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Poor Staff Performance
State Budgets and Federal Stimulus

Beginnings Workshop:
Young Children and Writing

On Our Cover:
Boulder Journey School
Boulder, Colorado

Boulder Journey School

Boulder, Colorado

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and Andrea Sisbarro, directors



Boulder Journey School, located in Boulder, Colorado, is a private school of over 250 children, ages 6 weeks to 6 years of age, and their families. Our school was first conceived in 1984 as a 'mommy and me' arts and crafts class within the Boulder Valley School District's Life Long Learning Program. We began with nine students and called the school "Make a Mess and Make Believe." Throughout the first 25 years of our existence as a learning community, we have maintained our vision of school as a place that invites children's learning through relationships and interactions with the environment and with others. However, our vision has evolved to also encompass the learning of adults. The genesis for this change was our study of the world-renowned schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy, beginning in 1995.

Dialogues with Reggio educators and Reggio-inspired educators from around the world encourage us to view the learning of adults as a critical aspect of the children's learning. Thus, as a school community, we have made a commitment to invest in professional development as a value upon which the culture of the

school is based. When we consciously made this commitment, we hoped that our investment would broaden and deepen our conversations surrounding children and the education of young children within the school, while also bringing visitors from all over the world to the school to study and to share their experiences, including their challenges, accomplishments, questions, and understandings. And it has!

A fundamental component of our professional development is our Teacher Education Program. The Teacher Education Program at Boulder Journey School, in partnership with the University of Colorado Denver and the Colorado Department of Education, offers students, as intern teachers, an opportunity to co-teach alongside mentor teachers in a Reggio-inspired school for young children, while earning a Master's degree in Education and a teaching license. Mentor teachers share their knowledge and experiences with intern teachers, while intern teachers contribute their unique and important perspectives on both practice and theory.

One example of this reciprocal learning occurred this year in a toddler

classroom. The intern teachers had been asked to document perceived challenges in their classrooms. In response to this assignment, one of the intern teachers brought video documentation of a child pulling paper off a shelf and dropping it onto the floor. This posed a problem because the teacher's intention was that the paper be taken from the shelf and used at the table, not on the floor. When the intern teacher and her colleagues viewed the video during their weekly intern seminar, they noticed that this was not a random act. The child was watching the paper as it floated to the ground. He seemed to be wondering what it might look like there, how it would sound if he stepped on it, and whether repeated acts would produce the same results. The experiment was continued by the child, along with other children, both with paper and with other materials.

The term 'dumping' is often used to characterize actions such as these, and the connotation is most often negative. On the contrary, what the intern teachers noted was very positive. Children were gaining knowledge about materials through research. This caused the intern and mentor co-teaching team in this classroom to envision a new image of what a studio for one-

year-old children might look like if it were based on observations in lieu of teachers' habits. The experience, initiated by an intern teacher who had been at the school only a few short weeks, has become part of a larger all-school research project focused on breaking patterns and creating innovative solutions not usually evident in schools for young children.

Another fundamental component of our professional development is our Study Tour/Extended Study Tour Program. The Study Tour Program at Boulder Journey School welcomes educators from around the world. Visitors observe the work of children and adults and reflect on this work with members of our faculty, making connections to their own contexts. Conversations can be continued through participation in the Extended Study Tour Program, where Boulder Journey School faculty members visit participants' contexts. Just as evidenced in the Teacher Education Program, the Study Tour/Extended Study Tour Program provides opportunities for faculty to share experiences and understandings while also benefitting professionally from the different perspectives that visitors bring. The desire to clearly articulate our thinking means that we have to understand the intentions underlying our actions, the values which inform these intentions, and the philosophical underpinnings of these values.

Our professional development is also enhanced through participation in self-selected Faculty Research Groups, which meet monthly around mutually agreed upon topics of investigation. This summer and fall, several study groups formed around the traveling exhibit from Reggio Emilia, "The Wonder of Learning — The Hundred Languages of Children." Visits to the exhibit initiated and supported research that focused on

many aspects of our work, including documentation, the environment, our theater, technology, literacy, curriculum, and community. Some of our specific questions around community include:

- In what ways can we initiate and sustain relationships with the neighborhood adjacent to the school?
- Can we collaborate with our neighbors around our shared dedication to sustainability through ongoing materials collections?
- How can we give visibility to children's work in the community, and what effect might this visibility have on people's perceptions of young children's learning?
- What can we learn from how children view the life and events in spaces they visit and/or occupy?

Based on these questions, one of the Faculty Research Groups organized "The Creative Recycling Day," an opportunity for our neighbors to visit Boulder Journey School in order to understand how and why children use recycled materials. It was on this day that we met one of our neighbors, a man who works with adolescents around sustainability, specifically on creating relationships between adolescents and senior citizens. During his visit to the school, where he was surrounded by images that spoke to the competencies of young children, he commented that he had never considered the possibility that young children could be involved in the sustainability movement.

A relatively new component of our professional development is the creation of The Hawkins Room for Messing About with Materials and Ideas. The Hawkins Room is an adult studio and think tank, inspired by the thinking of internationally known and respected educators, David and Frances Hawkins. Research emanating from work in The Hawkins Room is part of an innovative project, Hawkins Centers of Learning

(hawkinscentersoflearning.org), that seeks to make the Hawkins' work and their impact on contemporary education visible and to cultivate thinking and action through the sharing of ideas and experiences.

Much of the Hawkins' work involved the multi-dimensional role of the teacher — the teacher who observes, documents, and reflects on children's learning, the teacher who becomes a partner in learning with the children, and the teacher who continues his/her own learning through ongoing interactions with the physical and social world. In his book, *The Roots of Literacy* (2000), David Hawkins writes:

"But teachers will not know how to support such aspects of learning unless they themselves have been encouraged to explore and appreciate the manifold ways these simple materials of childhood play are related, as subject matter, to the style and character and history of the great world around us" (p. 52).

Teachers work in small groups in The Hawkins Room, seeking to better understand the materials that children use to express their ideas.

For example, children often draw as a form of expression. When we carefully observed, documented, and analyzed classroom experiences that included drawing, we noted that the teachers seemed unsure about how to support the children's use of this language, possibly because many of the teachers were uncomfortable with drawing and hadn't drawn for quite awhile themselves. Based on this information, we determined that as teachers we needed to draw. We needed to draw, not in order to lead an isolated and arbitrary art lesson, but rather in order to understand the processes of drawing, the affordances and constraints presented by a specific drawing material, and

the strategies that could be used to overcome obstacles when necessary.

While we were drawing in The Hawkins Room, one of the things we noticed was that things can be drawn from many perspectives. For example, we typically draw self-portraits looking straight ahead and ignore our profiles. This understanding became useful for one teacher when she observed a child in her classroom struggling while using his drawing of a shark as a reference for making a shark mask. He had only drawn the profile of the shark and was thus unable to figure out how to make the top of the shark's nose. Because of her experiences and conversations in The Hawkins Room around drawing from multiple perspectives, the teacher suggested that the child draw the shark looking straight ahead as an additional reference. Without the knowledge gained from her experiences in The Hawkins Room, the teacher would not have been able to support the child in this way.

The joy and excitement of learning together is woven into the culture of Boulder Journey School and shared by all. The sounds of children experiencing, investigating, and communicating their learning with other children and adults are audible in the classrooms, hallways, theater, studio, reflection room, and outdoor spaces. Also audible are the sounds of adults thinking and learning — about children and about their own relationships with the world.

Reference

Hawkins, D. (2000). *The roots of literacy*. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado.