoint of the world and be related to my need to disrupt the usual means by which children are judged by teachers or researchers. What is also prominent to me is the presence of identity development throughout the two years of stories. The first collage illustrates Sarah's exploration of the possible multiplicity of self. She uses her experiences to develop her core person, standing firmly in who she is but bending towards what could be through creativity and care of others. In the second collage, the dichotomy of her two selves is challenged by her own development as a learner. Sarah may be drawn to two distinct ways of being but her identity is grounded in

their integration. This integration empowers Sarah to be curious about the world, understanding how to be an active, thoughtful, giving citizen as well as remaining strong in the person she is and being open to the person she will continue to become.

In revisiting the preschool stories after the collage creations, I find myself in awe of the power of the stories. The stories reveal identity and imply the function of the everyday classroom. Further, I believe the purpose of teaching in this classroom becomes evident – creating a space for a child to be listened and responded to, encouraging the development of her person and her relationships with the world. This purpose is in conflict with the constructed conceptions of school as a place for skills acquisition and judgment as reflected in the traditional report card.

Emerging ideas

Through the re-examination of preschool stories and original documentation notes, the development of drawings and collages, interviews with the child and her family as well as personal reflections, several ideas have emerged regarding relationship, voice, and alignment of curriculum, assessment, and reporting.

The presence of a relationship between child and teacher and between teacher and family is imperative to the writing of preschool stories. Since the teacher is placed in a position of interpretation, these relationships contribute to an interpretation of the child that is based in the world of the child instead of on the perspective of an outsider looking in at the child. However, there is also a tension in the interpretation. No matter how deep the relationship, the teacher is still telling the story of the child, holding the power within the interaction by choosing what should be documented and developed within the preschool story. At times, this tension is lessened as both the child and parent are able to find themselves within the stories.

In this case, both the child and the parent found their voices within the stories. The stories provided a space for their own thought processes and opinions regarding Sarah. As the parent, Dianne added her own words and experiences with Sarah to the collage, in this way she illustrates how the stories create welcoming spaces for her viewpoint. This is evident in her statement that "my voice is totally in there" (personal interview, 3.24.2009) and as she describes parts of her interpretations of Sarah's stories. During Sarah's drawing and interview experience, the stories created a space for her memories and the person she is now becoming. The stories were not foreign tales of how Sarah was when she was 3- or 4-years old, rather the stories were the foundation of her identity,

and of how she came to the person she is now. This is evident in Sarah's own response to her stories, "I see myself" (personal interview, 3.3.2009).

The use of the preschool story is in accordance with emergent curriculum. The daily documentation notes attempt to capture the vivid details and life of the everyday, which inform the development of the preschool story. No separate assessment exists. The power of understanding the child is positioned within the community. External accountability pressures, often manifested in pre-structured assessment, are left outside the community. Within the traditional perspective, the teacher is often positioned to make judgments on the child without input from the child or family. This lack of power that children and families hold within the traditional construct of school is challenged as both the child and family demonstrate how they bring their ideas and interpretations to the preschool stories. Further, a practice inherent in and essential to emergent curriculum is consistent and dedicated observation and analysis of each child's behaviours, conversations and interactions. The choice of daily documentation and long-term assessment stresses the need for us to spend the majority of our time with the children listening to and responding to their expressions while also discussing our observations with fellow teachers in order to develop multiple perspectives of a child. All of this contributes to an active relationship between child and teacher, based in response to the child disputing the traditional constructs of school where the teacher often responds to curriculum and subject matter instead of to the child.

Importance of Study

Emergent curriculum offers children moments to experience life from their points-of-view while challenging what they already know in order to deepen their thought and reflection processes. The use of structured and separated reporting methods to try to tell the story of a young child can detach the child from the culture and context of her or his world. As Kincheloe and Steinberg (1993) reminded us, "We are never independent of the social and historical forces that surround us" (p. 302). As a parent, Dianne commented that the use of a report card could be considered 'bizarre' in conjunction with emergent curriculum. Using preschool stories as means of sharing the child's competence of living in the world as a child, attempts to go beyond the one-sided, generic and even misinterpreted data shared in a report card. Preschool stories document how the student makes meaning as interpreted by the teacher. As the teacher-researcher negotiates and struggles with the daily documentation notes in order to create a child's preschool story, she or he is attempting to understand the possible, the impossible, and the

spaces in between (Fine, 1998) in the complex life of a child. Understanding these complexities offers a beginning for other teachers, administrators, and policy makers to interrupt traditional conceptions of reporting and assessment in order truly to honour children and their experiences.

This study compelled us to re-examine preschool stories, challenging what we already know, and to reflect on the boundaries that we need to cross in order to engage as researchers (Jipson & Paley, 1997b). Through this experience, we present new ways to understand the world and create a place to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar (Spindler & Spindler, 2000) in order truly to understand the identity and world of the child. Interviewing Sarah about her stories reinforces our belief that the essence of a child can be discovered using careful observation and reflection. Sarah's behaviours, thoughts, and conversations accounted for who she was, depicting her beyond developmental domains. Separating out each behaviour in order to fit a uniform structure seems unnatural. Rather, considering all of the qualities that made Sarah unique allowed for the creation of two stories by two different individuals that Sarah continues to identify with years after they were written.

Having had the opportunity to work on narratives and portfolios with predetermined structures and requirements, and writing preschool stories I feel very strongly about the significance and value of the latter, particularly in a community that practices an emergent curriculum. Using these forms of thorough documentation has forced us to look at children and the place of the teacher within a classroom environment in a different way. The ideas come from the children, the children express what is of importance to them and provide the stories of their life in day-to-day meaningful pieces if we as teachers truly watch and listen. Each child is an individual within a larger community, and discovering who they are and how they exist within that community makes writing preschool stories a practice that can truly be shaped around the child.

The challenge that still remains is the integration of preschool stories into the traditional constructs of school. As time, structured schedules, and pre-determined curriculums infest the everyday of school, questions emerge around creating space for preschool stories. More importantly, questions exist regarding whether there is space for children and teachers to have relationships based on trust, listening, response, and power sharing. To include preschool stories calls for a rethinking of how school is structured as well as a rethinking of the role of the teacher, moving the teacher more towards being a collaborator and away from being a dictator. This may also call for a rethinking of education policy based on surveillance and accountability to move towards supporting and trusting teachers to make decisions that best reflect the needs of children.

Further Research

This story only considered the perspectives and experiences of one child and one family. Studying other children and families may expand the overall perception as well as reveal more limitations in the use of preschool stories. Considering both male and female children and families representative of a variety of cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds could provide deeper insight and possible actions in relation to the implementation of preschool stories. Another aspect that could be considered is the kindergarten teachers and admission officers who receive the stories as part of a child's introduction to the new school. Their viewpoints may also offer another degree of interpretation to preschool stories.

In thinking about emergent curriculum and preschool stories, looking at the national early childhood curriculum of New Zealand *Te Whàriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996) may be useful first step. Based on the intent to meet the needs of the child, families, and communities, the curriculum focuses on inspiring children to "grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 7). Learning stories, which resemble our preschool stories, form an essential component of this curriculum (Carr, 2001). The ideas shared through *Te-Whàriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996) are reflective of the cultures of New Zealand. However, it is incorrect to assume that these concepts and actions can simply be replicated in the United States. Instead, we should look for inspiration to help us find a space for both emergent curriculum and preschools stories to be a fundamental facet of everyday learning.

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Referencing Format

About the Authors

Jeanne Marie Iorio, Ed.D., is an Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Education at the University of Hawai`i, West Oahu. As both an educator and artist, Jeanne Marie has intertwined the arts and education, focusing her research on child-adult conversations as aesthetic experiences.

Jeanne Marie is currently working on a documentary depicting the stories of LGBTI (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgender Intersex) adults and their early childhood experiences. Her research interests include arts research methodologies, power differences between children and adults, preschool stories as documentation, action research, gender and early childhood, and democratic education.

Jeanne Marie serves as the program co-chair for Critical Perspectives on Early Childhood SIG for the American Educational Research Association and the co-chair of University of Hawaii Commission on the Status of LGBTI Equality. She completed her doctoral work at Teachers College, Columbia University.

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Hema Visweswaraiah received her MA in Early Childhood General and Special Education from Teachers College (TC), Columbia University, and worked for several years as a preschool teacher at the Rita Gold Early Childhood Center at TC. Currently, she is the Associate Director of the Fisher Early Learning Center at the University of Denver (DU).

Hema has conducted research with colleagues regarding the significance of child-adult conversations and the role of the teacher in an early childhood setting. She has also explored perspectives on gender and alternative assessment while further analyzing her own role as a teacher-researcher in the early childhood classroom.

Hema's role as a teacher-researcher has been fueled by her interest in better understanding - through play, conversation and careful observation - young children's perceptions of their world. Through doing so, she hopes to provide them with an optimal environment for learning and growing.

Hema completed the Buell Early Childhood Leadership Program at DU (May 2012) and has focused her action research on promoting inclusive practices in early childhood settings. She oversees the Fisher Inclusion Team (which serves children with special needs) and the Night Owls Program (which provides respite care for families of children with special needs). In her work as an educator and administrator, Hema strives to promote inclusion and to convey the importance of "best practice" when addressing each child's strengths and challenges.

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