

Growing a Culture of Inquiry: Observation as Professional Development

by Ann Pelo

Ann Pelo is the mentor teacher at Hilltop Children's Center in Seattle, where she has been a teacher and learner since 1991. The teachers at Hilltop have taught Ann as much about professional development as she's taught them; this article is dedicated to them.

Early childhood programs ought to be incubators of inquiry. Children, teachers, families, and program administrators, collectively and individually engaged in systematic investigation, searching and researching, asking questions, mulling over hypotheses, debating, trying on new perspectives: this is the culture of inquiry in which we all deserve to participate.

To grow a culture of inquiry, we need professional development rooted in inquiry, aimed at fostering the values and growing the dispositions and skills of researchers: curiosity; willingness to linger with questions; commitment to constructing knowledge with others through dialogue, disagreement, and challenge; and, attentive observation. When we put inquiry at the heart of our programs, we organize our curriculum for children and for teachers around observation, study, and responsive planning.

In a curriculum built around inquiry, teachers pay close attention to children's play and work, taking notes and photographs, capturing what they see and hear — researchers collecting data. Teachers study their notes and photos and other traces of children's work to unearth the meaning in the children's play — researchers making meaning of their observations: *What theories are the children exploring through their play? What questions are they asking? What relationships are they building?* From their observation and study, teachers plan ways for the children to test their theories, expand their questions, and strengthen their relationships — researchers taking action. And, then, teachers observe and listen some more, as the children engage with the materials and activities that teachers offer as a result of their planning; they make notes about their observations and start another round of study and planning. Throughout this cycle of observation, study, and planning, teachers make their observation and thinking visible to the children, to families, and to each other with written documentation and display.

This process becomes a spiral that carries teachers, children, and families more and more deeply into investigation, collaboration, and relationship. Like life, it unfolds moment by moment, one step at a time, with surprises and detours and new questions to take up. And, like life, it is anchored in everyday, ordinary moments in our classrooms.

At Hilltop Children's Center, the full-day, year-round child care program where I am the mentor teacher, we've experimented with several professional development practices centered on observation, as we've aimed to grow the dispositions and skills needed for this cycle of inquiry: center-wide research questions, supported observation and meaning-making, and collaborative study of observations.

Center-wide research questions

Inspired by the study questions used by the staff at Chicago Commons, we develop a research question each year to give us a shared focus for observation and study.

Our research question is linked to our year-long professional development focus. Several years ago, for example, our year-long focus centered on the intersections between anti-bias curriculum and the Reggio-inspired practice of pedagogical documentation. During our monthly staff meetings, quarterly in-service days, and our annual staff retreat, we explored this intersection from a range of perspectives, with the intention of strengthening our anti-bias work with children, families, and each other. Our research question at the beginning of that year was: "How do children explore and express their cultural identities in their drama play?" Later in the year, we added a second question: "When do children call attention to difference and when do they ignore it? How do they use difference in their relationships with each other?"



years, we've deepened our knowledge of children's drama play, of the way they use blocks, of their social strategies for inclusion and exclusion. Through our observation and study, we join in dialogue with educational theorists like Piaget, Dewey, and Paley.

Supported observation and meaning-making in the classroom

We establish our research question in September; I bring some big ideas that I think hold potential for our shared study, and, as a full staff, we tease out a specific question for our research. Our research question launches us into a cycle of observation and study.

Teachers bring their research question observations to our monthly meetings of the full staff, where we study them together. During these full-staff meetings, teachers from different classroom teaching teams work together; as they share their observations, they bump into new and unexpected ways of thinking about children's learning — and even unexpected ways of thinking about the research question itself. Our work with the research question during staff meetings invites teachers to try on new perspectives, to see the delicate dance between “just-the-facts” observation and the subtle interpretation that shapes observation notes.

During our staff meeting work with the research question, we typically plan some collective next steps that we'll take to grow curriculum — steps we'll take in light of our research observations to make more room for children's cultural expressions, for example, or to support children's ability to engage with differences. This planning inevitably carries us to conversations about our shared values and goals for children, and about our collective teaching practices — conversations which deepen our sense of purpose and vision as a program.

Our research question not only gives us a way to practice the cycle of observation, study, and planning; it also leads us to specific new understandings about children's learning and development. Through our research question observations over the last few

The research question provides a shared framework for observation that lets us practice the cycle of observation, meaning-making, and planning as a whole staff. The parallel practices of supported observation and meaning-making with individual teachers and with classroom teaching teams grounds teachers' inquiry in their particular contexts.

When I'm in a classroom, as mentor teacher, I partner with a teacher to observe children's play and listen to their conversations. We tuck ourselves into a non-intrusive space where we can take notes and photos about what we're seeing and hearing. We talk quietly together about the play we see, sharing our questions and musings as we seek to understand what's important about the play for the children. We consider what we might offer the children right there and then to deepen their exploration and to sustain their play. Our intention is to see into these ordinary moments, to use close observation as a doorway into understanding and, then, into offering children challenge and support.

As teachers become more and more at ease with this process, they dive into observation themselves, not waiting for me to partner with them, but gathering stories themselves. When teachers meet in the hallway or in the office, they are eager to share their observations with each other: they talk with engaged curiosity about what they've seen and heard, discuss possible interpretations of the children's play, and share thoughts about next steps they might take. The air is full of questions, insights, hypotheses; breathing it in is breathing in inquiry.

Collaborative study of observations

To solidify our practice of inquiry, we've established the expectation that every teacher brings written

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observation notes and/or photos to their classroom teaching team's hour-long weekly meeting. Teachers pull out carefully typed sheets, or bits of scrap paper — even crumpled paper napkins used to record a breakfast table conversation that captured a teacher's attention. We dive into the stories together, working with questions like these to help us make meaning of our observations:

- What are we curious about as we listened to this story of children play?
- What are the children curious about? What are they trying to figure out?
- What knowledge are the children drawing on? What theories are they testing?
- How are the children building on each other's ideas, perspectives, and contributions?
- Are there any inconsistencies in the children's thinking?
- What do we want to learn more about?
- What goals and values come up for us in this situation?

Once we have a sense of what the children's play is "about," we consider how we might extend or challenge children's thinking. We plan one or two next steps, concrete action that we'll take with the children to help them deepen their exploration, nudge them to take new perspectives, and encourage them to reconsider their theories. Our intention is to generate a cycle of inquiry for the children — to create more questions and deeper study, not to give children information or lead them to "right answers" or help them acquire facts. In our planning, we consider questions like:

- What changes could we make to the classroom environment to invite children to look at their pursuit from a new perspective?
- What materials could we add to the classroom?
- How could we participate in the children's play?
- How could we invite the children to use expressive and representational media to deepen or extend their thinking?

- How could we use our notes and photos sketches to help the children revisit and extend their play?
- How will we be in dialogue with families, inviting their reflections and insights as well as letting them know what we're thinking and wondering?

As we end a meeting, teachers have a plan about what they'll do next to extend and deepen children's investigations. A week later, they arrive at the team's next meeting with more observations to share about how children engaged with the next steps that teachers offered — and we move through the cycle of meaning-making and planning again.

With each round of the cycle, teachers become more skillful as researchers; they notice gaps in their observation notes and work to correct those gaps next time; they become more astute at looking underneath the topical concerns of children's play, digging out the deeper meanings and questions that children's play holds; they experiment with strategies and practices to deepen children's thinking, growing a repertoire of possibilities; they engage in passionate discussion with each other, relaxing into the challenge of deep collaboration as they take up meaningful research with each other. This cycle of observation, meaning-making, and planning weaves our professional development into the fabric of daily teaching.

At the same time, with each round of the cycle, in-depth, long-term investigations grow. This emergent

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PHOTOGRAPH BY ANN PELO



curriculum, anchored by observation and study, stays closely linked to children's questions and pursuits, because it unfolds one step at a time. Teachers carefully observe what happens with each step, constantly adjusting and refining their planning in response to what they observe. In this way, children and teachers construct curriculum together.

Observation as a strategy for transformation

When we put observation at the heart of our professional development at Hilltop, everything changed. Teachers who'd typically sat back, arms

crossed, unengaged during staff meetings and classroom team meetings now lean into our discussions: they have observation stories to share, insights to offer, questions to ask. Classroom team meetings, once a tedious listing of housekeeping and logistical details, have become animated discussions about teaching and learning; teachers are quick to work through the dry and mundane details of classroom life so that they can dive into the stimulating and sustaining work of teacher research. Talk of our core values and our vision for our work is a regular part of our staff meetings, as we seek to locate our observations and planning in our school's larger purpose. Our curriculum involves everyone — children, teachers, families — in long-term investigations, as the cycle of inquiry for teachers launches cycles of inquiry for children and families.

This transformation required strong institutional support; we created my half-time mentor teacher position to organize and facilitate our professional development. And it required willingness by teachers to take risks, to see their work in new ways — to become researchers, observing closely, making meaning with each other, anchoring themselves in the revelations of each moment. A year into our effort to put observation at the heart of our teaching and learning, one of the teachers at Hilltop commented that "This is making me a better teacher, for sure — but more than that, it's making me a better person. This is how I want to live in the world — paying attention, staying connected to what I see, thinking about big ideas with other people."

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Culture of inquiry?: The idea of early childhood programs as incubators of inquiry for children, families, and teachers is a new one for some. Open the discussion with teachers about what such a culture might look like, feel like, and then begin.

The cycle continues: Creating a cycle of observation, study, and planning allowed Pelo and her colleagues to make their observation and thinking visible. Explore these ideas by setting up a pilot project to get started. See where the exploration leads and learn from the process.

Ask questions: Focusing across an entire program on research questions was powerful and apparently cumulative. Gather teachers together to begin your inquiry process by zeroing in on some questions that deserve program-wide consideration for focusing teachers' observation and study.

Typed, scribbled, or scrawled: Collaborative study of observations confirmed that observation notes are dynamic and not always perfectly prepared. Don't let the fear of getting it perfect prevent teachers from getting started. Start somewhere — and support teachers in making meaning out of their observations through dialogue and sharing.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht