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Young Ethnographers: Children Conducting Case Studies in a Multiage Classroom

by

Ruth Shagoury Hubbard

Children come to school with questions, with five years of experience noticing, trying to understand and explain their world. Though they don't stop asking those questions when they come to school, they often learn that school isn't the place to pursue their answers. But children's insights and questions clearly *can* become part of the curriculum, even though the questions the children have are as diverse as their backgrounds, interests, and experiences. In a flexible working environment, a 6-year-old child like Fiona can pursue her questions and fascination with rabbits, discovering answers to her questions such as: "Do rabbits live in families like we do?" and "How big are rabbits when they are born?" In the same classroom, there is space for 8-year-old Tara to explore her question: "What holds bubbles together?," and 7-year-old Jeremy can find out how the color in comic books gets printed. Jill Ostrow, their teacher, sees a major part of her role to be helping children explore these questions as part of their daily work. Examples of children exploring their wonderings like this in inquiry models are becoming more widespread—and need to be more common still (Boomer, 1992; Short & Burke, 1991).

Fiona, Tara, and Jeremy have the opportunity to work, learn, and research together in Jill Ostrow's multiage classroom in rural Oregon. For the last three years I have been a member of this class at least one full day per week, investigating the children's creative development (Hubbard, in press). My involvement with the class has covered a wide range: reading and writing stories and investigating math patterns; interviewing children about their work and ideas; joining in on the tire swing at recess; building bridges out of string, toilet paper, and popsicle sticks; going on field trips; and attending potluck family gatherings.

One of the themes that crystallized in the course of this research has been the centrality of children as researchers. Their natural abilities to observe, question, and look for meaning and patterns can—and, I believe, should—be at the heart of curriculum building, with opportunities to hone these abilities and add new skills in the midst of improvising in ever-changing research situations.

I witnessed the power and possibility of students from ages 6 through 9 collaborating on whole-class research inquiries as well as individual projects: from hands-on research in the structure of building bridges to observing and documenting the life cycle of butterflies to answering student-generated questions about the Arctic. This research adds the important dimension of working together on larger community goals, apprenticing children to each other and to a variety of mentors. It also allows children to see that there are various ways to tackle an issue or a problem, that they can choose to work from their own particular strengths while gaining exposure to the processes of others.

Children's need to answer their questions and reflect on their learning comes together when their considerable skills as researchers are respected, refined, and expanded—skills such as posing questions and finding problems, experimenting with framing them in new and untried ways, delighting in the risks and possibilities it may open. Curriculum can grow from helping children gain experience with their ability to make detailed observations, including ways to nudge them to try out a multitude of recording and sharing techniques. Even very young children can also learn to find information from books and distant teachers, as 7-year-old Maria did when she studied

chimps and investigated the methodologies of Jane Goodall, or when 6-year-old Fiona delighted in the triumphs and techniques of Georgia O'Keefe.

When children are immersed daily in research, we learn that they are capable of insights into the process that came to many of us only after adulthood. When Micah was explaining one page of his research to me, he confided: "The thing about research questions is, you keep doing the research and you have more and more questions!" Even more exciting than Micah's insight is the comfortable stance toward ambiguity this implies and his understanding and acceptance of the generative nature of our research and our quests for knowledge.

Children as Ethnographers

These research skills, then, can become part of children's repertoire, part of their way of observing and making sense of the world. And interacting with the world, and significantly affecting it, too. Toward the end of the school year one May, the school counselor approached Jill about choosing a "child of the month" to honor. Jill was uncomfortable with the idea of setting one child apart in this way and told the counselor that *all* her children were worthy of being honored for their work that year, but that she'd think about it. As she often does, she brought the issue to the class, and Paul, one of the older children, said, "Oh, I think it should be Maria, 'cause she has improved so much this year!" Jill asked Paul to write up a nomination for Maria to send to the counselor, and this is what he wrote:

About Maria

At the starting of the year, Maria was very shy and she couldn't write or read and she wasn't a very good group worker. After a while, we couldn't keep Maria quiet! And not keep Maria from laughing neither! She's the best first-grade writer that I know and reader that I know. She's a very good group worker, too.
Good-bye.
Paul

This short piece, "About Maria," shows Paul's skills as a social researcher, an ethnographer. When he writes about Maria, he explains her progress both academically and socially. He looks at her as a whole person, as someone who is part of the community. You can tell that he celebrates her growth and improvement. This incident happened near the end of the school year, and over the summer Jill and I talked about how to continue to build on the children's abilities as researchers by incorporating their strengths as observers of the learning that is going on around them.

So, the next fall, the returning third graders began an ambitious year-long project, with each one observing the growth and learning of one first-grade student over the course of the year. Based on her knowledge of the children, Jill paired each third grader with a younger child that she thought would be a good match. They all had case study notebooks that were housed in one corner of the room, and they kept their data and drawings, their interviews and surveys in this folder. They didn't work on their case-study research every day, or even every week, but there were periodic check-points and aspects of the research that they all conducted throughout the year.

The way they began was very much like the initial experiences of a teacher-researcher: I met with the 8 third graders and asked them to take ten minutes some time during writing workshop and observe their case studies, writing down as much as they could about what they saw—including what people say and do. Even in their first attempts, these 8-year-olds showed their considerable skills. This is Stephanie's first set of field notes on Kelly:

9/29/93

She is writing before she draws. She thinks before she writes, then she sticks out her tongue. Then she writes again. She is writing a story called "The Three Lost Girls." She is leaning against the table. She is sitting by herself. And she writes and writes and writes. She seems sad. Then she said, "Ben wrote his first 'B'." Then she drops her pencil, and erases her story and throws it away. Then she starts on a new piece of paper. And erases a mark on the table.

You can see that Stephanie very effectively recorded Kelly as she worked on her writing, making decisions to abandon her work and start again. In this brief observation, Stephanie has faithfully documented Kelly's emotional state and awareness of others in the classroom; even as she "writes and writes and writes," Kelly notices the landmark accomplishment of Ben writing his first 'B.' And, when Stephanie shared her fieldnotes with me, she, too, found it exciting that Kelly noticed Ben's achievement, exclaiming, "Isn't it neat that she took a break in her story to say what Ben did?"

The children's observational fieldnotes show that they are clearly able to take a close look at what's going on around them and, further, to begin to make sense of it. JoAnn Portalupi Curtis (1994) notes that an ethnographer's stance involves an attentiveness to the happenings around you and a curiosity to look beneath the obvious in order to understand what's going on. "Invite students to embody this stance and the classroom becomes a research community that focuses the camera on itself," she writes. "We can wake students up to the questions they have about life in the classroom and teach them how to systematically gather information and then collaboratively speculate on what the data reveal" (p. 145).

The third graders' fieldnotes were rich data for the class to continue to explore, collectively and individually. Lisa often took fieldnotes on Fiona as she worked on her research, which in turn provided insights into the younger children's concepts of research, of writing workshop, and of their own creative process:

February, 1994. Tuesday

Today Fiona is doing her research. She is on her bibliography! Fiona is thinking of what to draw. Fiona said "I want to draw a bunny, but I don't know how to draw one!" Then she ate a bit of her apple and piced up her pencil and started to draw. When she was finished she exclaimed "I should wright what it is so the people who read this will know what it is!" then she wrote bunny. She sort of likes research but she likes wrighting workshop better. Fiona gave me a short exlamation of why she like w/w better than research, but before she could answer Daniel said "Because you get to write whatever you want." Then Fiona answered "True! And you get to name it!" Then I asked "Fiona, is there any other way why you like wrighting workshop better than research?" And she replied, "Um, that's pretty hard." Now Fiona is moving on to her project. Then I asked her "What are you going to make for your project?" and she said "I have to think!"

Fiona thinks that she has improved a lot since the beginning of the year. Fiona thinks that she's improved in reading more than anything this year.

Lisa's fieldnotes are impressive for the information contained in them, and for the process of research they reflect. She has learned to ask questions of Fiona as she works, recording what the other children say, too, and thinking of follow-up questions as she observes and records data. This kind of "in the midst" data collection is difficult to manage and shows Lisa's adaptability to the evolving nature of her research.

Seth also demonstrates this skill in his interview of Carl, his case study. In the writing inventory that Seth conducted, he asked a series of questions, and wrote Carl's responses:

Excerpt from Writing Interview:

How did you learn to write?

I had homework at home that helped me write.

Who helped you learn to write?

Nobody.

How did they help you? (Seth crossed out "they help" and wrote "your homework help")

(See Figure 1 for 2-page interview in its entirety.)

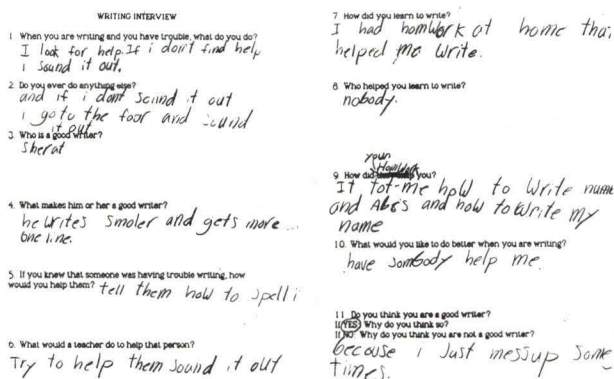


Figure 1

Notice how Seth adjusted his question to adapt to the answer that Carl gave him about homework, rather than just asking the already prepared question that followed.

These examples from Lisa and Seth highlight an important aspect of the children's abilities as researchers: They are not following a script; rather they are improvising to meet the needs of the situation. They are observing and documenting their case studies' growth as learners—not in an abstract, removed sense, but because they are invested in the younger children's growth as learners.

The line between teacher and researcher often blurred as more and more children took on the roles of coaches and facilitators with their case studies—even pulling together groups of children for mini-lessons that they thought would be helpful. Stephanie and Lisa thought that several of their classmates (including both their case studies) would be helped by learning what they called "the e lesson." They planned the lesson, carried it out, and shared their anecdotal records with us:

With the e lesson, it went pretty good. We had Fiona, Kelly, Tara, and Charles. With Fiona, she got three wrong, but she really tried hard and paid attention. With Kelly, she got them all right and paid attention. With Tara, she got them all right and does not need to work on it any more, and knew them right away. With Charles, he got them all right, and he struggled a little.

Their anecdotal fieldnotes became part of the teaching record of the class—part of all our data in understanding the learning that is occurring within the community.

In June, the children looked closely at their data in order to write their findings for a genuine audience: their case studies' parents. While they found it a daunting task to condense their findings to the format of an informative letter to parents, they rose to the challenge. Lisa focused on Fiona's improvement, sharing information about Fiona's learning that gave her parents a picture of their daughter's active problem-solving skills:

June 1994

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Leary:

Fiona has improved a lot since the beginning of the year!!! Especially in her writing. In the beginning of the year, her stories were just a picture and a tiny bit of writing! But now her stories are lots of writing, and good pictures, too!

In the beginning of the year, she was reading just pictures. Now, she just finished a book called All About Stacy which is a chapter book.

For problem-solving, Fiona doesn't just sit and twiddle her thumbs. She gets up and gets 10's strips and 1's squares to solve the problem. She also uses pictures.

The following are what you might want to do with Fiona or have her do over the summer:

- Have her read for 10 or 15 minutes each night.*
- Give her problems to solve (like problems that include math, art, and science, not just straight math fact!)*
- Have her write for 10 or 15 minutes each night.*

*Sincerely,
Lisa*

Stephanie wanted to show Kelly's growth, so she attached some samples from "the beginning" and "now" (see Figures 2 and 3). She was also honest about Kelly's needs as well as improvement:

June 1994

Dear Mrs. Boise:

Here are some things that Kelly did at the beginning of the year ...

(see attached)

and some stuff she has done recently:

(see attached)

As you can see, she has improved in writing. As I was writing this letter, I was showing Nolan her work from the beginning of the year. He could barely read it. Then, I showed him the other one and he read it perfectly.

In reading, the first thing she was reading was Lulu's First Day of Witch School. Now she's reading Peanut Butter and Jelly. I was reading that yesterday! Even at the beginning of the year, she was a really good reader.

In problems, sometimes she just sits around and does nothing (not to be mean or anything). But on the other hand, she goes and gets 10's strips and solves the problem.

A thing you might do this summer is maybe give her some math problems or buy some books for her to read at night. And encourage her to write or do some observational drawings.

*from Stephanie
the researcher of Kelly*

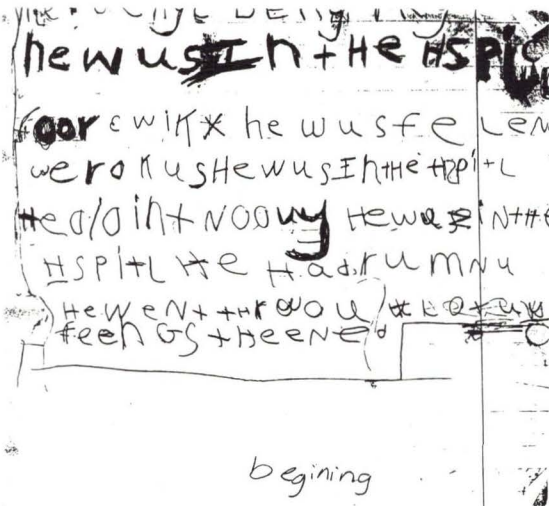


Figure 2

Monday a little cat was eating her
milk and the owner of the cat
bought a dog

Now

Figure 3

As the children notice growth and learning in others, it helps them set goals for themselves as learners and note their own progress. By taking on other perspectives, they learn to see themselves in new ways as well. Creative thinkers evaluate their own progress and set goals for themselves as a natural part of their process. In a growing number of classrooms, children are expected to document their progress and share it with their parents at student-led conferences (Austin, 1994; Ostrow, 1995). Children like Paul, Stephanie, and Lisa, as well as younger children such as Fiona, view these conferences as natural extensions of their research and pull together portfolios of their work across the curriculum, explaining their choices, charting their progress, and setting new goals.

Young children's creative abilities show up clearly when they are in environments that honor their capacity for research, reflection, and improvisation. The most important advice we can give educators and those who work with young children is to assume that children *are* developmentally able to learn. The teacher's job is to create an environment that is complex, stimulating, and interesting—and to work with the child to find the keys that will unlock their potential.

In Beverly Cleary's (1975) novel, *Ramona the Brave*, her 7-year-old heroine Ramona asks, "Why don't grown-ups know that children think important thoughts?" Yes, we need to remember that children *do* think important thoughts, they have strategies for learning, remembering, researching, imagining, collaborating. We need to encourage them to share their insights with us, to be active agents in the environment.

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