



Editor's Introduction

Lani Shapiro

This newsletter introduces two Network initiatives: a local project called the Geography of Childhood and a monthly Documentation Lab. These, along with the long-running monthly Book Study, are ripe for cross collaboration.

The Reggio-Inspired Network of Minnesota Civic Engagement Committee engaged with parents and children in a series of conversations about the varied contexts within which children construct their identities. These discussions became defined as “the geography of childhood” and then the “geographies of childhood.” We considered:

- the natural environment and seasonal climate;
- the built environment: rural, suburban, urban, small town;
- the social environment: communities that hold diversity, and communities that are (perhaps only apparently) homogeneous;
- places of high mobility and places of high stability;
- and contexts that carry high responsibility at an early age, and those that insulate children from even age-appropriate challenge.

This geography is more than a place on a map; embedded within each context are histories, expectations, opportunities and constraints. We wondered about the strengths and liabilities nurtured in these various contexts. We thought about the spaces of our own childhoods and how they affect our expectations for a current generation of children. So began our desire to explore the “Geography of Childhood” which explores the evocative power and limits of place both for parents and teachers and for children as they grow.

Reggio Emilia inspires us, in part, because this community shaped its political present through a commitment to childhood and pedagogical documentation. The ordinary and the extraordinary lives of young children continue to be made visible through documentation, and these traces are used to advocate the municipality for continued financial and civic support for all children. Documentation transforms our understanding of childhood and our social, emotional, intellectual and civic expectations of children.

Here, within our own communities, members of the Network Civic Engagement Committee desire to build a local project based on the practice of pedagogical documentation, provide direct service, and engage in advocacy and political action. Through the Geography of Childhood, these three missions can be achieved. Local schools could reflect with families, teachers could reflect with children, and communities could reflect together, providing comparable traces of Minnesota childhoods and ultimately the basis for advocacy. We hope this will personalize the many experiences of childhood in Minnesota, all with potential for resilience and strength so that we, as citizens, exercise our responsibility to provide equitable opportunities for all our children.

"As centers of experience, places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further, place makes us: As occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped." - Gruenewald, 2003

Geography of Childhood Project: The Back Story

Cassandra Gutfenfelder

Parents in Community Action Headstart (PICA) invited members of the Reggio-Inspired Network of Minnesota's Civic Engagement Committee to their "Parent Connect" event. As we prepared, we considered how to connect with children and families who were participating in a busy day of resources and information. Our mission was to create a space for families to relax and engage in play.

As we designed our space we wondered:

- *How do we create a space that values each child's inherent strengths and invokes a state of curiosity and wonder?*
- *What does it mean to a child when we listen to him or her with genuine interest?*
- *What does that teach us about how young children perceive and engage with the world?*



We began with multiple invitations to freely explore:

- open-ended play
- mark-making play
- big body play
- play with natural materials

Supporting the children's curiosity and creativity led naturally to collaboration and connection. Some children entered the room tentatively, others exuberantly; all were playfully engaged, eager to create and explore together. All children come to a learning space with unique experiences and a rich cultural background, and our challenge is to listen and design a joyful, playful space to guide each child. Through truly listening to children and families, we create a strong, supportive and empowered learning community.



A Project Emerges

Ross Thompson

Recognizing that our definition of geography was stretching beyond physical points on a map, the Civic Engagement Committee wanted to construct a shared project that could invite the perspectives of many participants. We generated a short survey to initiate conversations with others while also gathering information about where people were coming from -- listening to their stories. And that was it! Everyone has stories from their childhood, about what they experienced and that was our common ground. However, we desired to delve deeper than simply sharing stories. Stories tell about an individual's experiences, but within those memories are the feelings and values that have shaped and influenced the adults they have become today. Thoughts about those early influences inspired new questions for those that work with children: *what values do we (as adults) have for childhood; are those values at the core of your current work with children?*

In the Geography of Childhood survey, the final question asks: *"Thinking about the childhood being experienced by the children in your neighborhood or program, what do you hope or wish for them?"* For me, I want children to be happy and safe. To be loved and to be loving. To be respected and to be respectful. To be problem-solvers and to be question-askers. I want children to be seen (by both their peers *and* the adults in their community), while also seeing others – being kind and caring to everyone they encounter. I want all children to value themselves, one another, and the earth, as it's going to be a collective, non-partisan effort to move us forward. *When and why do these things change? How do we keep these "wishes" alive inside in all children so they can share those same qualities, values, and "wishes" with their future children?* These are a few of the questions we will discuss together at the January gathering.

After reading and reflecting, I invite you to consider again: *"What are your values for childhood? And are those values still at the core of your current work with children?"*

Reflecting on Childhood, Shaping Preschool Today:

Documentation Reflection

Willow and Sprout

Where did you grow up? We are asked this question many times, yet it doesn't encompass all the experiences of childhood. *What were the sounds, smells, tangible treasures, sights and tastes? How do these visceral memories inform our desires for the children in our lives?* These are questions we considered ahead of a meeting with parents at Willow and Sprout.



As we presented our questions, many parents desired space to rest and reflect. We observed quiet drawing, doodling, shifting eyes, tilting heads, and smiling as they recalled the sensory stories of their childhoods. When we regrouped to dialog our experiences, a common theme emerged: many had childhoods that felt free, open, abundant and autonomous. Most parents grew up in small towns, with land to explore and bikes to ride for miles. Some grew up in suburbs and felt the same expansive space and time to explore, play and discover their world with friends. Many parents felt that their child has similar freedoms within a smaller boundary, such as, a cul-de-sac, driveway, a backyard, or a friend's yard.

The parents felt encouraged and comforted during this reflection and discovery. They delighted that their children played similarly but noted different boundaries. Our families' united experiences of an outdoor childhood shaped our dialog.

Reflecting on the conversation, as teachers, we wonder how the parents' desires can align more deeply with their children's experiences at Willow and Sprout. We continue to examine this and look forward to sharing our explorations with you at the January gathering.

Reflecting Collectively, Some Possibilities:

Cassandra Guttenfelder and Damian Johnson

What does childhood look and feel like in our homes and schools? What does it mean to be a child in our neighborhoods and communities? Please join us in exploring these questions in a format that resonates with you.

Only together can we construct an image of childhood that represents the richness of lived experience of our entire community.

- Share photos and text using #geographyofchildhood on [Instagram](#), or complete our survey on [Survey Monkey](#).
- Join the conversation on The Geography of Childhood [Facebook Page](#) or put a pin on the map by completing the questionnaire.
- Add stories or images of childhood, your own or that of your children, via email or contact Damian Johnson to do a phone or in-person interview: geographyofchildhood@gmail.com.

Garbage and Treasure

Damian Johnson

"When do we stop noticing the little things?" This question came up while discussing the network's Geography of Childhood project and I immediately thought of my friend Sarah and her child, Owen, and his somewhat epic treasure collection. The Geography of Childhood is in part an investigation of the children in our communities and what childhood is lived like today. My interview with Sarah tells a story about a 5 year-old who constantly takes home little things that he has noticed. It's a reminder that people of all ages need time and space to make connections between all the little things that our larger ideas are built from. It's a story about how one parent provides for that, when she could easily choose to make things more convenient for herself.



Have I myself stopped noticing the little things? I see tiny treasures and sense little mysteries just as much as Owen, but there's no time to dig in. Now, I have to collect and save little pieces of my schedule,

scraps of evenings and weekends, to use for reflection and connection, the way that Owen tries to hold on to every bubble gum wrapper for his mini-comics.

And that's not the way I want it. At home and at school, I'd happily trade away every educational device, every light table, every tree cookie, magna-tile and mirror, I'd give up so much of *the stuff* if it meant more time to just be present with *the people*. Owen's play ends up having a significant impact in the world of adults. Could this be more common if there was more space for children in the "real world"? Ultimately, this story is intriguing to me because of the way Owen relates to people; his grandfather, his teacher, his mother and more- through his collecting and creativity with his treasures.

[Read the full interview here.](#)

Documentation as a Way to Support Learning and Understanding

Joanne Esser

This autumn, the Reggio-Inspired Network of Minnesota created our newest initiative, the **Documentation Lab**, as a way for educators to share our documentation practices with each other and to practice critically analyzing the documentation we study.

Documentation is one of the most essential practices that the educators in Reggio Emilia, Italy developed and modeled, *a way of looking at children's thinking* that has inspired authentic child-centered practices in schools around the world. One definition of documentation in the Reggio sense is: "*a process for making pedagogical (or other) work visible and subject to dialogue, interpretation, contestation and transformation,*" (Gunilla Dahlberg, in *The Hundred Languages of Children*). It is only through sharing with other thoughtful educators the visible traces of our work with children that we can more deeply understand and support the children's work. The Documentation Lab creates a forum for comparing interpretations, providing multiple perspectives to inform our practice, whether we are presenting documentation or we are participants studying another's work.

The Documentation Lab met three times so far, once a month. Each time we gather, one participant offers visible (or auditory) observations from their own work with children. These could be photographs, video clips, transcripts of conversations, anecdotal notes, work samples done by the children or any other tangible recordings of their thinking and play. Then the group follows a specific step-by-step discussion protocol that we are adapting from a process used by Steve Seidel and colleagues at Project Zero. We spend time in turn to observe, describe, raise questions and speculate about the work we see children doing in the traces offered. Then the group hears more from the presenting teacher, who has been listening all along to what was said about the children's work. Finally, together we discuss implications for learning that have arisen from the conversation.

Perhaps the place in the structured conversation where the deepest learning happens is discussing the implications for teaching, learning and understanding children's strategies. Everyone is invited to share thoughts stimulated by examining the work. One of the big questions we consider is, *What could we do next or differently to move this learning forward?* For example, in October, Bridget Keefe, a teacher from St. David's Center, brought a series of photographs she had taken of toddlers interacting with one another. After studying the photos of the toddlers, the group considered ways that the teachers at St. David's might share their insights with the children's parents and gather the parents' perspectives. We wondered whether revisiting the photos with the children themselves would result in language that

could further illuminate what they were doing, and whether adding some of the teachers' own questions to the display of photos might highlight for families what they were noticing.

At the end of each evening of studying documentation, we reflect on the process itself. After looking at the toddler photos, these were some of the participants' comments: "Using the protocol treats the documentation like primary sources. We look at the primary sources first, not simply the secondary retelling of what happened." "I found that our questions and observations got better as we went along, richer and not as predictable, and we got better at our critical thinking. This takes practice." "It gave me a broader understanding of the deliberate, purposeful choices we make as teachers."

Because we are studying real traces from real children in our own Minnesota teaching practices, rather than hypothetical examples or experiences retold from Italy, the Documentation Lab process allows us to directly examine our work in practical ways. We hone our skills at observing, critical thinking and planning in collaboration with supportive colleagues. Then we can return to our own settings and apply to our work with children what we have discovered. This is the essence of Reggio-inspired practice.

Documentation in the Reggio sense is: "a process for making pedagogical (or other) work visible and subject to dialogue, interpretation, contestation and transformation." -Gunilla Dahlberg

We invite you to join us!

Contact Joanne Esser: jesser@blakeschool.org

[More detail and examples found here.](#)



"Using the protocol treats the documentation like primary sources."

Book Study

Tom Bedard

The Reggio-Inspired Network of Minnesota Book Study transformed how I read and how I view my practice as an educator. Throughout my career in early childhood education, I considered myself a reflective teacher. In the context of book study, though, I find myself reflecting even more deeply about my practice. I changed from thinking, *“How I can I make an activity better?”* to *“How do I create conditions that will help me see children’s thinking processes?”*

Three factors contribute to this shift. The first is book selection: collaboratively, we have identified books that examine various aspects of early education in the schools of Reggio Emilia. Each book models how the pedagogues of Reggio Emilia think about how children think AND think about their own thinking. For example, in **dialogue with spaces**, the pedagogues researched how children listen to and represent sounds in a space. *How often do we examine our own soundscapes from the children’s perspectives? Or represent a sound, visually?*

The second factor is the pace of the discussion. Each month, we discuss one and only one chapter. (Sometimes we even repeat a single chapter, when it is particularly rich.) This allows us to go more in depth. *What does the text mean? and How does it relate to our own context?* For example, in **Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care**, the authors ask us to examine the concept of quality from the perspective of *who gets to decide? What does quality really mean?*

The third factor is the group itself. The book study is open to everyone. I remember being quite nervous the first time I went, but I was made to feel welcome right away in part because of a protocol that invites everyone’s participation. More importantly, the group establishes a context that supports us to be good listeners so when someone does speak, they feel like their ideas are valuable to the discussion.

Sunday Monthly Book Study Continues

Book study is the third Sunday of the month from 3:00-4:30 PM.

Please Note Location: Until the end of football season we will continue to convene at the Finnish Bistro. [2264 Como Ave | St Paul, MN 55108](#)

We are just finishing Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia, by Vea Vecchi and about to choose a new title. New participants are always welcome. Email Patti at pattiroseloftus@gmail.com for more information or to be added to the book study email list. For dates, visit our [Events Page](#).

Library Resources

The Network has been donating literature from and about the Reggio educational project to the Debra Fish Library, accessible through your public library directly or via inter-library loan. These references, in particular, could support thinking about the Geography of Childhood:

Published by reggiochildren:

- *reggio tutta*

- *one city, many children*
 - *not just anyplace (dvd)*
 - *participation is an invitation/ la partecipazione e un invite (dvd)*
 - *dialogues with places*
 - *the park is...*
 - *theater curtain*
-

A New Opportunity: The RINM Education Scholarship

The RINM Education Scholarship is a new opportunity available to those interested in learning more about the Reggio Approach. Network members are invited to apply at any time of the year (a minimum of 6 weeks before an event you plan to attend). This scholarship may be used for registration costs to local, national or international Reggio-inspired workshops and conferences. Preference will be given to professional development opportunities where educators from the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy are presenting. Funds are limited and awards are made at the discretion of the Reggio-Inspired Network of Minnesota Board.

[Download Application.](#)

Upcoming Events

Book Study: January 21, 2018

Documentation Lab: January 25, 2018

Exploring the Geography of Childhood: January 28, 2018

Book Study: February 18, 2018

Documentation Lab: February 22, 2018

The Language of Clay: January 24, 2018

[For more information about upcoming events.](#)

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