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BUILDING THEORIES: PLAY, MAKING, AND PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD ART EDUCATION

A Dissertation in

Art Education

by

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Abstract

The study is theoretical and narrative—anchored in my own subjectivity and in my experiences as a teacher working with young children in an urban elementary school and in a new early childhood program. My participation in a year-long researcher-teacher collaboration in the studio of a Reggio-inspired school for young children and my observations in Reggio Emilia inform the processes through which I have generated data through pedagogical documentation in each of these contexts. In Chapter One, I interrogate images of children to illustrate how constructions of who children are (and who they could become) produce and sustain educational institutions and relationships. It is my intent to place the image of the rich, historical child in a relationship of positive tension with the eternal child. In Chapter Two, I present pedagogical documentation as a form of ethnographic research through which educators generate, test, and refine theories as they co-construct knowledge with young children. Here, I trace how the small theories that teachers develop through practice can contribute richness and complexity to the larger body of theory in educational research. In Chapter Three, I situate children’s visual productions as cognitive and socio-cultural processes that are socially distributed to investigate how children make meanings through making as individual and group learners. I consider children’s making in various media and use theory from contemporary literacy educators to support a construction of children’s visual productions as making in visual languages. I assert that in their making, children strive for communicative fluency. In Chapter Four, I contribute to current theories of child art in early childhood education by positioning children’s visual productions as making—a
social practice that performs social work in multiple social worlds—and by extending the theoretical assumptions about children’s making to include ways in which children make with new media. In the Epilogue, I review the theoretical contributions that I make in the study. Those include the idea of unacceptable children, the portability of the Reggio Emilia approach and site-specific pedagogy, the idea of making, and the process of finding voice in research and writing.
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Acknowledgements

I have written this section last, partly because it is one of the most exciting parts of a dissertation to write and partly because it is one of the most difficult parts of a dissertation to write—it is daunting to realize that it is not possible to give due thanks to all of the children and adults who have been a part of this project and who have supported me unconditionally throughout the span of this endeavor.

So first, I have been teaching, in one way or another, for the past nine years. I would like to extend my deepest respect and most sincere gratitude to the children and families who have allowed me to become and to remain a part of their inner lives. I would like to think that I have undertaken this research with children and that their voices are the most vital part of the work. I am hopeful that as I continue in my work, I will have the rich opportunities to learn from and with children to which I have become both accustomed and devoted.

Of course, my committee is as much a part of this work as the children and I! I am especially grateful for their constant support and their consistently thoughtful answers to flurries of anxious email messages. My advisor, Christine Marmé Thompson, has astounded me with her generosity of mind, her gifts of time, and her thoughtful and gentle encouragement. I came to rely heavily upon her beautifully handwritten notes—evidence of her exacting reading of numerous drafts and incarnations of this work. Small purple stars and question marks led me to a deeper understanding of the questions that I hoped to ask but that I often struggled to articulate. I am, in fact, quite sad to let this
manuscript go because the memories I have from working with her are so pleasurable and so vital to what I hope my continued work experience in the field will be. I can’t possibly thank her enough in these few pages (and I doubt that readers would want to endure more of my gushing)! Brent Wilson has not only championed my work as a teacher and as a researcher but has also pushed me to extend my thinking about the “interesting things” that I saw and felt happening in my classroom further than I could have imagined. He never fails to both inspire and surprise me—the way in which he seems to blend a pure kind of wonder about what children make and do with a brilliant theoretical overlay is just amazing! Yvonne Gaudelius’ contributions were supportive and theoretically sound. Her voice about the political aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach, the feminization of early education, and the ethics of work and research with children are especially cogent within the context of a work as intimate as this. Her comment that it feels as if I have treated the children with whom I have worked with respect in this work was perhaps one of the most valuable compliments I could hope to receive. Sarah Rich’s fierce intellectual prowess and productivity, her metaphor of the “hostess,” and her acerbic wit make me both laugh and think: I know that she will approve of nothing less than air-tight writing and theoretical work. So, then, I feel that her approval of the content of this work is a grand achievement!

The richness and weight of my entire committee’s work is vital to my own ideas about what research and teaching can be. Thank you!

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And, I would like to thank my entire extended family, and my friends for their unquestionable support, gifts of hospitality, and of good cheer. And a special thank you, then, goes to my Italian cousins Francesca and Francesco Marazza for their willingness to support my infatuation with Reggio and their refusal to speak to me in English. And, finally, I would like to thank the schools and administrators who took a chance on me and my ways of teaching with the full knowledge that I would be recording mine and the children’s experiences. Lest my critical eye in this study be misread as only criticism, I must write that I am grateful and humbled that so many wonderful places to be a teacher and a child exist!
Prologue

Teaching and Research: Identity versus Role Confusion

With the image of the teacher dealing with the unformed child, who in turn is happily involved with the unformed clay or sand, we just about hit rock bottom on the prevailing scale of intellectual worthiness (Hawkins, 1974, p. 41).

Do you just wanna be Shaggy? It’s the only part left. You can still make the Mystery Machine with us (Conversation between a group of three and four-year-olds playing Scooby Doo® and a new student who would like to join in the play, personal communication, November 9, 2007).

We are fifty-five days into the school year. I have been to school every day for eighty-five days. Yesterday, someone threw up on me. Today, I remembered to bring a change of clean clothing for myself. Lucky break—when I arrived, half of my classroom was flooded with raw sewage. We spent the morning on the north side of the room—we only ventured to the infected area when it was absolutely necessary. When we had to return to “safe” side, we sprayed the bottoms of our shoes with Lysol®. The children were fascinated with the patient plumber and his snake—an auger machine that fed a long tube into the sewage system to dissipate the clog—that is sometimes called a “toilet jack.” Both names fascinated the four-year-old boys. Today’s clog was seventy-five feet
deep but last week’s was one hundred. One of the four-year-old boys counted to a hundred for the first time this afternoon.

Despite my better efforts, when I don’t spend early mornings, late evenings, and weekends in my classroom I have difficulty not thinking about being there. I am constantly haunted: about preparing, refining, or presenting this or that material, tweaking this furniture arrangement, or controlling this or that traffic pattern. I have chosen each item in the classroom with care. They reflect my aesthetic: an eclectic mix of handmade items and of kitsch. Yes, there is plastic, but there is also wood, metal, stone, glass, and ceramic. I am especially conscious of the ways in which the items carry multiple communicative potentials that several audiences must read. I have displayed my own artwork. The children contribute their own additions (Figure 1). So far this year, they have added two hula leis, a large tissue paper rainbow ball, three paper lanterns, a circular basket of leaves, a dead praying mantis, a Root-Vue® farm, two dead butterflies and a dead beetle, four framed marker drawings, a pad of puppy and kitten stickers, several necklaces made of beads intended to be hung from the ceiling so that they can make them move by blowing hard with puffed cheeks, and six bags of rocks. One bag is of drawing rocks—they leave a chalky mark on most surfaces. My assistant teacher, a geologist by trade, promises to bring in her rock identification guide for the children. Now, whenever we venture outside, I provide the children with plastic bags to collect what they find. They call the collections “clues.” Experience tells me that these “clues” will work themselves back into our experiences in the classroom. But, I have taken some of the bags of rocks off of display: some of the three-year-old girls were eating them during an especially extended episode of “kitty food” play.
Figure 1: Children’s contributions to the visual landscape of their early childhood classroom. These re-used plastic bags hold “clues.”
Preparing the classroom is such a pleasurable experience for me that I lose myself within it—I experience a clichéd version of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1993) “flow.” Sometimes I wonder if this carefully inscribed environment—my third teacher—is too carefully polished. What does it reveal (or conceal) about the children who live within it? What does it reveal (or conceal) about me (My specific phobias—germs—or my innate drive for order). I recall my first steps inside the Diana School in Reggio Emilia. I was alone, left to linger and to think, on a study tour that hosted groups of teachers who already worked together and who had come with specific missions in mind. I was hypnotized at the front door. Obscured amidst the lush late spring foliage in the Giardini Pubblici, the school’s entryway appeared to signal the residence of a mid-century Modernist hobbit (Figure 2). I was surprised that the school’s physical structure resembled schools from a similar era that I have previously encountered: perhaps I had expected Reggio Emilia to feel less familiar. When we opened the door (there was a rush to get inside) several women brushed past me into the central piazza with bothered looks. I overheard one loudly retort in English, “It must be staged.”
Figure 2: The front entrance of the Diana School in Reggio Emilia. Photo taken with permission from Reggio Children.
I was naïve then. I was not yet responsible for preparing my own highly visible early childhood program classroom: one that would be featured in the local press and toured by countless visitors interested in both innovative educational practices and green design. As an art teacher, I had assumed that all classrooms are staged. They are installations. Yet, now, I understand more clearly how Reggio seems so incredulous. Part of this may have to do with its deceptively unfamiliar appearance. It is difficult to image the messy and intimate (and often disgusting) daily realities of early education and care within such an editorialized space. Do the children swallow the tiny materials presented chromatically (Figure 3) in the schools’ ateliers the way that they eat their drawing rocks? The atelier’s materials have an industrial feel—most are not wood—that belies their resemblance to Froebel’s gifts, Hill blocks or Pratt unit blocks, and Montessori’s sensorial materials. Indeed, Loris Malaguzzi, first director and charismatic leader of the schools, was not only familiar with these other educators’ efforts but he worked to surpass them. He was probably also familiar with the public expositions of those influential inventors of early childhood education working with children in glass houses. Like those early twentieth-century viewers, spectators in Reggio seem to meet the incongruous reality of Reggio Emilia along an emotional spectrum that ranges from wonder to bitterness. How does school work in Reggio? These are the questions from a teachers’ listserv upon which Johnson (1999) pounces in his biting critique: “Are behavior problems such as spitting, biting, and hitting common concerns in the Reggio program? How are problems such as these dealt with in the Reggio approach?” (p.66). Johnson does not cite the authors of the questions or comments he reproduces. Wright (2000) points this out as an act of silencing—of further obscuring the largely female and
undereducated workforce that provides most early care and education in Western
countries. These concerns appear to emerge from a field that is dually overburdened and
mesmerized by the possibility of rebirth that the apparently highly refined sheen of the
Reggio Emilia approach appears to offer.

My mind has never allowed me much peace. I am not pompous: I do not think
that I am more complicated than others, but I am nearly certain that I am less skillful at
accepting this complexity. I have struggled with it since my first memories. For the past
ten years, I have slept with a stack of post-it notes on my bedside table. I use various
“designer” sticky notes: some I prefer solid, saturated colors (except red) and modernist

Figure 3: Materials presented in monochromatic arrangements in clear plastic containers.
Photo taken with permission from Reggio Children.
designs. When I get low on a particular stack, I save the precious few notes for “special” occasions. I dislike the idea of disposability. I have placed the post-it notes in an antique Limoges porcelain tray on my bedside table. When I have an idea that stirs me from sleep (as I usually do), I write it carefully on the post-it pad. I make sure that my handwriting is neat: It is an essential part of my self-presentation. When I was a child, I was intrigued with drawing letters. I perfected several ways of printing in a particular style, mimicking both my father’s architect’s print (a learned affect from his art school days) and my mother’s graceful script. My husband recalls going through a similar phase as a child. He would copy the curvature of her cursive carefully and then ask his early childhood educator mother, “What does this say?” Convinced that his irregular curls had meaning, he still recalls his frustration at failing to instantaneously grasp the system through mere reproduction. In his second decade of life, he became a ferocious writer. The ideas that I note on my sticky bedside diary generally range from an insight about a particular child and a material and/or experience that I think will engage them (more wire), something that I can’t forget to do that day (this or that revision—pay my student loan bill), or something that I might choose to wear (raspberry tights with a green linen dress). I have always been just this obsessive. As a child I was continually on the prowl for something in which I could completely sink my impatient mind. Even as I write this prelude, my thoughts obstinately veer toward teaching. Tomorrow is Monday—the beginning of a new week in school that will bring with it two more children new to the class. All the children will wonder what is new in their classroom this week. I just thought about Gia, a three-year-old child in my class. On Friday, she asked about my notebook. I explained that I was writing about school. I wonder if she will ask again tomorrow. Last year, the
children became so aware of the importance of my writing that they stuffed Valentines Day cards inside of my notebook for me to find. I found them several days later while I sat on a propeller plane stuck on a runway in southeastern Illinois during a late winter ice storm. I was on my way to a conference to present research about my classroom experiences. I was worried about whether or not my work was research. I held onto the notes tightly as we careened through turbulent air: the Crayola® marker stained my hands. It was one of the first times that I felt how quickly the plane was really moving. We learned only when we had landed that the pilot had taken a chance in driving the deadheaded flight home—his wife was in labor at a nearby hospital.

Early in life, I found making the most satisfactory outlet for my unstill nature (I am fidgeting now). I focused much of that making on self-presentation. While I absolutely adored consuming—an activity in which I still guiltily indulge, albeit with a conspicuously green conscience and a carefully constructed penchant for vintage that originates as much with my frugality as it does with consumer guilt—I got a different kind of rush from making. I began drafting patterns and making clothing in second grade. My first project: Roman Gladiator sandals made from paper and staples. I had watched Ben Hur on television. Not grasping its biblical connotations, I concentrated my looking on its costume design. I learned that it is important to make shoes from neither staples nor paper. I must have been influenced by my mother. When I was a preschooler, she began to teach tailoring and pattern drafting at a local college. When I was not attending the university-based child care program, I went to class with her. I was as mesmerized by her pulsating sewing machine needle as I was by my father’s almost supernatural ability to draw anything realistically. In one of my first memories, I am begging him to show me
how to make a tire seem like its *moving*. I can’t recall now if the memory is real or if I reconstructed it when I looked through one of my first sketchbooks as a slightly older child. I remember then that the book’s pages were flaky and yellow—they came apart in my hands. The book was filled with pages and pages of tractor trailer *Pepsi* trucks, drawn from various angles. I recognize both my father’s steady hand and my own shaky graphics. They are on the cusp of moving from circular scribble to schematic form.

Sometimes, now as a teacher in a mixed age classroom of three-, four-, and five-year old children I wonder what the children can and will remember from the many hours we spend living together each day. What impressions will the experience leave with them? The idea of childhood memory intrigues me: my own “afterlife” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002) of childhood seems so intimately connected to the project of teaching. I think about how my image of the child is tied to my image of me; how it is a relational construct. As Graue and Walsh (1998) explain:

> In exploring subjectivity, then, we emphasize the social nature of research and the researcher as a social self (Bakhtin, 1981). Whatever the researcher discovers about her own personal biases and personal relationships to those with whom she is working, she must also locate herself in the theoretical connections of her field to achieve what Strauss (1987) calls an “informed theoretical sensitivity” (p. 29).

I spent the rest of my early school years continuing to make. I dabbled in various crafts: embroidery, woodworking (I was one of the only girls in my middle school woodworking class to win a woodworking award), painting, and sculpture. As my brother grew older, I enlisted him more and more as my unwilling but affable apprentice. We had two favorite pastimes. In one, we would make “sets” to photograph. We did this in the
downstairs bathroom. We would take a large piece of cardboard and paint it, place characters within it and photograph it. I remember being continually frustrated that no matter how carefully I placed the viewfinder of my pink and purple 110 camera around the backdrop, parts of the bathroom tile still showed through on the developed roll and arrogantly ruined our illusion. Rocky delighted in the sets. He is now an architect; still preoccupied with the look and feel of space and working in miniature. Our second hobby involved “borrowing” a mini-audio recorder from my father’s work things and recording various sounds. We would sing and sometimes we dropped things into the toilet to hear them splash. We would play back the tape and squeal and giggle in our secret and subversive delights.

My family was quite amenable to my eccentricities, and no one was much surprised when I became intrigued by art. My first school-art love affair was with Renoir. In my own unique interpretation, I carefully copied his works. I especially loved *A Girl with a Watering Can*. I labored over each fuzzy fold of her lace-trimmed overcoat with a colored pencil. I spent hours in a lighted make-up mirror trying to make my hair “fuzzy.” Unsatisfied, I graduated to Degas and spend most of my third grade year trying to emulate ballerinas even though I, myself, was a ballet-class dropout. When it was cold, I would wear a sweat suit to school under the pink tulle tutu my mother sewed for me. This was the year after the single most important experience of my educational life occurred. One day, early in my second grade year, a man in a three-piece suit came to my classroom. He carried a soft leather briefcase, introduced himself as the school’s psychologist, and asked me to come with him for an “interview.” We went into the school’s health office and he pulled closed a curtain that divided the room between a
wood-veneered round table with diminutive chairs and a cot. The interview was a series of problems. They were my most favorite kind: Logical problems, sequencing, “brain teasers,” as we called them in school, and trivia. Each had a magnificently clear answer. He complimented my enthusiasm and shook my hand. A few weeks later I received a letter in the mail that invited me to join an enrichment program for “gifted” children called HEP. The program met for one day each week in the same small health office. I was the youngest child and the only girl. We had a beautiful young teacher whom I instantly adored (and still do). She would come to pull us out of our “regular” classroom in the morning while the other children taunted, “Time for HELP, you weirdoes!” Despite its risk of social banishment from kinderculture, the program was a refuge: entire days to spend on self-directed projects of our own choice with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of institutional support in the form of re-use materials. I spent that first year studying Impressionism and Architecture. I learned two styles of Calligraphy. In our small group—five children—we played games, we invented games, we designed projects, and we planned and took trips outside of school. We were the protagonists of our educational experiences and we formed close and nearly impervious bonds with one another.

Although my outward fondness for Degas has cooled, I usually wear ballet flats to school. Four-year-old Layla asked me about this yesterday, “Marissa, why do you always wear ballerina shoes to school?” I looked down at her own ballet flats. They were anchored to her small feet with an elastic strap. “Because they are my favorite,” I
answered. “They are my favorite, too,” she replied as she nestled her head against my wool—tight covered knees in the brisk autumn wind. In intimate moments such as these, I feel twinges of guilt. What messages do I send to the young children whom I teach with my body? Perhaps I work on myself too much: Perhaps my eccentricities hide deep insecurities. Why does this work on me ease my mind? It has always been a shield of sorts. I am keenly more aware of this as I engage in the complicated complementary professions of teaching and research.

I am thankful that the new preschool classroom has a bathroom within it: I have had neither a lunch nor a planning break this year. My assistant teacher and I have perfected the art of perching ourselves on the miniature toilet. We spend seven and a half hours a day with twenty-one mostly three-, and some four- and five-year-olds in a multi-age classroom. Last week, the children began to play in the bathroom. The door locks from the inside. Thank you, insightful architects with a keen eye for melding the desires of three-year-olds with your erudite vision. At first several girls would noticeably “hide” in the bathroom. I would hear hushed voices and giggles: I paid little mind to this. I admonished my assistant teacher when she shot me the “Aren’t you going to do something?” look. I explained that I rarely intervene in play unless it is a matter of explicit emotional or physical safety. I wondered, quietly, if my constant note-taking was itself an intervention. Of course, it’s on the down-low. My new school knows that I am a researcher. They know that I am, at the very moment that I am helping them to build their first-ever early childhood program, finishing my dissertation. What they don’t know is that there is no off button for research—no line between it and teaching for me. I can only
do both at once. I am grateful to spend such a lengthy expanse of time building theories with young children.

I had assuaged the tension between my assistant teacher and the bathroom door for the day. The next day I put a feather duster near the table with the lamp on it in the bathroom and a cup with sponges and soapy water near the sink. The girls spent nearly a half hour cleaning the bathroom in solitude. They resurfaced for snack time, wet but beaming, surprised that they had missed an impromptu group discussion. They campaigned for a reenactment. I abided, armed with my documentary notes. We sang the new song that they composed to the tune of *Row, row, row your boat.* Then, yesterday, I found three of my most active four-year-old boys in the bathroom. I heard shrieks (of pain?) and went to investigate. As is the system in my classroom, I cautiously knocked on the door and said, “Hello. It’s Marissa.” They answered, “Come in.” I opened the door (perhaps my first error of judgment) and found the three of them, nearly naked, crossing streams. In the kind of intimate situational access that a researcher hopes for and that a teacher dreads, they were simultaneously using their thumbs as trigger fingers and shooting one another, with sound effects and feigned dying. Miko cried out with pleasure, “My pee went all crazy!” I closed the door. The boys and I have an understanding.

Perhaps Graue and Walsh (1998) explain it best,

> Kids do stuff. If they didn’t do things that adults don’t like, adults wouldn’t spend so much time monitoring them. In fact, kids often do stuff to keep adults at a distance—stay away from the climbing structure unless you want to hear fart jokes (p. 59).
Later, as I was mid-conversation with a particularly serious parent, Miko emerged from the bathroom, interrupted us and clearly stated, “Excuse me, Marissa, my pee did not go all crazy this time.” This is the image of the child that guides my work as a teacher and researcher: the relational child who seeks and achieves participation in social worlds through multiple modes of performative making. Today, the child who yesterday morning taught other children how to crawl on the floor like a baby and beg, “Wipe my butt!” while squealing “Poop!” this afternoon discovered, mapped, and articulated the difference even and odd numbers.

**The Study: Subjectivity, Scope, and Serendipity**

As I review and continue to revise this manuscript, I notice that I have made substantial changes to the project outline that I presented to my committee two years ago. At that time, I thought that I would examine the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education through the intersection of four frames. I chose these frames because of their relevance to early childhood art education. They were: site-specific pedagogy, constructions of childhood, constructions of art and aesthetic issues, and the ethics and politics of early education. When I recently reread my prospectus, I recalled that I had revealed my hope that the frames would not be discrete; I proposed that they would mirror the role of the *atelier* in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy by melting into one another. I imagined this melting forming a kind of elliptical Venn diagram: It was a controlled oozing. I had used a similar overlapping image in my master’s thesis and my then-committee had urged me to continue to refine it. I thought, rather erroneously at the
time, that by stretching the boundaries of a contained shape, I could contain (or frame) my findings. I thought this visual metaphor for mapping would help me to understand what I might find. I was still looking for data. I imagined plugging it into the Venn diagram in pithy quips. Instead, I found no data: I had to generate it (Graue & Walsh, 1998). As Graue and Walsh (1998) explain, “The ‘it’…[was] situated, historically, socially, and culturally. Meaning making is situated” (p. xvii). They continue:

The act of research is conceived as nested contexts, including the researcher’s perspectives on research, theory, and in this case, children; the role negotiated with/by the participants; and the relationships that ensure over time. From these contexts, data are generated in a local way that represents their complex and dialectical relationships (1998, p. 73).

After I had generated my data—I am still generating data—my findings helped me to formulate questions. That constructed and reconstructed data and those lingering questions that have bred hybrid questions and that compromise the data that I have previously generated comprise the text of this study.

At the time I submitted my prospectus, I had not fully worked out the idea of contamination—one of the most appealing of Loris Malaguzzi’s pedagogical ideas—between frames: it was difficult for me to understand how I would compose a theoretical dissertation that I would not structure like others that I had seen. The data I generated resembled Loris Malaguzzi’s “tangle of spaghetti” or Hawkins (1974) description of observing food coloring being mixed with water. Hawkins asks, “Do the dye and water really mix, or is it like a tangle of colored threads that just get thinner and more numerous until you can’t see them any more” (p.13, original emphasis). I worried that I had taken
the wrong course: Surely an explicit study would have been much more containable. The research would be cyclical—I would find answers to the questions that I proposed—rather than spiral—where my findings, which are, in reality, collected and interpreted recollections of my experiences, continually generate further questions and subsequent reflections. I did do a survey once. I had composed twenty-two questions and sent them to fifty elementary art teachers. Each survey that was returned to me had qualifiers overcrowding the margins. I did my own statistical analysis but the texts in those margins preoccupied me. Despite this lingering memory, during the course of my current study, I wondered (as did my helpful friends): Was it (is it) research?

My committee encouraged me to write and write and to classify artifacts in “quick and dirty” piles. I abided by their sage advice and I tried to write each day, setting aside time after school to clear my mind in an intimate relationship with my keyboard. I made piles in copy paper box tops. Soon, my hands began to ache. I found that writing helped me to reflect and to re-formulate ideas and plans that directly impacted my daily—my teaching—life. I spent so much time sorting through piles and switching classifications that I put most of artifacts back in one big box. Although very little of that work reappears here, as I reread those stories, gripes, and questions, I began to see those frames “invading” one another. Perhaps I did have some big questions. What is site-specific pedagogy? How do constructions of children produce and sustain educational institutions and relationships? How do constructions of art influence both art education and constructions of child art? How do the ethics and politics (both local and global) of early education shape institutions and practices on an individual (teacher) and on a more grand (the school system, the culture) level? I did not realize how permeable these questions
were. Nor did I realize just how much I was formulating the ideas that appear in this study in my daily practice as a teacher. They seemed to come together under a larger question: How do children and teachers construct knowledge and identities—both individually and collaboratively—within the specific social and historical context of the classroom? How do they learn to communicate through multiple languages? These questions contaminate each frame.

The personal nature of this question, too, made me reconsider the concept of memory in research: The stories that I re-wrote from “field” notes and from my experiences were essentially “screen” (Freud, 1899) memories. I saw myself as an actor in them. I was almost certain, despite my careful notes, that I had omitted important details. Although I am concerned with the dichotomous constructs of teacher and researcher within this study, I did not realize that I was partially living that discontinuity. Like many others before me who have faced the considerable challenge of concurrently working full-time as they write a dissertation, I wanted to also map, frame, and contain my daily life: teach and document during the day, write my dissertation through the night. Perhaps this compartmentalization was a defensive strategy: it might make it easier for me to face such an enormous and worrisome task. How else could I even begin to think about penning the single most important work of my burgeoning academic career as I barely ground my way through each seemingly endless and formidable day as a full-time teacher in a “challenging” school? Would it be possible for me to reconcile the idealism that drove me to teaching with the realities I faced in the classroom? These ideas were messier than I had hoped that they would be.
Yet, at first I was determined. I did write about the experiences of working in a teacher-researcher collaboration in the studio of a Reggio-inspired school for young children. I loved that work, those children, and that experience. But I hesitated to re-tell stories teachers there had already told through their own work with documentation. Would my own voice add or detract from their collective voices? Although I have not placed these stories at the forefront of this study as I had once intended, they provide my own stories with a richly textured background. Those experiences resonate with me now as I work to build a new early childhood program in a new school today.

By the end of last school year, I noticed that my original study frames had melted so thoroughly into one another through my experiences as a researcher and as a teacher that they are no longer discernable. At any given moment as a teacher and as a researcher I am making choices about site-specific pedagogy— informed by constructions of childhood and art—and grounded within a particular ethical and political situation that reflects and refracts a larger social and historical context. The two sides of my identity bled into one another like oil and water. I looked at research with a teacher’s eyes: I looked at teaching with a researcher’s eyes. Through documentation and reflection, my research hovered in in-between spaces: between teaching and research and between myself and the children. Those reflections now form the text of this study and my teaching practice. My current teaching practice—I am still teaching full-time but in a context with nearly full autonomy over the choices that I make with my own class of three-, four-, and five-year-old children—in turn, continues to shape and to define this research.
I would like to see these changes as strengths in my study. They have certainly strengthened my teaching: the relationship between teaching and research is symbiotic in the best sense. It mirrors the relationships the children and I have with one another. In the two years since I submitted my prospectus, my professional and personal life has changed in ways that I might not have ever imagined. I have taken on three new roles, back to back to back, and in the midst of this, I moved three times (once across the country). These three roles have been the most challenging of my career. During that first year, I became a supervisor of art student teachers in a large, urban school district in the Northeast. I worked with sixteen pre-service teachers and fourteen mentor teachers in schools primarily designated as federal low-income schools, where children came from a rich diversity of family, cultural, religious, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. The district, amidst much scandal, had hired a new Superintendent from the business sector who brought with him grand hopes for a more efficient reorganization and desegregation of the schools. During the course of the year, he proposed that twenty-two schools close and others be melded together to become more focused on basic skills. Mentor teachers were unsure about the security of their positions and vocal about concerns of the efficacy of the proposed widespread school reforms. Most were seasoned enough to have ridden through several previous waves and promises of systematic school change. By contrast, the pre-service teachers with whom I worked had generally grown up in small, homogenous towns. They visualized themselves going back to their hometowns to teach in the schools that they had attended as a child. Nostalgia, in some ways, fueled their desires to teach. The first few months were difficult: the student teachers were nervous and felt afloat. Sometimes they hid their fear with bravado and loud complaints: on other
occasions they collapsed into my arms. Barely their elder and an aficionado of the pace of urban life, I was not prepared for this teaching situation to be as emotional as it became. I groggily answered many late-night phone calls: I fielded complaints and tempered criticism with measured responses. I did not want to play into the gripes that pressed them between the public university system and the public school system. I smiled often and held myself back from intervention in their classrooms on many occasions. I was constantly on the edge of my seat. I escorted them to school when were in tears and drove them around slippery city streets in the snow. I am sure that I bent several university rules to support them, but the experience repaid me. I was in the luxurious position of having ample time over the course of the year to observe children and teachers at work from the most discrete corners of the classroom. During that time, too, I was working in the researcher-teacher collaboration in the studio of the Reggio-inspired school for young children. I spent ten to fifteen hours a week with the school’s studio educator. I worked with her in the studio, in the classrooms, helped to prepare documentation, and participated in family and community meetings at the school. That school was private, university-affiliated, intellectually and aesthetically rigorous, affluent, and I was working with one of my closest friends. My husband would comment on how I smelled different when I arrived home from the school: like something good to eat. I hadn’t realized that the obvious contrasts between the two experiences went so far as to be olfactory. Unraveling these disparities through documentation and reflection here supports my craving to understand how an image of children and of childhoods produces educational contexts. I have tried, at least partially, to satisfy this craving in the first chapter of this study and, of course, in my daily work as a teacher.
When I was just beginning to understand my role(s) as student teaching supervisor, my husband called to let me know that he was planning a move across the country. We are an academic couple with the two-body problem. As I stood before Magritte’s *Time Transfixed* at the Art Institute of Chicago, I was hopeful that I would find another job. Eager to try out the possibilities that I had encountered in the Reggio-inspired school and to alleviate the tensions I felt between seeing myself as a theoretician or a practitioner, I took a position as an art classroom teacher in an urban, low-income elementary school. It closely resembled the schools in which I worked previously and where I had supervised the student teachers. The school staff who interviewed me was enthusiastic about change and stability in their art studio: I would be the children’s third teacher in a year and a half. I knew that it would be a challenge: I had little idea that it would be the first major challenge of my career: an experience daunting, devastating, and exhilarating all at once.

I realized part of this when I saw my classroom for the first time. I choked on my tears. I had never seen any educational space so neglected. Each drawer I forced open presented a new horror: rusty nails, moldy cookies, a pile of sawdust, twelve bottles of pancake syrup, ancient batik wax in warming plates with frayed fabric electrical cords, razor blades. There was clay on the ceiling and paper airplanes on top of the cabinets. I shrugged off comments from other teachers that I would be taking over the “crap factory.” I asked one friendly-seeming new colleague if she recalled an experience in the art studio that particularly motivated her third grade students. She replied, “To be honest, I avoided ever going into that room. I can’t name one thing my class has ever done there.” I felt less smugly overqualified.
When I began at this new school, I learned that it had once been regarded as one of the most prestigious and elite in one of the largest districts within the state. As school elders told me, in the early nineties, the school district changed neighborhood boundaries and the school began to incorporate children from more impoverished backgrounds. The school’s demographic make-up continued to change dramatically as children whose families left a nearby inner-city area continued to move into the school attendance area. While children had previously come from backgrounds in which they lived in nuclear families with parents who were professionals, now more children lived with one parent or extended family members and more children lived in poverty. Currently, over half of the children who attend the school live in families who are eligible to receive federal meal programs. Over time, the school’s population has become increasingly diverse. Although the majority of children are White, African American, or of mixed-race, the school’s immigrant population has increased dramatically because it is one of the school district’s ELL sites. Many of these children are African, while others have come from Mexico, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. In addition to the free and reduced price lunch program, the school is designated as a federal low-income school and a Title 1 school. The school is somewhat unique within its urban area, as many schools within the district could be defined as primarily White and middle class and as espousing “mainstream” educational values.

Like any other school, this school had its “unique mix of people, language, micro-politics and in-jokes” (Thompson, 2002), and it was one of the first times in my adult life that I experienced feeling like an outsider. I had no idea whether or not what I was thinking about during my PhD program would work within this context. One of the
teachers who had interviewed me confided, “After we met with you, we figured you’d be here for a year at best but we thought your optimism would make our school a better place.” I was no longer a bystander on the margins of classroom life: I was in the midst of its labyrinthine complexities in a role that demanded immediate action. As a person who must often think before acting or speaking, I tried to sustain myself with the image of walking the labyrinth carefully and contemplatively. As a teacher, I had been commended for my planning and for my attention to detail. For me, teaching art was a craft that allowed me to hone my aesthetic preferences. My classrooms had been museum-like; my work on them an outward manifestation of the confluence between my own aesthetic preferences and the children’s contributions to the space. I was a minimalist who held tightly to the security of a plan—of expectations that children could meet but which they frequently exceeded and of carefully designed limits that would curb unnecessary conflicts and ensure success. Despite my efforts to maintain that rigor I had developed I found my mind wandering back to my very first teaching experience. Like many new teachers, I was then twenty-one and terrified. Although they often had an appreciation for my rich inner life, almost everyone who had known me during my life up until that point had labeled me as quiet. I was voted runner-up to “Shyest” in my senior class poll. The girl who won had talked to more people than me. I wondered: Would I be able to speak on the first day of school?

Perhaps facing this personal challenge was part of the reason that I chose to teach; I knew that I would need to continually challenge my own ways of thinking and being. I would need to be uncomfortable in order to grow. The “fix” I got from teaching was something concrete upon which I could sharply focus my excessive analytical energies.
I became a teacher after I graduated from the University of Pennsylvania; an exclusive, private university within the inner-city neighborhood of West Philadelphia. During my time at Penn, Philadelphia was rated the most impoverished inner-city in the United States. I was the only one of my six roommates who had attended a public high school. My father, whom we joked was the poster-child for either Protestant work ethic or Yankee thrift or both, had insisted I get a job on campus to support myself. My roommates thought it was wonderfully bourgeois. Through my work for the library and its special collections gallery, I found myself connected to the local community. I participated in several community service projects. On my first outing, I helped to clean a shelter for homeless women and children. My roommate, Min, and I took a van deep into the western part of our neighborhood. We met a young mother named Audrey who was twenty-three and who had eight small children. The smell of urine in the shelter bathroom that we cleaned stuck in the back of my throat and burned my eyes. On the van ride home, while the rest of the volunteers devoured peanut-butter sandwiches and sang eighties pop songs, I couldn’t decide if I was going to cry or to throw up. Later that evening, as I was dressing for a black-tie charity formal in my black crepe-backed satin gown, I felt a sea-sick distance swing between the versions of myself I had yet to reconcile. I have yet to overcome it. When I graduated, I joined AmeriCorps and requested an educational placement. My first interview was with Carlos. He had written a grant to support literacy education for Mexican-American children in suburban Colorado. If I wanted to be considered, I would have to fly to meet him at the Boulder Public Library. At the end of our talk, Carlos admitted, “Well, Marissa, I’ve decided that I’m going to hire you,” and I gasped. He laughed. I searched for my mother across the room.
She was smiling. She had accompanied me because I was too nervous to go alone. Carlos told me that I would be teaching supplemental reading in a pull-out program for third through fifth grade children at a bilingual elementary school. I had an overwhelming feeling that I was responsible for improving the quality of a child’s future. I realize now that it was egotistical of me to think in that way—perhaps my philanthropic nature was indeed tied intimately to the sense of guilt that accompanied my privileged upbringing. But that idealism and sense of responsibility remain with me as I continue to teach. A sense of nostalgia for the future, as Loris Malaguzzi termed it, must be a necessary propellant for many educators. Perhaps I am still arrogant as I continue to think that I can be a teacher. Left without words of my own, as I continue to teach and write I console myself with two quotations. First, as Walsh admits, “Maybe I have become smarter about the world, at least about some very small corner of it, but it is presumptuous to think that I have made it a better place” (1998, p. xiii), and as Hawkins divulges, “some things are best known by falling in love with them” (1974, p. 3).

Sutton-Smith (1989) explains, “Ours, after all, is the therapeutic century, where it is common to think of those who work with children as also working on problems from their own childhood” (p. xiii). Although I am working in the next century, perhaps Sutton-Smith’s characterization fits me. What I am working through as I work with children is the idea that the child is not singular. I was frustrated by this idea as a child. I felt like an older person stuck in a small person’s body. I constructed my identity in pieces and in relation to what I needed to do or show or who I needed to be with at the time. In teaching, I work with this uncomfortable “afterlife” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002) of childhood always in mind. It motivates me to look for how children are
constructing their multiple identities and negotiating meanings. As a child, I had one identity for adults and for school: that of the perfect student. That identity was based upon how I looked and how I performed. I was good at that one—it fit me easily. I could slip into it at any time, especially when my other identities felt much less comfortable. Those, I constructed with friends and in relation with popular culture, despite the fact that my “serious” parents allowed me to actually consume little popular culture. But, does consumption of popular cultural actually mean buying or watching it? I wonder. If I didn’t know what the other kids were talking about—like the Freddie movie—I made it up, feeling guilty all the while that a good girl would lie. My friends caught me once: Like the little girl who constantly brought the fake iPod to my school this year, my friends asked me if I had heard the song *Like a Virgin* by Madonna. We had all been emulating Madonna in makeshift ways: I’d never actually seen a photograph of Madonna but I wore a piece of lace I found in my mother’s sewing box as a head wrap when I accompanied my father to his office for work one day. We weren’t allowed to listen to Madonna’s song in school because it had a “bad” word in it. I remember feeling the hot sting of guilt well up in the back of my throat when I heard my teacher’s stern words. I read her look—“you should know better.” When my friends asked me about that bad word, I didn’t know what it was but I pretended that I did. In the bathroom after lunch, they told me that I should stick up my pinkie finger when the teacher came back and dared me to do so, probably knowing that I couldn’t. I felt a tremendous sadness for the teacher that I loved. Could I compromise my good, smart-girl status to gain acceptance in the peer culture? Or would I continue to ride the crest of uncomfortable ambiguity? Later, I found out the bad word was virgin. I didn’t know what it meant. In her study of how
good girls construct and maintain themselves as good in working-class Britain,
Walkderine (1997) concludes:

Thus, I argued, when the girls metaphorically turn the other cheek in kind and selfless helpfulness, they are psychically coping with the struggle between opposing forces within themselves, with anger never put forward as a weapon with which to fight oppression: thus, anger and violent feelings inside themselves (associated with masculinity) are to be defended against in favour of the accomplishment of feminine virtues (p. 48).

Although Walkderine references the particular struggles of girlhood and of accomplishing femininity, her conclusions reveal that children are contradictory—that the same children who are “clean, sexless, nondisgusting, nonaggressive, rational and tidy” (Sutton-Smith, 1989, p. xii) can be “haughty, smug, directive, dominating, controlling, demanding, and thoroughly concerned with power” (p. x). The split, however, is uneasy. These same children can be generous, just, compassionate, empathetic, and passionately engaged in intellectual and social work. These complicated children are the children (and adults) with whom I have worked.

Beyond the painful disconnections I felt when I was a child negotiating my multiple identities, I agree with Sutton-Smith (1989) that the discontinuity between adulthood and childhood is perhaps more “apparent” than real. Now, as a teacher and a researcher, I see that what I am trying to do in this study is not so different from what I see children doing everyday in my classroom. I am negotiating my place in multiple social worlds. I am attempting to map the contradictory points that make up my continually changing identity as a teacher, a student, and a researcher. I am trying to build
meaningful, reliable, lasting, and supportive relationships. I am defining myself as an insider and outsider. I feel a vital need to be “taken for who I am,” or whoever I present myself to be at any moment and to recognize traces left by my words and actions. I see that, like Walkerdine (1997), my position was not a fixed place….that I should see the world in a particular way, but that the ways I had been brought up to see the world, my very subjectivity, was created, produced, regulated in the social realm….I was non-unitary, contradictory, fragmented (p. 59).

While I am hopeful that this prologue foreshadows some of the ideas that I consider within my study, I realize that I have focused a great deal on my past experiences. Perhaps, I, too, am guilty of nostalgia—of re-reading the past with enhanced meaning. This is something that I need to remember as I document children’s learning—to be heedful of my subjectivity but to also recognize it as an interpretive resource. I am intrigued by the idea that identity is the product of work: work one does on herself. I am equally intrigued by the idea that childhood, or any identity for that matter, is a relational concept (Lesko, 1996)—contingent upon the context of multiple social worlds (Dyson, 1999) and never quite fixed.
Chapter One

The Image of the Child: Multiple Metaphors, Desires, and a Metatheory

Acceptable and Unacceptable Children in the Complexities of the Classroom

Mia, “Do you ever not want to teach at this school”
Me, “What do you mean?”
Mia, “Because the kids are so bad. I think it would be hard to teach at this school because the kids are so bad.”
Me, “Well, no, I want to teach at this school. I don’t think of the kids here as bad. Part of my job as a teacher is to help everyone think about the choices that they make and the ways in which those choices affect others.”
Mia, “We make bad choices a lot. It makes me so sad because it wasn’t like this in first grade. In first grade, Terrell was like my best friend. He was so nice, he wasn’t mean at all. We played together all the time. He didn’t cuss then and he didn’t hit people. I wish sometimes that we could go back to first grade.”
Me, “I can understand that. Sometimes I think about what might make my life easier, too.”
Mia, “I think that you should be meaner. I don’t think the bad kids are gonna change. I think it just gets worse. If you were meaner, they would
stop. Other teachers are a lot meaner. You’re like the nicest teacher.
You’re not so strict.”

Me, “It’s not always that simple. I have to try to understand why they are mean [I feel a twinge of guilt here when I, too, use the word mean]; their side of the situation. I can’t just yell first and think later. I have to sometimes take time to figure out the situation. There isn’t always an easy answer, and sometimes I know that kids get hurt and that is hard for me, too. I don’t think that teachers mean to be mean, it’s just hard sometimes to handle a situation.”

Mia, “I know what you mean. It’s hard to be good. I’m always good, you know. I’ve always been good. That’s why I get so mad when kids are bad. Because it’s hard to be always good. Sometimes I wish I could be bad, you know, say something just really bad, even though I never would. I think I would feel more free if I could just try being bad. When I play school at home, I try being bad. I say stuff that I would never do.”

My relationship with Mia changed the day that I cried in front of her and her friend, Laila. Their third grade class had just left the art studio, and, as usual Mia and Laila had stayed behind to help me to re-organize the day’s materials and to work on their projects in-progress. The repetitive nature of these jobs seemed to comfort them and I knew that, really, they wanted to not only talk with one another but to spend time with me. I could sense that the chaos of the classroom sometimes overwhelmed them and that small acts of organizing markers by color and counting freshly-sharpened pencils were centering and therapeutic: a necessary preparation for the girls’ collaborative making
play. Using these insights, I would invent “jobs” for them and situations that provided
them with a possibility of spending extra time in the studio with me. Their classroom
teacher, who understood and who supported me completely, would either send them up to
the studio before school began or let them stay after class ended. At some points, we even
invited other children to this special time (my forty-minute planning period). We would
push two tables together, grab a bucket of clay and tools, and I would go about my
planning as Mia, Laila, and their friends held a mini-class (Figure 4). I felt that we had a
mutual understanding—that this relationship was symbiotic. While they whittled away
the stresses of the day I would reflect upon their conversations and their striking
sophistication: This sophistication had motivated me to teach. Even when I was younger,
grueling days as a babysitter and unwitting playmate refused me the capacity to view
children as child-like. As my current administrator says, “They take up the space of a
whole person to me…I can’t imagine them as ‘just three.’”
This day was different, however. We’d had a heated discussion in the studio. It was one of those days that I knew was going to be tricky as soon as I saw the twenty-seven hot little bodies ambling willy-nilly up the stairs. There was the usual pushing and shoving—both jovial and serious. Innocent toes were stepped upon and stamped upon. As one of these matches escalated a single child teetered on the verge of a full-blown temper tantrum. He had one before in the studio. I had watched the anger well up inside him with an almost detached fascination—I knew at that moment the intervention he desired would elicit an escalation. With a beet-red face he had wailed and screamed. Several children covered their ears in acts of annoyance or empathy as strident sighs abbreviated the thumps of his small fists pounding on our pine-green carpet.

Figure 4: Clay pieces of “make-up” that the girls made during this time became part of a larger clay installation for an exhibition at a local art gallery.
Today, Abram pushed all the other children out of the way as he made a dramatic entrance. Our studio door never opened or closed properly: today, it temporary stalled his forward motion as it theatrically augmented his frustration. With a screwed-up face, he cried out to his classmates, “You don’t know what it’s like to be me!” and collapsed with a studied Superhero leap and an effervescent grumble onto that carpet. A few children, desensitized by his staged tendencies, began to exploit them with artificial laughing. As studies have proven, even fake laughter is contagious. Sensing the moment had arrived for an impromptu performance Terrell puffed up his chest and shouted, “He’s makin’ me so mad! I’m gonna lose it! He don’t know me!” as he made a forceful “aw shucks” movement with his tiny right arm and cracked a knowing smirk. I smiled at Terrell: Yes, I had noticed him. No, he was not successful: I would not lose my temper, although this temptation taunted me. He smiled back. Situation averted! Questions raced through my mind just ahead of the unfolding action. I knew that I would never recover from the dual blow of not only losing control of my class and the shame of abusing my power by raising my voice. I reached further into the deep pockets of my experiential arsenal. I had been mending those holes for years.

The studio had hosted both emotional and physical brawls. Hair had been pulled, paint had been spilled, and someone had innocently made someone else a full face and hair mask of clay while I applied a band-aid to another child’s surprisingly bloody paper cut. I had gone home more than once with bruised hip bones from placing myself in a headstrong child’s path. I had also watched a throng of children sing and move as one when I turned the classroom radio to a particular station. I had watched them squeal with delight when I blew the top of a blender during a glaze mixing demonstration: They came
together to help me clean up the broken glass while they salvaged the precious mineral blend. Casey had been the biggest help to me in that situation. I was relieved that an awkward silence we once had did not distill our relationship. He had told me he had been on TV. Intrigued and speaking before thinking, I had told him that it must have been very exciting and had asked why he had been on TV. He replied, averting his azure eyes, “Because there was drugs all up in my house.”

Despite the sometimes in-navigable gulfs between their experiences and my own, I had watched the children show astounding patience and cooperation as well as genuine care and concern for one another and for me. Despite my experience, the too-frequent (for my comfort?) situations of terror or ecstasy in the studio never failed to unnerve me.

This day, like all the others, it happened quickly. I breathed deeply: I knew that I must restore my go-to façade of grace. I intervened, and gave Abram some time to sit outside of the room to think. As usual, I framed it as a sort of choice, “Would you like to take some time to rest and to think?” Abram nodded. Although he was a frequent “hall student” (Dyson, 1997a), I accompanied him into that “temporary holding zone for children” (Dyson, 1997a). I sat with him for a few moments and made sure he was recovering without responding too sympathetically: My coddling might be a kind of reward. He could soothe himself as easily as he could taunt himself. I returned to the studio confident that Abram would be back working independently on his computer video game sculpture. The amoebic class would roll forward even if emotional undercurrents punctuated it with pregnant pauses.

During my absence—was it that brief? Milliseconds always hung unexpectedly thick in the imposing air—the rest of the children remained frozen on the carpet. I could
see that more than five were self-consciously trying to quell obvious laughter—or were they? What hypothetical response did they hope to elicit? Furonda poked Callie and shot her the “be quiet!” look when she saw me come back into the studio. My heart sunk: Despite my careful attempts to pass, I was still a symbolic figure of authority. Would the children always rail against me in order to construct themselves in opposition? I was confident, however, that whatever pleasures Furonda took in this public display of her power that she knew that she would never press me. My calm demeanor swelled through me in an otherworldly way: I envisioned myself as a child whisperer. I would not yell, make demands, or conspicuously display verbal or nonverbal threats that I had no intention to keep. I scoffed at colleagues who did that in the same way that I abhorred colleagues who motivated themselves with teaching clichés. Secretly, though, I always wondered if I, too, could find solace in the sweetly inspirational slogans illustrated with cherubic cartoon faces posted so haphazardly in a dingy faculty lounge. Did anyone?

Several children, including Mia, were now crying. Some others had blank looks: they were almost robotically unfazed by Abram’s and Terrell’s conventional performances. Twenty-six children sat on a scratchy old paint-stained carpet in various states of emotional disarray. I folded up my legs under my skirt and took my place among them.

It seemed preposterous for me just to move on with our plan for the day without discussing what had just happened. I could feel my teaching aplomb drift down through my toes as anguish welled up in my throat. I was not a new teacher. I had finished both a Master’s degree and most of a PhD program. I had mentored new teachers and I had supervised student teachers. I had assured them it was about getting to know the children;
that these relationships would support and guide them. My own extensive preparations could only partially support me as I negotiated the layered and interwoven emotional and intellectual complexities of the shared spaces of the classroom. Like Chana, who describes her first days as a mother in Ayers’ (1989) descriptive ethnographies of preschool teachers,

I felt I’d done something wrong. I had failed. And physically, too. I was wiped out…I’d been a big deal…I could shake things up. And here I couldn’t stop this [child] from crying sometimes, and the cry was electrifying to me. I was exhausted and I felt incompetent—all the skills I had and felt so good about were completely irrelevant (p. 51).

Teaching and Research Problems

This tradition has coalesced with the general egalitarian public tradition of giving all children equality of opportunity, which seems to have meant largely treating all children in the same way (Sutton-Smith, 1995, p. 83).

Walkerdine (1993) reminds us, teachers and students are positioned “in relations of power which are constantly shifting, rendering [each] at one moment powerful and at another powerless” (p.203) (in Phelan, 1997, p. 79).

As both an observer and teacher in contemporary classrooms, I became especially sensitive to ways in which teachers, schools, and peers create acceptable and unacceptable children. Often, these constructions are polarized. Children like Abram and Terrell—“difficult” children—are both literally and figuratively demoted to the margins
of classroom life where they are most often ignored or lamented. I have wondered, in a way that Dyson (1999) articulated, whether classroom complexity could be used to further learning in classrooms? Like Maxine Greene (1987) I like to speculate as to whether or not the margins could be where all the action is in teaching. She frames teaching as a project—not only a project, an undertaking, but a projection of a teacher’s identity and her hopes for educational change. In this way, perhaps, teachers would neither consign children to the margins nor to the mainstream. In incorporating all children into their project, they could consider the continuum of children and childhoods. Within this continuum, individual children and groups of children move both fluidly and uncomfortably between categories and in “multiple social worlds” (Dyson, 1999) and “spaces” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002). I wondered, too, how a reconsideration—a projection—of the taken-for-granted power and authority relationships between adults and children might lead to a reconstruction of the roles in which schools cast them as teachers and students. This could reveal how we socially construct and perpetuate an antagonism between the two. Could a model that positions teacher and student—or adult and child—or subject and object—as “within or inside” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 15) one another thrive? Would resistance be transformed? Could ambiguity be productive?

In the theory and practice of schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy, the “image of the child” seems to allow this mobility because of its own contingency. Assuming that no one child is centered or ultimately knowable, many children are multiple children at once. Equally competent and demanding, they perform the roles of protagonists and antagonists in classroom situations. All the while, they are negotiating,
rehearsing, and performing an array of available identities within multiple contexts. They are friends, confidantes, teachers, intentional and “unintentional” helpers (Dyson, 1997b), champions, and dissenters in the same sequence of overlapping moments. We teachers—with them at each step—place ourselves inside those untidy moments and feel for our ways out of them. We interpret, note, support, question, provoke, decide, support, and sustain. We do all of this with a careful attunement to the power of our selective interventions and the insights of our keen observations. Who we see ourselves, and the children assembled around us to be (not to become), underlies our actions, thoughts, and words in critical moments. It is a heady proposition that in so many cases we are solely in charge of so many dissimilar small bodies and our reactions to unforeseeable and emotional circumstances.

In this chapter of my study, I present the image of the child as a metaphor and metatheory in the theory and practice of schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Within that context, I look for implications for contemporary teachers in multiple contexts and for intersections between the image of the child and contemporary educational theory. As educators in Reggio Emilia construct it, the image of the child, is a particularly useful lens for teachers to examine children, childhoods, schools, and the social worlds and contemporary spaces of teaching and learning. In this study, I plan to make connections between the child that educators in Reggio describe lucidly and contemporary theory and practice in early childhood and art education. Mapping these connections has helped me to begin to create pedagogies and relationships distinctive to the sites in which I work. Those sites, too, are complex webs of variable relationships. The site which most informs this study is a contemporary, complex, elementary school,
although I will include references from the time I spent as a participant observer in the
studio of a Reggio-inspired school for young children, from my prior teaching
experiences, and from my current experience as I help to begin a brand-new early
centrality program in an independent school. Throughout the study, I look to ways in
which practice with distinct groups of children, informed not only by the Reggio
approach but also by contemporary scholarship on children’s visual productions and
literacy learning, generates teaching attitudes and theoretical action.

**Children and Childhoods in Reggio Emilia: A Common Image**

The theory and practice of the pre-primary schools (*scuole dell’infanzia*—
“schools of infancy”) and infant-toddler centers (*asili nido*—“safe nests”) in the small
northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia have influenced theory and practice in American
contexts for a quarter century. A particularly well-developed image of the child—a rich,
powerful, historical social actor—functions in Reggio Emilia as both a metaphorical
construct and a metatheory (Smolucha, 1989). Working with this image of children
always in mind, educators and children work together to eclectically merge, assess,
continually revise, and generate theory through reflective practice. In the heading for this
subsection, I have purposefully chosen to characterize the image of the child as
“common.” I intend that common be read doubly. First, the image of the child is held in
common by educators in Reggio Emilia—it is a collective construction and decision.
Second, the child that educators in Reggio describe is the same child that contemporary
educational theorists in American contexts propose. She is the “real” child who “wiggles”
that Roosevelt (2007) describes (pp. 114-5): “the kind of three dimensional kids who can be bratty, obnoxious, swaggering and silly” (Thompson, 2002). Leeds (1989) concurs: “Most children, as Thomas Armstrong (1985) has pointed out, are a wonderful paradox, and partake of the natures of both angel and demon in various ways” (p. 94). In other words, children are actors not objects—people not projections. But, then again, we are generally always projections.

The width, breadth, and rigor of the image of the child as a metatheory enable educators in Reggio to designate all children as acceptable, as desirable, as citizens with rights in a civil forum. This child exists in the here and now. The early childhood institution functions as a civil forum. To paraphrase Bruner (2002), it is not a preparation for children’s participation in a future society or economy: It is their life. As such, rich, powerful, and demanding children are never positioned as unitary or redeemable but as multiple and changeable. In this way, the metatheory of the “image of the child” allows educators in Reggio to examine familiar constructions of children that emphasize their “limitations” (Thompson, 2006, p. 38). Those often contradictory constructions include versions of Rousseau’s “innocent” child, Locke’s “cultural reproducer” or tabula rasa, Piaget’s natural or scientific child, and the child “as a labor market supply factor” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, pp. 44-7). In each of these constructions, who the child could become predicates who the child is. The child becomes a manifestation of adult desire and a repository for adult hope. These constructions abut contemporary constructions of childhood that position children simultaneously as hope for the future and as in need of protection from the corrupt present. In each case, the image of the child is reductive, singular, and objectified; it disallows multiplicity. Responses to these
children address the perception of their needs—often a microcosm of societal needs and a repository for contemporary anxieties—rather than “the particular strengths (and, in their light, naturally, particular needs) of the specific children being taught” (Roosevelt, 2007, p. 114).

Thus, insufficient images of children produce restricted educational and cultural relationships and contexts that focus primarily on educational results and/or mere care. This sometimes produces schools for young children that are “charitable,” “merely custodial,” and “discriminatory” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 52). Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) caution that a dominant educational language of “promoting development; ensuring readiness to learn and readiness for school; enhancing school performance; early intervention for children deemed to be in need, at risk or otherwise disadvantaged” (p. 1) emphasizes the “technical and managerial nature” (p. 2) of schools. For example, in a factory model (Lillard, 2005) of schooling children are raw material. They move in an almost conveyor belt-like way through a school environment that both shapes them and adds parts to them in a way that is divorced from their social context. Hawkins (1974) explains:

Children are treated as things rather than as ends in themselves….the school conceives the process of education as one of ‘transmitting’ knowledge, ‘developing’ skills, ‘training’ children (or teachers!) by routines of instruction which in fact minimize opportunities for significant choice and self-direction. Children are not conceived as coagents in the process of education, but only as patients, recipients (p. 230-231).
This image of the child produces educational relationships that seek “standardization, predictability, and control” (Dahlberg et al, 1999, p.2) and limit children’s and teachers’ movements. Bresler (1995) explains, “Schools aim to produce similitude of results, to inculcate rules rather than break them. They are places of clear and well-defined standards” (p. 33). Those standards can do disservice to the most vulnerable children—those who are seen as “unacceptable”—because they do not fit neatly into the constructions of children and of learners who dominate contemporary educational contexts. As Dyson (1997a) explains, “these assumptions tied to the lifestyle of the powerful segment of our society, glossed by the word ‘mainstream’…yields a tension-filled relationship with those families and children not included in that gloss” (p. 5). These assumptions then support a continued interpretation of the school as “the system,” an autonomous monolith, not as a system of relationships among individual people and groups of children and adults who can instigate change.

In the face of enormous societal and economic pressures, schools label children and families as “clientele” or as “customers” that they aim to please through their purchase of pre-made curriculum and assessments. Others hope to inspire “excellence for all” through data-driven practice sustained with “quality tools.” Metaphors from business, “managerial concepts such as delivery, quality, excellence, and outcomes” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 2), profess to remedy social and intellectual inadequacies in education but often lack the theoretical and practical underpinning to support them in specific contexts. Teachers who work with children who do not achieve the measurable expectations that schools seek sometimes must defend their own efficacy by dismissing “unacceptable” children with euphemisms. Sometimes, educators fault families for not “supporting
education” while offering few real ways to involve families as equal and crucial partners in the educational process. As Dyson (1997a) explains, “children with ‘reputations’ could be blamed on parents with reputations, stereotypical ones” (p. 25, original emphasis). Because of the tremendous temporal and academic pressures upon teachers in the most challenging school contexts, these assessments rarely move past the stage of blame.

As a metatheory and a metaphor, the image of the child operates in a nuanced and layered way as it produces and sustains reflective practice both in schools in Reggio and in schools and educators “inspired by” or “in dialogue with” the Reggio approach. “Who the child is” (Spaggiari, personal communication, May 27, 2005)—not that “the child,” or any child, is essentially unified and knowable—is the symbolic, political starting point for schools in Reggio and a source of encouragement for schools motivated by the Reggio approach. This image of the child aligns with Roosevelt’s (2007) description of children in Child Study where teachers pay

- painstaking attention to the particulars of an individual child’s strengths and tendencies as a thinker and a maker [as] a way of valuing the child as she or he makes him- or herself known and present—that is to say, in the here and now, not as a condition of who she or he could become (p. 117).

An image of the child as historic allows educators to meet and support the many children that they encounter through their practice. In turn, it allows them to consider how they construct themselves in response to many, complex situations. The image of the child, then, is intimately related to the image of families and to the image of the teacher. It allows teachers to accept that they are “Contradictory. We’re not these unitary nice neat people who (are always) fair” (Campbell, MacNaughton, Page, & Rolfe, 2004, p.
In her study of a young woman learning to teach, Jackson (2001) explains, “Annie’s becoming a teacher was a wrenching, uneven process as she constructed her teacher subjectivities while situated within the unstable relationships between power, knowledge, and experience” (p. 386). Sutton-Smith (1995) attests “that we are different within ourselves, that we are multivocal creatures…that we consider multiple possibilities” (p. 83). Building upon the image of the child, Edwards (1998) explains, “If adults can agree on how they shall look on the schoolchild’s nature, rights, and capacities, then they can also come to agree on what kind of teacher is needed to educate and provide for this child” (p. 180). Her statement does not assume that this teacher is essentialized or autonomous: he is complementary. Like the child, the teacher does not begin and end on a pole that places her as a “kind of ‘martyr’ behind closed doors” (Dyson, 1997a, p. 21), but on a continuum in which she, too, is a social actor negotiating meanings and relationships in complex situations. In an account of teachers working with children in city schools, Dyson (1997a) concludes, “Teacher agency was linked to child agency” (p. 17). Therefore, if teachers are able to conceptualize children as competent social actors in the context of the classroom, they are able to see themselves—and by extension, families the school itself—as agents.

As Dahlberg and Moss (2006) interpret this, “In Reggio, the individual can never assume the liberal guise of autonomous subject, but only ever acquires full subjectivity—through construction as a unique and unrepeatable subject—in her or his relation with others” (p. 9). Their words echo Hawkins as he explains,

People don’t amount to very much except in terms of their involvement in what is outside and beyond them. A human being is a localized physical body, but you
can’t see him as a person unless you see him in his working relationships with the world around him (1974, p. 50, original emphasis).

A child, the child, does not exist, then, on his or her own but performs her existence through relationships mediated by languages. The image of the child, then, designates individual children and adults as subjects and “Reggio can be said to be a social movement on childhood and its schools new public spaces for democratic practice” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 14). Writing from a particular post-modern theoretical point of view, they reveal their hope for schools for young children that function as civil forums. Their post-modern assessment of the schools in Reggio highlights the tension between the post-modern and modern impulses of the approach: In particular, their work reveals a dualism between the utopist and the pragmatic.

**Constructing Childhoods and Children: Theory and Discourse**

In Reggio Emilia, the image of the child produces (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999) sustains, and challenges teaching and learning practice, educational relationships, and institutions. Complementary to the image of the child, educators in Reggio see the school as a contingent and changeable social construction, “as a sort of construction in motion, continuously adjusting itself” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 62) where “meanings are never static, univocal, or final; they are always generative of other meanings” (p.81). His words support Graue and Walsh’s (1998) description of a context. They explain, “A context does not merely contain the child and her actions; contexts are relational….Contexts are not static….Instead, contexts are fluid and dynamic, constantly
reconstituting themselves within activity” (p. 11, original emphasis). Rinaldi proposes, “This definition [of a school] poses an issue that we would define as the processes of entropy, or the management of change…a school for young children is never the same from one day to the next” (2006, p.85). As the opening vignette to this study and Walkerdine’s (1993) quotation illustrate, a school for young children is never the same from any moment to the next. Through relentless confrontation with change, educators in Reggio position schools (by positioning teachers and children) to resist the idea that the “school has become a technology of normalization” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p.2). This normalization is neither possible nor desirable.

Theoretical foundations of the Reggio Emilia approach have been discussed in literature on the approach and applications of the approach in the American context for over twenty years. This literature, from both the Reggio context and the American context, has addressed the history and philosophy of the Reggio approach (for example, Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1993, 1998; Reggio Children, 1996), documentation of children’s learning (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 2007; Reggio Children, 1996; Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001; Reggio Children, 2004), children as individual and group learners (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001), the political context of early childhood education (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999), applications of the Reggio approach outside of the Reggio context (Cadwell, 1997, 2003; Lewin-Benham, 2006), the role of the atelier as a place of provocation (Reggio Children, 2004; Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwall, 2005), and relationships between children and the built environment (Reggio Children, 2003). Literature about Reggio has addressed multiple audiences, from
educators who travel to Reggio Emilia to participate in study groups to early childhood practitioners in school and care settings to university-affiliated faculty and researchers. Despite its richness and its diversity of voices and viewpoints, this literature does not fully articulate theoretical affinities and points of convergence between the Reggio Emilia approach and other current educational theories and practices. In the American context, the primary concern of much of the literature is an understanding of the Reggio “way” (Hendrick, 1997, 2003; Wurm, 2005) of working with young children in contexts in “dialogue with” or “inspired by” the Reggio approach. These qualifications—in dialogue with or inspired by—suggest that the schools are either systematically studying the Reggio Emilia approach or working formally with Reggio consultants. That literature’s purpose is not to fully explore implications of aspects of the Reggio approach in contexts of work with older children in diverse, contemporary settings, including elementary schools and schools like my own that are not in dialogue with the approach. An exception is found in a study of pre-service teachers in a varied group of preschools, in which Kroeger and Cardy (2006) explain how Reggio-inspired practices, particularly documentation, are “hard to reach” (p. 390) in contemporary contexts. They continue, “We use the term hard to reach because educational environments as places of practice do not share philosophical orientations to learning and teaching” (p. 390). It is perhaps not surprising that this study finds documentation as its point of connection between the Reggio Emilia approach and practice in contemporary early childhood education. As Johnson (1999) has offered, documentation is one of the most commoditized aspects of the approach. Because of its intimate relationship to assessment, it is a logical beginning place for schools in the American context to begin to form a relationship with the Reggio
Emilia approach. Indeed, in my own practice and within my study, documentation was the necessary beginning point and process through which the children and I began to formulate, reflect upon, and understand our teaching and learning identities.

Likewise, although much literature about Reggio discusses the *atelier* and the *atelierista* and their roles, no studies have looked to the larger theories of art—or more accurately, of visual languages—that intersect with both the image of the child and social constructivist theories to produce practice in Reggio Emilia. Those theories, in particular, can be used to examine constructions of “art” at work in American schools and to augment theories of the relationships between children’s visual productions and learning—especially the interface between learning in the graphic languages and written language.

In this study, I hope to begin to locate important aspects of Reggio discourse within other communities of contemporary discourse, including discourse in early childhood education, literacy education, and art and visual culture education in the American context. For art educators specifically, the image of the child in Reggio both proposes challenges to theories of child art and also elucidates relationships between symbolic and representative communication through art—or visual, graphic, and digital languages—and other languages including oral, aural, and written language. An intersection between the image of the child and an image of art informs art educators’ practice. As Wilson (1971) explains, “What the art teacher does depends upon his conception of the nature of art, art students, how art might be taught, and how it is learned. Many of his actions are intuitive and based on what feels right” (p.5). Despite the ongoing efforts to standardize curriculum in so many disciplines, many teachers continue
to make intuitive decisions and judgments in their classrooms. They may base these decisions on amalgamations of many theories; both personal and those considered major theories within their respective fields or what Graue and Walsh (1998) define as “Big-T” and “little-t” theories (p. 32). They define Big-T theories as “familiar,” they “have been accepted by a critical mass of scholars” (p. 32). They explain further:

As researchers attempt to build theory by beginning with a little-t, they must remember that their insights and hunches are contextualized. Hunches do not spring out of thin (or thick) air. They come from somewhere, from experience, one’s own or others’, from books, from conversations, and from other theories, both big and little t (p. 33).

Furthermore, Big-T and little-t theories, like other apparently dichotomous constructs, exits within one another. They, too, are relational. Graue and Walsh (1998) note “The influence of a big-T theory can be enourmous….Bruner (1986) argued that big-T theories do not just explain how the world works but also come to constitute what they explain” (p. 32).

Like Katz (1998), I am interested in what we can learn from Reggio but also aware of criticisms surrounding the influence and discursive practices of the approach (Johnson, 1999) and the tensions between the progressive, authentic, universal, stable and utopist and the critical, partial, subjective, and dependent in the interpretation of practice in and inspired by Reggio and in other contemporary educational practices.
Positive Tensions and Dichotomies in Reggio Emilia: Specific Sites

Throughout theory and practice in Reggio Emilia, tensions exist between the idea of the “eternal” (Walsh as cited by Thompson, 2006) “timeless, universal, essentially unchanging” child and the “situated, specific, ‘historical child’” (Thompson, 2006, p. 39). The relationships that these tensions produce have pedagogical and political implications for educators working in contexts like my own most recent position in a diverse, urban, and federally designated low-income elementary school and my current position in an independent school that is delving into early childhood for the first time. In both of these contexts children live, at home and at school, in a multitude of family, economic, religious, and cultural situations. They perform and move within “multiple social worlds” (Dyson, 1993). They bring different “pieces of the world” (Malaguzzi, 1994, p.53) with them when they arrive at school each morning and selective share these pieces in their performative movements through the overlapping social worlds of the classroom. In this case, I became most interested in how multiple languages mediate these performances.

Tensions between seemingly binary constructions—theory/practice, teacher/student, theoretician/practitioner, adult/child, home/school, nature/culture, education/care, wealth/poverty, high culture/popular culture, content/meaning, product/process, personal/political, work/play, reality/fantasy, order/disorder—arise throughout the theory and practice of Reggio Emilia. Gardner explains, “Reggio successfully challenges so many false dichotomies….by achieving a unique harmony that spans these contrasts, it reconfigures our sclerotic categorical systems” (1998, p. 17).
I propose that Gardner’s idea of a “unique harmony” produces and sustains a comfort with discomfort, disharmony, and ambiguity, a deconstruction of the space between these apparent and constructed oppositions that create a level of positive tension (Gandini, 1998). This tension propels theory and practice in multiple directions and allows for the multiple and malleable meanings and continuous motion (not necessarily forward progress or developmental unfolding) to which Malaguzzi characteristically alludes. In Reggio Emilia, “intellectual conflict is considered pleasurable for both adults and children,” and “moments of cognitive disequilibrium” contain “positive possibilities for regrouping, hypothesis testing, and intellectual comparison of ideas” (Edwards, 1998, pp. 187-189). That process of exploring in-between meanings produces compound “third sites” (Wilson, 2004, 2005). Like Corsaro (1992), educators in Reggio Emilia see “development as reproductive rather than linear” (p. 161)—as a confluence of social constructions and biological dispositions rather than a universal unfolding. Corsaro’s interpretation of development underpins my conclusions throughout this study and my practice as an early childhood educator.

Wilson’s metaphor of the “third site,” or “a site where adults and children collaborate in making connections and interpreting webs of relationships among the images that children make for themselves and the images that adults ask them to make” (Wilson, 2005) is a guiding principle for this study. A thoughtful study of the multiple “third sites” (for example, that in between teacher and student) in Reggio Emilia can illustrate how adults and children work together to co-construct knowledge and co-create meaning in their educational relationships. Schools are almost already third sites. Like Wilson, I see educational sites as “characterized by different types of power relationships,
obligations, and freedom from obligation,” and I, too, am interested in how these “sites function pedagogically” (Wilson, 2005, p. 18).

These spaces in between (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p.8, original emphasis) are places of mediation—of constant negotiation and management of change (Rinaldi, 2006). The space in between a construction of the historically and culturally contingent and “rich” child and the eternal, universal, or innocent child produces an educational and relational foundation that can nourish ideas of both societal change—a “nostalgia for the future”—and site-specific pedagogy—a “living heritage, permanent research” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 53). In each of these binary pairs, the underprivileged other becomes, if not the dominant term, then the locus of serious reflection and a co-anchor of multiple entangled relationships and meanings. Rinaldi (2006) has explained part of the relationship between theory and practice:

The traditional relationship between theory and practice, which designates practice as consequent to theory, is redefined and therefore, surpassed. Theory and practice are placed in a relationship of reciprocity, but one in which, to a certain extent, practice takes precedent over theory (p. 56).

She continues, “In this way, practice is not only a necessary field of action for the success of theory, but is an active part of the theory itself: it contains it, generates it, and is generated by it” (p. 75). Her explanations show that this deconstruction is not a simple reversal, and that these seemingly separate spaces more accurately contain (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002) and contaminate one another. Malaguzzi’s words support this as he explains,
Yet, in so praising the child, we do not intend to return to the naïveté of the 1970s, when discovery of the child’s active role in structuring events and the two-way causality in child-adult interaction resulted in a strange devaluation of the role of the adult (1998, p. 68).

His words, in turn, echo Hawkins warning “Many of the critics who hold these views appear to operate with a simplistic notion of freedom, such that the implied cure for the troubles of education is simply a switch from the active-teacher—passive child model” (1974, p. 231).

Malaguzzi’s words imply that a construction of children produces a construction of adults (especially teachers and families) as “likewise protagonists—participants with children and parents in singular moments of time and history” (Edwards, 1998, p. 180). Malaguzzi’s metaphor that these meanings and directions can be seen as a “tangle of spaghetti” (Malaguzzi as cited in Rinaldi, 2006), perhaps best serves the mapping of in-between spaces. In more appropriate philosophical terms, Malaguzzi’s spaghetti is a version of Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome…with no beginning and no end, but always in between, and with openings toward other directions and places” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 8). This idea complements Corsaro’s idea of development as reproductive, rather than linear, and as collective rather than individual. He explains:

Culture is not in the heads of individuals. It is produced and reproduced through public negotiations. In these negotiations, social actors link shared knowledge as a resource for making novel contributions to the culture and for pursuing a range of individual goals (p. 164).
In his work on peer culture, Corsaro emphasizes the “public, collective, and performative aspects of social life” and that “this culture is shared primarily in the course of its production” (1992, p. 162). Although he is discussing children’s production and reproduction of peer cultures, we can apply his ideas to ways in which educators in Reggio Emilia have built, maintain, and sustain a shared, site-specific, culture based upon their production of the image of the child and its production of educational institutions and relationships.

**Adults Producing Children: Children Producing Educational Relationships**

We can never think of a child in the abstract. When we think about a child, when we pull out a child to look at, that child is already tightly connected and linked to a certain reality of the world….When you enter the school in the morning, you carry with you pieces of your life….You never come in an isolated way; you always come with pieces of the world attached to you (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 53).

In this 1994 article written for teachers, Malaguzzi wrote, “teaching begins with your image of the child.” He goes on to explain that when we “pull” a child—and by implication, a teacher, or ourselves—into an educational situation, that person comes in with her own, sometimes contradictory, never essential, personal and cultural histories. The director of the Reggio-inspired school where I observed explained, “When children come in the door every moment of their lives is inside of them…a million moments that influence the child’s actions.” Hawkins (1974) writes, “The product number, of possible congenital patterns multiplied by possible early biographies of children, is of higher
arithmetical order than the total number of children, past, present, and future” (p. 24). Contemporary theorists and ardent post-structuralists might call these moments or pieces “identity markers” that those in the know (or in the culture *read*). Malaguzzi, in the poetic language characteristic of the Reggio approach, calls them “pieces of the world,” as he challenges teachers to read them. Whether tacit or overt, that particular teaching image(s) of the child guides teachers in making educational decisions, both those decisions that are informed by theory and those that are so taken-for-granted that they seem “intuitive.” Those assumptions, that feeling of what is “right” or “wrong” in educational practice, may arise from a teacher’s emphasis on what she sees as the endpoint of education (Smolucha, 1989), who she sees as an acceptable child, and what she views as an acceptable, or improved, society. As Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) explain:

> In other words, we absorb theories into ourselves to such a degree that they govern our ideas and actions, although we may not recognize what is going on—even to the extent of confusing theory with truth. As such theories can become ‘taken for granted,’ self-evident, unquestioned and seen as the only right way to think and act, rather than being understood as just one possible way of thinking and acting (p. 12).

As Thompson writes (citing Tarr, 2003):

Adults may envision the child as a cute object, a ‘wiseass,’ a consumer, an innocent, or a *tabula rasa*; in each case, whether they relate to the child as parents, researchers, teachers, or merely bystanders, they will act toward the child in a manner consistent with the image of children that they hold (2006, p. 38).
The “personal theories” (Malaguzzi, 1993) or little-t theories (Graue & Walsh, 1998) that guide teacher can influence practice in positive or dangerous ways. As Graue and Walsh (1998) explain, “The danger of theory is that it can function like a set of blinders, restricting what one sees and how one sees it” (p. 26). Teachers who believe that young children are “egocentric,” in a sort of underinterpretation of Piaget’s conclusions, may shy away from discussing difficult or “abstract” issues that are often meaningful for young children but that require a sense of empathy: birth, death, race, poverty, war, inequality, safety. Teachers who believe that young children have short attention spans or that they cannot think abstractly might plan a succession of quick, unrelated, and easily manageable hands-on activities with observable outcomes instead of providing children adequate time to work through their ideas and waiting for children to develop and test their own theories and hypotheses. Teachers who believe that children should be provided with projects that ensure “success for all” might reduce learning in the visual languages to a sequence of steps that produce a reliable, ready-made, and “cute” craft. When children “defy normative assumptions” (Thompson, 2006, p. 38) either through extraordinary or unacceptable behavior, teachers may not know how to react and sometimes resort to faulting the child, the child’s family, or the educational “system.” Such a feeling of a loss of control can be traumatic for someone who is expected to always be solely orchestrating and understanding a situation “all by herself” (Edwards, 1998, p. 189) in an “isolated and individual” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 37). Further, when a teacher loses control she has no avenue of recourse: acting out could be at best injurious to the children and at worse it could jeopardize her career. A teacher often has no choice but to swallow and to think. Rinaldi (2006) explains,
The big crisis as a teacher is to be in crisis….It has something to do with an acceptance of the crisis of your knowledge. Because there is a relationship between the identity of your knowledge and your own identity….The crisis becomes the place of encounter (p. 183).

That place of encounter can be ripe with intellectual and emotional barbs—it is full of choices. It has a temporal quality—it often necessitates action with little time for thought and for reflection. This abruptness requires not only constant management of change but constant emotional and intellectual repair. As Dyson and her teachers’ study group eloquently admit, “There was a small chorus of voices saying, in effect, ‘I still go home and cry.’….I go home and say, ‘Tomorrow I’m going to do this. I’m going to change this. It didn’t work” (1997a, p. 17). Each of these quotations reveals that teaching is a complicated, ambiguous intellectual and emotional undertaking. In this way, teaching can be both difficult to endure and to describe.

In these examples above, it is easy to place fault upon a teacher’s apparently naïve beliefs or upon on the “unspeakable” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p.72) inadequacy of her preparation. The shortfalls of teacher preparation and professional development do perpetuate a context “where teachers struggle to comprehend and then put into action someone else’s epistemology,” where complex educational theories are often reduced to “slogans” like “hands-on learning” (New, 1998, p.276). Curriculum companies and school districts, often with positive intentions, repackage and reshape Big-T theories (Graue & Walsh, 1998) into “teacher-proof” systems that can be purchased and that ensure, if they are followed properly, results. In these cases, teachers grapple between an expectation that they follow the script of curricular programs and their own intuitions
about how individual children and groups of children learn—the theories that they are building (Graue & Walsh, 1998) through practice. This struggle can lead to resentment and a resistance to what seems to be a continually changing set of curriculum frameworks and institutional expectations based upon top-down decisions or to a superficial and unexamined acceptance of each subsequent theoretical imposition. Rinaldi (2006) refers to this when she explains that to become “theoretical,” teachers must quote others. Beyond this, “the problems of a very demanding job exacerbate the crisis of identity that teachers are experiencing today” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 48). Malaguzzi’s strong words about the humiliation of teacher education reveal his viewpoint that, if children are the rich protagonists of their education, then teachers, too, are richly and dynamically “competent” (New, 1998). The image of the teacher is complementary to the image of the child and allows the teacher to continually acknowledge, examine, and assess her practice as a practitioner, researcher, and theorist (New, 1998, p. 276). As Rinaldi explains, “Competence is not a static term in this case, or a given. It is an approach” (2006, p. 50). New (1998) describes this situational competence as praxis (citing Friere, 1977/1995) because it enables teaching to assume “philosophical and political congruence” (p. 279). Teachers’ roles in Reggio Emilia provide conditions for teachers to continually examine “the politics and effects of their knowledge and practices” as they “are played out in their classroom by asking who benefits and how from what I know and do” (Campbell et al, 2004, p. 80).

These beliefs about teaching then frame how the teacher sees, interprets, and interacts in educational situations. They are inherently political and they are productive and reproductive because “they determine the institutions we provide for children and the
pedagogical work that adults and children undertake in these institutions” (Dahlberg et al, p. 43). They do this because “interpersonal relations reflect cultural systems….children through their participation in communicative events, become part of these interpersonal relations and cultural patterns and reproduce them collectively” (Corsaro, 1992, p. 161). So, these relationships simultaneously frame and produce culture.

Malaguzzi has remarked in another context, “we tend to notice only those things that we expect” (1998, p. 84). In that statement, he reminds educators that their point of view is at once contradictory, multiple, partial, and contingent. Dahlberg and Moss (2006) explain, “You are always part of the context, a participant in the system you are observing and interpreting” (p. 12); while Rinaldi writes, “Point of view is always subjective, and observation is always partial. But this is a strength, not a limitation” (2006, p. 128). Rinaldi privileges the specific, localized knowledge that teachers build and apply in Reggio Emilia. That knowledge is partial because it is site-and relationship-specific. Educators in Reggio Emilia do not intend to produce generalized meanings. Nor do they consume generic meanings that position teachers as “adopters,” not “producers,” of knowledge and that “disregards local knowledge made in contexts” (Roosevelt, 2007, p. 115). In this way, their view of knowledge constructed in context echoes Roosevelt’s (2007) conviction that local, specific, in-process knowledge supports democratic educational practices. His explanation of how pre-service teachers construct local knowledge has much in common with Reggio’s ideas about documentation. I will return to his ideas again in Chapter Four of this study.

Since the founding of the first schools in Reggio, educational leaders have placed great emphasis on teachers’ professional development. In their in-service programming,
they emphasize that a teacher (practitioner) is a researcher (theorist). Furthermore, in
their classrooms in schools in Reggio Emilia, children act as researchers. By interacting
with objects, children are theorizing, formulating and testing hypotheses, and coming to
experimental and experiential conclusions based upon their observation of the evidence
of their actions. Reggio’s emphasis on research—on looking again—helps to redefine
teachers’ images of children and of themselves to produce educational relationships and
contexts that support an image of the child as “rich,” “interactionist,” and constructivist
(Spaggiari, personal communication, May 27, 2005)—constructing knowledge through
experience. In turn, this supports an image of the adult as someone who both provides
“conditions for learning” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p.83; Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p.5) and
interprets educational relationships through documentation or “reconnaissance”
(Malaguzzi, 1998). *Reconnaissance*—exploring, searching to gain information—through
documentation allows teachers to examine “the limits and possibilities of what they think,
say and do as teachers by asking what limits what I know about this child, this
pedagogical practice and myself and by asking what are the possibilities for knowing
these differently” (Campbell et al, 2004, p. 80). While Malaguzzi’s use of the term
*reconnaissance* does imply a kind of surveillance, it is an ethical and explicit
surveillance. In an article about social justice in early childhood education, Campbell,
MacNaughton, Page, and Rolfe (2004) use Foucaultian and feminist post-structural
theories to analyze teachers’ responses to particular children in a racially charged
classroom play situation. They illustrate how teachers’ personal theories and ideological
understandings of classroom worlds shape their productive interactions with children,
their educational discourse.
Discourse in Reggio Emilia

In Reggio, the collective adoption of a particular construction of children and a discourse that supports this construction of children as interactionist and rich, adaptable, competent, and demanding allows the “image of the child” to function as a metatheory that guides collective practice and enables multiple, ambiguous, contingent, and historical meanings to emerge and exist. As Edwards (1998) explains,

They [teachers in Reggio Emilia] have evolved together a shared discourse, a coherent way of thinking and talking.…This language of education serves to organize and bring together all of the participants in the Reggio Emilia system into one community (p. 179).

New (1998) explains that discourse about education in Reggio Emilia interfaces with the city’s local and national culture—its “developmental niche” (Harkness & Super, 1994, as cited by New) or “unique sociocultural context that draws on centuries of tradition and history associated with the larger Italian culture as well as that at the local and regional levels” (p. 265).

This changeable historical anchoring of the image of the child allows it to elude classification alongside “empty signifiers” (Laclau, 1995). The vagueness of words like “quality,” “achievement,” and “excellence” resists any concrete attachment to a signified yet these expressions have become increasingly productive of educational relationships and institutions. Empty signifiers exemplify “dividing practices” (Foucault as cited in Dahlberg et al, 1999) that “distribute, manipulate, and control children, leading to a diagnostic, assessment and therapeutic culture where normative judgments about the
child enter in and take over” (Dahlberg & Taguchi, 1994). These distinctions, in turn, classify children at-risk or in-need as unacceptable and in need of intervention—they provide a dangerous and productive order. Rinaldi explains, “We need to avoid generic statements, slogans, words which are too all-embracing (such as ‘family needs,’ ‘fostering relationships,’ ‘communicating,’ and so on) and make an effort to conjugate them and grasp their many facets” (2006, p. 31). This tension particularly interests me because of my experience working with children who have sometimes been marked as unacceptable and my experiences as a teacher in classroom situations that are uncomfortable. My attraction to the image of the child in the Reggio Emilia approach stems in part from its construction of children and childhoods as multiple and contingent, not as distinctive to or from an empty or eternal ideal.

Spaggiari explains that in Reggio Emilia, educators construct childhood as “a thirst for exchange with others, a land of encounters, exploration, interaction with others” (personal communication, May 27, 2005). His figurative language begins to reveal the social constructivist theoretical framework through which educators construct the image of the child. In their particular construction of childhood—one that educators in Reggio acknowledge as culturally invented and imposed and not biologically predisposed—children are “rich” as opposed to “poor” in resources. Spaggiari explains that this construction of children as rich was a “radical, extreme” idea, a pedagogical and political intentionality intended to philosophically challenge historical constructions of children. Those constructions of children as “weak, incompetent, dependent, and privatized” (Dahlberg et al, 1999, p. 38) produced previous educational relationships and institutions
that “decontextualized” children from their specific social and historical contexts. That image of the child disallows nuance and complication, and is not “neutral,” but rather contributes to a construction of the ‘poor’ child….and of the relationships between young children and society as abnormal, only legitimated in such diagnostic and therapeutic terms as ‘compensation’ or ‘intervention’ when the family, the ‘natural’ place for the child, is in some way deemed to have failed the child (Dahlberg et al, 1999, p. 38).

Poor images of children continue to shape contemporary educational contexts and to exacerbate the tensions between education and care. As Dahlberg et al explain,

Early intervention has come to be seen as a means of preventing or ameliorating problems in families with young children and in later childhood, as well as protecting children deemed to be at risk. Early childhood education and care services are discussed as a condition for urban and rural development (1999, p.1).

Their words support Thompson’s view that the “systematic underestimation of children’s competence and integrity reflects a widespread but depleted ‘image of the child,’ a perspective that is decisive in determining our orientations and actions toward children” (2006, p.38).

In Reggio, then, the image of the rich child is more thoroughly anchored in both the theoretical context of education and also in the contingent, historical context in which a particular child lives. In this way the “image of the child” functions both as a metaphor and metatheory for children and childhood and as a theory that produces a concept of children as specific, complex, individual, constructivist, and socially mediated. However, as a metaphor the image of the child risks a kind of under-translation or an
oversimplification that unintentionally sustains the image of the eternal child in some interpretations of the Reggio approach. In an argument that reveals tensions within both Reggio discourse and also in interpretations of Reggio discourse that influence the discourse community of early childhood education Johnson (1999) explains, “This powerful language, the Reggio discourse, sets an awe-inspiring tone” (p. 65). He asks, “does Reggio Emilia really exist,” (p. 61) or is it an imported “cargo cult” (p. 67) sustained by the “fanaticism” (p. 63) that surrounds it? In a Foucaultian analysis of power imbalance and silences in Reggio discourse, Johnson reveals tensions between the Modern and postmodern in Reggio discourses. He explains that a tendency to be so “impressed” by Reggio discourse that “we seemingly unequivocally trust Reggio Emilia ….with what amounts to very little intellectual debate” (p. 68) perpetuates not only the perception of anti-intellectualism in early education but also a colonialist and tourist adoption of Reggio Emilia as a “cargo cult” or an exotic, authentic, and desirable other. Throughout the essay, he supports his conclusions with evidence from an online discussion surrounding Reggio that refers not only to the desire to adopt Reggio practice in multiple contexts but also the tourist nature of traveling to Italy (to the authentic original) to retrieve or receive insights educators do not see as readily available in practice closer to home. Johnson sees Reggio Emilia as both exclusive—only those who can afford the high expense of traveling to Reggio can do so—and commoditized, citing documentation as one example of the “highly commodified aspects of Reggio programs” (p. 72). His criticisms reveal underlying tensions in understandings and applications of the Reggio approach (one that resists reproduction in its “authentic” form) in multiple contexts.
Throughout this paper, I hope to address Johnson’s call to intellectually examine theory and practice in Reggio Emilia from the perspective of a teacher and researcher working with children from diverse backgrounds in specific contexts outside of Reggio Emilia and participating in multiple discourse communities. Developing this kind of perspective requires not only a thoughtful understanding of the specificity of Reggio practice in Reggio but also an attempt to illustrate how educators in Reggio use shared theory (what Johnson would see as the theory that has been readily available to early educators for some time). That, too, requires a willingness to implicate my construction of my own practice and research within this paper. In doing so, I hope to present “doubt, uncertainty, and feelings of crisis….as resources and qualities to value and offer….as requirements for creating new thinking and perspectives” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 18). I also hope to locate and critically examine aspects of Reggio discourse within the those other frames through which I both think and work with children, especially in that discourses “produce and express desires and emotional investments” (Campbell et al, 2004, p. 77).

In response to these criticism of the common language that educators in Reggio Emilia use, Rinaldi (2006) explains, “The fact that this language is highly visual and metaphorical has often made it extremely attractive to our….colleagues, but has also been the source of a few understandable suspicions” (p. 75). The poetic, figurative, and specific language of the discourse community in Reggio Emilia gives meaning to their educational project but also stands alone in a way that makes it seem intuitively understandable, familiar, and supportive of conventional ideas about children. Its phonetic resonance obscures its theoretical rigor. Rinaldi continues,
At times we were a little too vague, letting ourselves be perceived as enveloped in a kind of haziness that had much in common with vagueness. We see metaphor not as a rhetorical or stylistic devise but as a genuine tool of cognition (1999, p. 75).

To show how the image of the child in Reggio Emilia combats this undertranslation, it is important to move outside of the specialized language of Reggio Emilia and to root the image of the child both in the Reggio interpretation of educational theory and in the specific cultural and historical context(s) of the approach.

**Site-Specific Pedagogy: We’re Doing Us**

As you know, they cannot do a Reggio. Perhaps we should make more clear that Reggio itself is an interpretation of Reggio! The only thing that we can share with others is our values and the reason why and the way in which we try to challenge ourselves….We have nothing to teach. The risk we have to avoid is the imperialistic approach, for us and for them to believe that everything we touch becomes gold and is perfect (Rinaldi, 2006, pp. 197-8).

Reggio Emilian teachers consciously orchestrate the tacit and visible dimensions of the sociocultural context that are within their control, thereby maximizing the possibilities of this culturally sanctioned relational premise on children’s learning and development. Examples of what constitutes the culture of schooling in Reggio Emilia may be found in organization features, the physical environment, curriculum content, and pedagogy, as well as the more mundane daily rituals and
routines—each contributing to the nurturing of select culturally valued tools, knowledge, and understandings. (New, 1998, p. 266)

The idea of site-specific pedagogy is a foundational construction that supports this study. I am defining site-specific pedagogy as the sum of relationships and discourse that give meaning to educational relationships in specific, historical, and local contexts. My idea of site-specific pedagogy supports the idea that there are only “Reggio schools” in Reggio and that the approach is not an approach, but an attitude (New, 2000). It supports the idea that each school, and each relationship in a school, is socially situated in specific historic and temporal moments that are not repeatable. I am interested in the concept of site-specific pedagogy because it allows each school, or each classroom—as will be the case in my study—to develop its own particular identity as a specific, non-repeatable, site that is an amalgamation of particular historical moments. In this way, as I work with children and as children work together in my classroom, I am not “doing Reggio,” but rather we are doing “us,” working together to develop a pedagogy that is attuned to our particular individual and group identities. Although I may be inspired by the image of the child in the Reggio Emilia approach as I work with children, we are working to create our own images of ourselves, and our own theories and practice. Our relationship to Reggio, then, is in our conscientious adoption of the image of the child as a beginning point. In our context, too, this is a political beginning point.

Because the historical and cultural contexts of the Reggio Emilia approach have been thoroughly documented and influential in current American early childhood practice, I will not provide an extensive history and philosophy of the schools in this paper. However, the social and political context in which the first schools were
founded—post-WWII, post-Fascist Italy—is of particular importance. Malaguzzi (1998) explains, “The history of our approach, and of my place in it, starts 6 days after the end of the Second World War. It is the spring of 1945” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p.49). Although in that interview, Malaguzzi recounts his particular role in the first schools, the war remains a collective starting point for the Reggio project—one of initial urgency and radical, political action. This kind of action was a part of the larger Italian cultural landscape at the time—an atmosphere in which “after all the years of Fascism, people were ready for a change….people took many initiatives into their own hands” (Edwards et al, 1998, p. 21).

Jerome Bruner has said, “you cannot understand the municipal schools if you do not understand the city from which they derive: the city of Reggio Emilia” (as cited in Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 2). The Reggio project began almost as the war ended with the “school of tank,” a school for the most vulnerable young children that was built literally “brick by brick” by an interested group of families and teachers in Villa Cella on the poor outskirts of Reggio. The project began only with the intent to create a school for children, not with a specific philosophical foundation. Malaguzzi explains, “we felt both enthusiasm and fear. We knew perfectly well how weak and unprepared we were” (1998, p. 51). In this way, a collective, democratic construction of a school was a direct political response to the cultural isolation and diminished subjectivity of the Fascist experience. It also nurtured a certain rebellious spirit in the Reggio Emilia approach—a skepticism caused by the lessons of Fascism that resists grand or meta-narratives or absolute truths. As Dahlberg explains,

the fascist experience had taught them that people who conformed and obeyed were dangerous, and that in building a new society it was imperative to safeguard
and communicate that lesson and maintain a vision of children who can think and act for themselves (Dahlberg as cited by Dahlberg et al, 1999, p. 12).

Those initial efforts provided a direct historical identity and antecedent upon which the subsequent project would build, both conceptually and practically.

**Site-specific Pedagogy and Social Constructivism: Knowledge Co-constructed in Context**

The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education is founded on a distinctive, coherent, evolving set of assumptions and perspectives drawn from three important intellectual traditions: European and American strands of *progressive education*, Piagetian and Vygotskian *constructivist psychologies*, and Italian post-war left-reform politics. All of these are blended together with elements of past and present history and culture (Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998, p.8, original emphasis).

As Vygotsky argued, the researcher’s question is not for the ‘discovery of the eternal child…[but for] the historical child’ (1934/1987, p. 91)…The historical child exists in real places in real time. She is not a representative sample, somehow timeless and without context (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 35).

Educators in Reggio interpret and generate social constructivist theory in a way that supports their image of the child, and subsequently their pedagogical endeavors as sensitive, historical, and political. Social constructivist learning theories that position groups of learners as co-constructors of specified knowledge in particular contexts best describe the ways in which they interpret and generate learning theory. As Rinaldi
explains, “I would say that our long-term experience and in-depth analysis has shown us that teaching and learning are absolutely complementary, and in this sense we feel close to Vygotsky, Bruner and the socio-constructionist theories” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.126).

Throughout this chapter, I use “the label social constructivism….to describe the epistemological and philosophical position that mental activity is bound to its social context” (Wertsch as cited by New, 1998, p.?).

A foundation secured by a social constructivist point of view not only produces the “image” of the child but also other foundational metaphors in the language and practice of Reggio. Those metaphoric and linguistic constructs include the “pedagogy of listening” and “dialogue” (Rinaldi, 2006) “languages,” “transparency,” “visibility,” and even the idea of a ping-pong game (Edwards, 1998; Malaguzzi, 1998). Each of these related metaphoric, theoretical, and practical ideas begin with, are anchored by, and help to propel and change the umbrella idea of the “image” of the child.

Working with the foundational image of the child, “educators in Reggio have not just brought in theories and concepts from many places. They reflect on them and experiment with them, creating their own meanings and implications for pedagogical practice” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p.4). Dahlberg and Moss continue, “teachers in Reggio have taken inspiration from theories and theorists but have not been bound by them; rather than reproducing others’ theories, they have used them to construct their own perspectives” (p. 6), an example of Corsaro’s (1992) “interpretive reproduction” and Graue and Walsh’s (1998) theory-building. New (1998), too, emphasizes that teachers in Reggio construct their own theories “to articulate a philosophical framework congruent with their evolving pedagogical practice” (p. 275). She explains, “It is insufficient,
however, to ascribe credit for Reggio Emilia’s accomplishments solely to their selective synthesis of the empirically and philosophically based positions espoused by other contemporary scholars” (p. 275). The significance lies, then, in the confluence between grand theories and little theories—the constant movement between meta narratives and local narratives. As Graue and Walsh (1998) explain, “Theory building can, and often should, begin with theory borrowing. One may find oneself with a data record that existing theoretical perspectives do not explain well” (p. 21). Through an examination of the constructivist and social constructivist theories that influence educators in Reggio, in this chapter I hope to begin to consider how educators in Reggio construct their own site-specific theories and metatheories.

But, because the theorists who have influenced and continue to influence practice in Reggio have been discussed in literature about the history and philosophy of the approach, it is not necessary to re-trace that “long list of names” (Malaguzzi, 1998, p.58) or “vibrant flood” (Rabitti, 1992, p. 19) for this study. Instead, I would like to focus on uniting aspects of social constructivist theory that most support both the theory that educators produce in Reggio and that support their site-specific approach to pedagogy. For my purposes in this study, this means a return to Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s influence in Reggio Emilia. I do not intend to omit subsequent and contemporary theoretical work that builds upon Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s ideas. Rather, I would like to position educators in Reggio Emilia as theorists themselves; as not only people who act as they are informed by other theories but as those who make theory through reflective practice. Through this, I am hopeful that I will be able to illustrate how the approach functions as an “attitude” and how this attitude, and not the “cargo cult” (Johnson, 1999) of the Reggio Approach,
can serve children in other contemporary settings and inspire other schools to forge their own theoretical and practical identities based within their specific context.

Almost all references to constructivism and social constructivist in Reggio name Piaget and Vygotsky. In various sources, Malaguzzi cites specific Piagetian influences on the schools. These range from seemingly simple choices concerning the physical spaces of the schools and materials to epistemological concerns. When he was asked why schools include an *ateliers*, Malaguzzi explained, “I believe with Piaget that cognition is born thru [sic] the acting of the child on objects” (Rabitti, 1992, p. 21). As such, the *ateliers*, as its name suggests, is a workshop that presents a variety of objects that children can manipulate to create meaning. Educators select objects to provide opportunities for children to develop perceptual skills—to distinguish between material and conceptual qualities of things. In this way, the environment (which includes materials) becomes the third teacher.

Documentation often refers to the *ateliers* as a *laboratory*—a place where children can experiment with materials and where teachers can document and interpret their experimentation. Even in *Haiku* infant toddler center, educators described the atelier as “a space—a laboratory, a center for observation and documentation, a space rich with different opportunities, where one formulates ideas.”iii In this way, “cognition is born,” through teachers’ interpretations of children acting upon objects. Cognition is both, then, internal and external, individual and social, biological and cultural.

Malaguzzi explains that “His (Piaget’s) idea was to allow children either to be with teachers or stay alone” (1998, p. 64) when he is asked why classrooms have two rooms. His words reveal how Reggio constantly strives for a balance between over- and
under-determination of teachers’ roles. He continues, “Piaget was the first to give them [children] an identity based on a close analysis of their development by observing and talking to children over extended periods of time” (1998, p. 81). This statement foreshadows the influence that Piaget’s methods have had on both the construction of the image of the child and the research methodology of pedagogical documentation.

Malaguzzi (1998) shares that his experiences at Piaget’s *Ecole de Petits* in Geneva inspired him “to work with numbers, mathematics, and perception” (p. 53). Malaguzzi continues that he is “convinced that it is not an imposition on children or an artificial exercise to work with numbers, quantity, classification, dimensions, forms, measurement, transformation, orientation” (p. 53). When observing in schools in Reggio, it is clear that educators create spaces and arrange materials in curatorial ways that emphasize the physical and conceptual qualities of and relationships between objects support these convictions. This is especially evident in the schools’ *ateliers* where educators display items for not only their formal and material qualities but to emphasize or de-emphasize their use-values. This conscientious juxtaposition supports not only children’s perceptual skill development (essentially a Piagetian task common in most early childhood programming) but also their understanding of the culturally-inscribed use values of things. In Reggio Emilia, variations of Piagetian operations are meaningfully contextualized. This contextualization may account for why children do things they shouldn’t be able to do. Tasks are meaningful, not isolated (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

Educators seem to intend for children to both contemplate objects and to upcycle them and to augment their constructions with fine art materials. Malaguzzi’s position, inspired by Piaget’s epistemological ideas, seems to have more in common with Kamii’s idea that
children “reinvent,” or learn the ideas behind arithmetic through experience (Kamii, 2000, 2004) with the additional caveat that the process is not only individual but social. Corsaro (1992) elucidates, “Best represented in Piaget’s cognitive developmental theory, the constructivist approach stresses the child’s active role; it holds that children interpret, organize, and use information from the environment, and acquire skills and knowledge in the process” (p. 160). In Reggio, too, children learn the ideas that support other symbolic and semiotic systems (or “languages”) through reinvention and reflection. In her account of Piaget, Kamii (2000) emphasizes that he was not a psychologist but an epistemologist. She explains that Piaget saw “elements of truth and untruth” in both the empiricist’s and rationalist’s ideas about knowledge, and continues, “His [Piaget’s] study of children was thus a means to answer epistemological questions scientifically” (2000, 2004, p. 4).

When discussing “our Piaget,” Malaguzzi cautions in an oft-repeated quotation, With a simple-minded greed, we educators have tried too often to extract from Piaget’s epistemology things that he did not consider at all usable in education. He would wonder what use teachers could possibly have for his theories of stages, conservation of matter, and so on. In fact, the richest potentiality of Piagetian thought lies in the domain of epistemology, as seen in his major opus, The Biology of Knowledge (1998, p. 81).

Piaget’s theories surrounding epistemology provide educators in Reggio with a beginning point to understand how children learn in and with relationship to their environment, or in terms of the nexus between biological predisposition and cultural influence (the ideas of nature and nurture). That understanding, although not strictly Piagetian but interpretive of the direction of his work, supports their idea of pedagogy as
historic, and as co-constructed and continually reconstructed through relationship. 

Corsaro (1992) explains, “numerous attempts have been made to extend Piaget’s work on intellectual development to the study of children’s social cognition; these studies suggest that children often interact with others in response to disequilibria” (p. 160). His ideas support what educators in Reggio have found within their theory and practice.

As Dahlberg and Moss explain, Reggio’s “social constructionist approach has meant that Reggio Emilia has been engaged in what can be termed a politics of epistemology” (2006, p.11). In this way, they are not interested in a “scientific” or “decontextualized” child (Dahlberg et al, 1999, p. 46) but in an understanding of the origins of knowledge. Like Vygotsky, they seem to believe that these origins are social, and they tend to emphasize the social over the individual. This emphasis on the individual within the group, as opposed to what Corsaro (1992) sees as an “adherence to individualism” that can be seen as an “overwhelming concern with the endpoint of development” (p. 161), is one of the most important aspects of theoretical thought in Reggio Emilian schools. As Corsaro (1992) explains, “Vygotsky’s views are important in extending the constructivist emphasis on children’s activities beyond acknowledging that they are interactive events to emphasizing that such events are basic to producing and maintaining cultural systems” (p. 160).

When he was discussing Vygotsky, Malaguzzi explained, “our own Vygotsky ….reminds us how thought and language are operative together to form ideas and to make a plan for action, and then for executing, controlling, describing, and discussing that action” (1998, p.83). In their account of how speech surrounds and supports young children’s making, Thompson and Bales (1991) explain
In very young children, egocentric speech marks the end result or a turning point in an activity. Eventually it shifts toward the middle, and finally to the beginning of an activity, “taking on a directing, planning function and raising the child’s acts to the level of purposeful behavior” (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 17) (p. 46).

They continue, “The ability to reflect upon experience, Vygotsky suggests, emerges in the preschool years as children acquire and perfect the means of self-direction that egocentric speech provides” (p. 46). Here, Malaguzzi and Thompson and Bales, following Vygotsky, imply that language and knowledge are dialogic and therefore social functions. Corsaro (1992) explains, “He [Vygotsky] argued that children, through their acquisition and use of language, come to reproduce a social world that contains the knowledge of generations” (p. 161). In this way, as Dyson (1993, 1997b) observes, children grow into the intellectual life that surrounds them by reinventing culturally coded symbolic systems—or languages. They move from speaking to symbolic making.

Educators in Reggio use Malaguzzi’s metaphor of “il cento” or “the hundred” languages of children to describe this process of achieving communicative fluency through visual, graphic, mathematical, logical, and physical languages.

Malaguzzi refers to Piaget and Vygotsky as “ours” to emphasize that educators in Reggio do not take theories wholly, but interpret them for their specific needs in context. They are wary of being aligned too closely to any one position or movement. Rinaldi (2006) explains that this is a kind of imprisonment. She clarifies that they try “to avoid being a prisoner of any definition—any predefinition” (p. 181). She continues, “I want each school to use theory, really, for interpreting, and not to be used, as we say, by theory” (p. 182).
In his writings, Vygotsky countered the position “that development and instruction are separate and independent processes. According to this view development obeys internal, natural laws (laws of maturation), and instruction externally utilizes the potentials of development” (Newman & Holzman, 1993, p.57). Rather, Vygotsky acknowledged the significance of the educational relationship between children and adults or competent peers. He placed tasks in their specific, historical, and social context. Influenced by Marxism, he was interested in the productive nature of social relationships, and in the ways in which language produces and sustains those relationships. As Sutton-Smith (1995) explains, “Vygotsky, for his part, and in his Marxist voice, was attempting to show the social source of word meanings, how the second signal system of language was drenched with cultural meaning” (p. 70) or “the knowledge of generations.” When Vygotsky studied interactions in which one person was more capable than another, he saw that “The student and teacher are involved in doing the task from the beginning: the task is socially distributed” (Newman & Holzman, 1993, p. 72) and therefore only has meaning in particular social contexts. As Corsaro (1992) expounds, “children discover a world which is endowed with meaning and that they help to shape and share in their developmental experiences by their interactive responses” (p. 161).

An understanding of Vygotsky’s play theory can also help to frame the project approach in Reggio Emilia in a significant way. The experience of play is an important feature of most of the well-documented projects that children and adults undertake in Reggio. In Reggio, as is the case with other dichotomies, reality and fantasy hold each other in a relationship of positive tension. In his play theory, Vygotsky “explicitly states that pretend play is the result of social interactions between the child and an adult”
(Smolucha, 1989, p. 2). In this way, pretend play is grounded in the real but transforms the real in a way that eclipses it. In a study of her translations of Vygotsky’s writings on play, Smolucha (1989) explains that Vygotsky “does more than make a general claim that creativity develops from pretend play, he specifies that it develops from object substitutions in play” (p. 3). She is concerned with creativity and imagination, and she proposes “that children learn how to do object substitutions from play interactions with an adult” (p.3). Sutton-Smith (1995) explains that Vygotsky had “given us a view of children’s play which provides it with a more creative role in human cognition than any other serious theory in developmental psychology” (p. 72). After giving an example of two girls engaged in play in that exemplifies the way “in which rule structures are first engendered….so that meaning arises and abstracts itself from everyday contextualization,” Sutton-Smith concludes, quoting Vygotsky,

“From the point of view of development, creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 103). If this should be true, and it may well be, it means that play has a direct, not an indirect, relationship to cognition (1995, p. 72)

Sutton-Smith (1995) seeks to “support the conception of the sophisticated, complex, multidimensional, and multivocal mind of the child” (p. 69). His radical theory of the ways in which children develop intellectually through narrative play can be related to both Malaguzzi’s idea of the multi-modal “100 languages of children” and the construction of the rich, powerful child who is a protagonist in her own intellectual, social, and emotional development.
Malaguzzi (1998) also references Vygotsky’s *zone of proximal development*, perhaps one of theoretical concepts most foundational to understanding pedagogy and politics in Reggio. Although the zone of proximal development has been discussed extensively in educational literature, it is not always fully understood as a philosophical construct or concept. According to Newman and Holzman (1993),

His [Vygotsky’s] understanding of methodology led him to search for a social-historical unity (rather than a traditional psychological unit), one grounded in the material existence of women and men ‘in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions’ (Marx and Engels, 1973, pp.47-8)—that is, one grounded in history (p. 65).

They continue, “To Vygotsky the mind (a psychological activity/an historical unity) is comprehensible historically because it is historical. It is literally created or produced through the participation in and internalization of social-cultural-historical forms of activity” (1993, p. 65).

Development in the zone of proximal development does not necessarily move forward in a predictable, linear manner. The zone of proximal development does not point to the status of development, but to the origin of development’s potential. The term proximal implies that this origin is a point of attachment; it is attached to the social and described through culturally inscribed languages and action. In this way, Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development reveals how knowledge and meaning are specific and contingent to their context, not universal or predictable. With this concept, Vygotsky also examined relationships between development and learning. He felt that “children must learn in order to be motivated. In other words, learning leads to development” (Newman
The idea that learning leads development supports the willingness of educators in Reggio to engage children in topics—from abstract philosophical—yet real—topics like “war” to fantastic topics like *HeMan: Masters of the Universe* toys (Dahlberg, 1999)—that interest them, even if they might seem to be beyond children’s developmental level. And of course, we could argue that the distance between war and between HeMan is easily eclipsed. The children are motivated by topics that are meaningful to them, and with support, are able to do more than conventional constructions of children might anticipate. This practice exemplifies a social constructivist theory that asserts that “children’s learning is situated in a socio-cultural context and takes place in interrelationships, requiring the construction of an environment that ‘allows for maximum movement, interdependence, and interaction’” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 6).

In this way, the zone of proximal development can be seen as a third site—a space that collapses the dichotomy between self and other (and in this case between adult and child or child and peer), and a space that participants negotiate and describe through language and action. In Reggio, educators focus much of their pedagogical attention on anticipating the zone of proximal development, or that space in which they can enter into a co-constructive dialogue with children or with their colleagues. It is a “hot moment” (Vecchi as cited by Edwards, 1998, p. 188). Newman and Holzman (1993) draw comparisons between the metaphor of “scaffolding” (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) “as the construct that motivates attention to the process by which ‘control’ of the task is transferred from the adult to the child” (p.70). However, Dyson (1999) cautions that using only the scaffold as an over-arching metaphor for this process implies a vertical
relationship. Sutton-Smith (1995), too, cautions against a direct interpretation of the representation of the “scaffold.” He sees it as culturally contingent. In its clean linearity, it risks being too didactic or mechanistic.

Dyson, like educators in Reggio, sees knowledge as radiating both horizontally and vertically in a state of continually moving disequilibrium or equilibrium based upon the knowledge’s specific social contexts. In this way, it is more like a game of Chutes and Ladders. Corsaro (1992) advocates that “a careful consideration of the role of language and discourse in children’s collective external productions….calls for a movement from a linear to a reproductive view of social development” (p. 161).

His statement challenges assumptions about the nature of the mind. We are often guilty (I am implicated too) of assuming that the mind is constant—that intellectual development, regardless of time or place or moment, proceeds in the same way for all humans. In this view, our contexts change, but our biological mental apparatus does not. We fail to see the cultural contexts of theories of mind. So, development unfolds and does not change. Is development a universal result of maturation, or do children develop differently in different contexts? How does development remain the same or change?

Site-specific Childhoods in Compound Social Worlds

Throughout this study, I present ways in which ideas based both in an understanding of the Reggio approach and of Reggio’s interpretation of social constructivist theory influences my generation of theories about ways in which children learn and communicate through visual language. This theoretical framework,
complementary to its practical application, has helped me to frame and generate my own theoretical hypothesis about relationships between play, between visual, digital, and written languages, and teaching and learning. My own theories, then, also lay in an in-between place, informed not only by the Reggio Emilia approach, but also by my classroom experiences, my understandings of historical and contemporary research about teaching and learning and especially by children’s visual productions and visual culture, and understandings of and relationships to specific children.

Within this study, I use this in-between framework to explore ways in which I believe that children communicate and construct identity and knowledge through visual languages. This exploration also reveals ways in which I construct my own teaching knowledge and identity with my students, and ways in which I have observed other educators do the same. My intentions are not to provide prescriptions for practice, or criticisms of contexts not inspired by the Reggio approach. I also do not intend to represent myself as a fanatic or “Reggio teacher” (Johnson, 1999, p. 73). I agree with him that “fanaticism, is synonymous with intolerance, obsession, narrow mindedness and prejudice” (p. 73). I, too, ask “What does tourism and Reggio Emilia have to with children in refugee centers, homeless children, and issues of poverty” (p.73). But, my answer, unlike Johnson’s, might be, “A lot!” My experiences in schools in Reggio Emilia, in a Reggio-inspired school for young children, and in public elementary schools, and now as I help to begin a new early childhood program, have shaped and refined my personal theories about teaching, learning, and children. The Reggio attitude has provided me with a framework through which I can articulate feelings and beliefs about children and about teaching that I have experienced since my very first, tentative steps into my
own classroom. It has helped me to more deeply experience and to more profoundly attempt to understand the many facets of classroom life. I have experienced some of that classroom life that confronts discomfort, “unacceptable children,” homelessness, diversity, racial tension, class bias, and poverty. I have experienced classroom life that revolves around privilege, power, and appearance. As a beginning teacher and a beginning researcher, the Reggio attitude has buoyed my questioning disposition. It has helped me to see possibilities in situations in which I may have otherwise felt despair. It has supported me as I construct myself as a social actor and I move in multiple social worlds with other actors—the children that I have come to learn about during my teaching experiences. It has supported me in my attempts to “understand children as learners” (Roosevelt, 2007, p. 115).

I understand that sharing the Reggio language is, too, a “marker of affiliation.” It helps me to overcome the isolation that I have experienced as a teacher by connecting me with something bigger than myself. Perhaps one day I will no longer need to use Reggio language: perhaps I will move past it into the realm of constructing my own theories. Although I am self-conscious about the ways in which my voice does and will continue to predominate (Dyson, 1997a) in this study, I feel that it is equally important to accept and acknowledge that as research, this is my story. My interpretations and personal theories support my relationships and practice in a site-specific context. In an educational field that calls for more evidence of experiences from classrooms (Thompson, 2005), this is both a strength and limitation of the study.
Chapter Two

Pedagogical Documentation as a Research Methodology

Writing to Understanding Mathematical Languages: A Vignette

Six year-olds Katie, James, Jackson, Marquise, Tomika, and Savannah are meeting for their daily math group. We are working with manipulatives: small red square blocks that represent one quantity and that link together into rods. I have been asked to help the children use the cubes to count and to make number combinations. The children will be assessed with these manipulatives. They will be asked how many cubes remain in a closed bag when some are taken away. It is a difficult problem for them to conceptualize. Although several can make number combinations in rows on paper by noticing patterns, they have varied success in transferring this know-how to their work with the cubes. They have yet to make the distinction that the cubes represent quantities that are symbolically represented by numbers. As Piaget first documented, symbolic understanding of numbers is a complex problem for young children. This morning, the children have become quite frustrated so we take a break to work on our oral counting. The children practice counting from one to one hundred by fives. They sing out, “Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty…” as Tomika slaps her hand upon her knee with each beat. It becomes more clear to me that the children have memorized the signifiers for the numbers devoid of their signified meaning. They are reciting, not counting. It is a
phonetic exercise for them. They know and understand that they are *counting*, but they do not understand what counting means.

One week later, as we sit on the carpet with our cubes, Tomika has an idea. She has noticed that each child in her group is a different height. She requests that I give each child five cubes connected in one rod. She then proceeds to line the children up from tallest to smallest and to measure their heights by fives. She adds ones when necessary. We find that Jackson is 69 cubes high and so forth. All the children are interested in this comparative approach to measurement. I take notes as they work. My job is to record their heights in cubes. Later that day, in the art studio, when the children are thinking about making life-size griffins, they realize that in order to stand, all the griffins must have legs of equal length. We recall the experiment with the counting cubes and number rods and the children measure the paper tubes they have chosen for legs in a comparative way. The process is successful! In math group the next week, most of the children now understand that one cube represents one number. As they write their number combinations, they use the cubes to count. They have made a breakthrough: Although they still recognize the patterns of numbers, they also recognize that each cube *represents* a number that symbolically stands in for a *quantity*. With this monumental discovery, they have begun to understand ways in which we can use the mathematical languages to describe and to map our world.

I have purposefully opened this chapter with a vignette. The process of transcribing field notes and then composing them into vignettes that emphasize particular ideas or themes is a crucial one for qualitative researchers. As Graue and Walsh (1998) explain, “More and more, qualitative researchers are understanding that rather than being
an afterthought or merely a mode of communication, writing is part and parcel of the interpretive act…writing is rhetorical, situated, and mysteriously as analytical as ‘analysis’” (p. 207). They continue, “Transforming observations into text frames the author role very early in the process and makes each subsequent textualization reliant on those earlier links in the chain” (p. 208). Walsh later adds, “My rule of thumb is that if you can’t write a vignette, there is something that you do not understand” (p. 221). I chose this vignette to open this chapter because there was something in it that I did not initially understand. I was as fascinated by Tomika’s rhythmic “counting” as I was by her proposal of measuring the children’s heights. I was impressed that the children seemed to be able to transfer this newly acquired skill to their griffin project. It was the first time “math group” had melted into the art studio and the beginning of the children’s understandings of the concrete usefulness of mathematical languages. I wanted to further understand how the children were “reinventing” arithmetic (Kamii, 2000, 2004) in order to take part in the intellectual life that surrounded them. On the first day of math group, the children were surprised to see me—the art teacher—as their math teacher. After I led them through the counting worksheets that the school had provided to me, Katie remarked, “You’re not very good at teaching this, are you?” Katie was right—it was my first time teaching math. I had much to learn about how the children approached numbers and the mathematical concepts on which they would be assessed. I was devastated when I learned that they had performed below expectations on their first assessment. I hadn’t even known that they were being assessed: No one had provided me with assessment materials. It seemed strange to me that they were assessed out of context. It was only through note-taking and through careful reconstruction and documentation that I began to
see how the children were coming to understand mathematical concepts. It was only after composing this vignette that I began to focus upon and extract the similarities of strategy that motivated their meaning-making in other modes of symbolic communication. In this way, through the process of documentation, I began to build what Graue and Walsh (1998) call “little-t” theories. I did this with teaching aims in mind, not with the intent of researching my teaching or the children’s learning (although I was doing both). For me, in this case, the process was practical. But, through it, I also began to see how these small theories fit into, abutted, and challenged “Big-T” theories. Throughout this chapter, I will examine pedagogical documentation as a research methodology through which teachers generate theory and construct knowledge—little-t theories—that not only enrich their practice but that can also make significant contributions to Big-T theories about how children learn through making. With this distinction in mind, I will also consider the ethical questions that surround making this research public—taking it beyond classroom practice and into the wider scope of educational theory and research. For the sake of clarity, the primary text of this chapter concerns pedagogical documentation as research situated simultaneously within a specific teaching site and the context of educational research.

Wilson (1997) calls research the “second search.” He explains, “I like to think of research as re-search, to search again, to take a second closer look” (p. 1, original emphasis). He continues, “Research includes the construction of theories, the mounting of philosophical arguments, and the making of critical interpretations and judgments” and adds, “One of the defining characteristics of education research is that it relates what is with what might be and what ought to be” (p. 1, original emphasis). I am hopeful that this
vignette begins to map how the process of pedagogical documentation, as a form of qualitative research, helps teachers get closer to intersecting points of meaning-making and of understanding in children’s experiences with language systems. As a part of this study, I have crafted this vignette to emphasize how looking again at what is—at what happens—and re-constructing a narrative from this helps teachers to generate theory-in-practice. A teacher can continue to investigate and to refine her small theories and to understand how they might become Big-T theories. Those Big-T theories, because of their basis in critical reflection of practice, would be more inclusive and more nuanced than the “slogans and shibboleths” that Hawkins (1974, p. 10) describes. This is my vision of what ought to be—that research be anchored within context, co-authored by participants within those contexts, and made public with this subjectivity as its strength.

In this way, I am hopeful that my opening vignette emphasizes a particular little-t theory that influences my work: how children can function as one another’s more capable peers in a learning situation. Tomika’s initial hypothesis helped the entire group of children to construct knowledge about culturally inscribed mathematical systems. My documentation helped me to begin to understand how this group of children co-constructed knowledge in this situation and how this co-construction elucidated relationships between individual and group learning. Too, in this playful episode the children made hypotheses that they applied in at least two other situations: their understanding of number combinations and their need to make their griffin’s legs of equal heights. While I do not mean to suggest an unsolicited transfer of knowledge—I reminded the children about their experiment and prompted them to make this connection—I did write the vignette in order to reveal how documentation, pedagogy, and research are linked. Here, documentation provokes
curricular decisions as it assists me in both generating data and building theory. My desire to understand through documentation necessitated waiting for the children to understand the cubes on their own and waiting for the children to understand that the griffins would need to have legs of equal heights. Had I proposed making the griffin legs of equal height on the outset or tried with words to explain the connections between the red cubes and numbers, I may have had much less information to help me support the children in math group and in the art studio. Documentation was my \textit{reconnaissance}: It provided me with the crucial information I needed to assess my own strategies, to listen to and wait for the children, and to pounce when the moment seemed ripe. It tried my patience, my own memory of coming to understand numbers for the first time, my teaching intuitions, and my worry about how the children would perform in their assessments. Regardless, I am thankful that I waited. As a form of research-always-in-process, documentation, teaching, and research exist in a dynamic relationship. They work together, informing one another, and provoking educational movement. This convergence between Big-T and little-t theories directly impacts practice as practice generates more nuanced little theories that have the potential to grow.

\textbf{Theory and Method in this Study}

Throughout this study, I have mixed qualitative research methods and research aims. My aims fluctuate between the little-t theories that inform my daily practice as a teacher and my relationships with the children with whom I work and the possibilities I foresee (through re-searching) for contributing to bigger theories concerning ways in
which children learn through play and through making. As using multiple methodologies is common in most qualitative inquiry, I have relied most on documentation as an ethnographic method to generate the questions that this research both addresses and reflects. In this way, I am inspired by Hawkins (1974):

The truth is that there has been relatively little close and disciplined scientific observation of the learning behavior of young children as directly related to their intellectual development. It helps to work by stages, as Piaget has done, but we need to see such developments in statu nascendi. Nor is such observation likely to prove fruitful under short-term, transient conditions arranged for the benefit of the psychologist or psychiatrist observer. A Lorenz swims with his goslings, a Schaller lives with mountain gorillas, ethnologists live the life of the peoples they would study. To expect more from the ethological study of young children, for a lesser effort, seems naïve indeed….that takes enough time to be called devotion (p. 45).

The devotion to the “magic moment” of which Hawkins speaks is a characteristic that most educators share. Documentation, then, allows for a public tracing and reformation of these moments of knowing in relationship. It embraces the underlying assumptions of “complexity,” “contextuality,” “social reality,” “subjectivity,” “interpretation and meaning” (Bresler, 1996, p. 133) that surround qualitative ethnographic inquiry and that render “truth and reality” as “perspectival, contextual, and multiple” (Bresler, 1996, p. 135). In holding subjectivity close, it consciously works to continually avoid what Bresler (1996) calls “subjectivism” (p. 138). She describes subjectivism as an “orthodoxy” in which the researcher sees her own beliefs as “what is
good and ought to be” (p. 138). This is what Rinaldi (2006) describes as being
imprisoned by theory: where a singular doctrine frames each moment that an educator
and researcher see.

Returning to vignettes, I compose the textual descriptions that I shared from my
classroom work with children from the observations that I made throughout the teaching
process. I was continually cognizant of the fact that the contexts in which I worked with
children were relational, that my conclusions were subjective, and that I was generating
theory as I was collecting it. My textual reflections, along with visual artifacts and textual
artifacts of children’s words, comprise my documentation. The process of selecting,
editing, and composing written and visual documents helps me to develop testable
teaching hypotheses (little-t theories). These observations provoke further actions or
proposals that I make to and with the children. Within this chapter, then, I would like to
begin to consider how pedagogical documentation functions as a research method that is
especially useful for educators in their practical and theoretical work with young
children.

**Theoretical Implications of Documentation as Research**

The stories that I shared from classroom life throughout this study are smaller
parts of larger scale documentations and extensive data sets that document my life with
children and the lives among children in my classrooms.

As teacher and documenter, I positioned myself as facilitator and researcher,
practitioner and theoretician, within the specific site (context) and fluctuating
relationships of the classrooms in which I have worked. Along with the children, I researched. As Hawkins (1974) explains, “Method is the use of knowledge to extend knowledge…through complete absorption in subject matter that is fresh” (p. 11, original emphasis). We observed one another, recorded our observations, our trials, and our small victories, reflected upon them, charted new courses to move in possible multiple directions, chose those directions as individuals or in small groups, worked, reflected, continued to observe, document, and work, and to document, reassess, work and observe throughout the school year. At the end of the last academic year we had cemented previous relationships, forged new ones, amassed technical and communicative skills, and succeeded in leaving the legacies we had intended for the next group of children and teachers. This year, we are doing the same. Throughout this chapter, I will trace and re-trace the processes of documentation to illustrate ways in which documentation functions like, and deviates from, qualitative research methodologies. I will consider how the official school context both supports and challenges this way of working with children.

As I have written, throughout this study, I have used qualitative research methods to both generate data and to begin to build my own localized and personal theories. This research is, as Graue and Walsh (1998) explain, “face-to-face, prolonged, narrative, and theory-building” (p. 22). As I acknowledge my movements within certain theoretical milieus, autobiographical interludes punctuate this narrative, while an interpretation—a reinterpretation—of classroom documentation supports my generation of theory-in-practice. Within this study, I have hoped to begin to more candidly reveal the hidden complexities of classroom life and within them, the complexities of teaching and learning. I find it necessary to do this because I too, am “convinced that existing
theoretical frameworks for understanding children’s interactions are either inadequate or as yet undeveloped” (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 22). As Wilson (1971) noted, “At the very least I must claim that art teaching and learning are infinitely richer and more complex than the theories that seek to describe them” (p. 5). Bresler (1996) concurs: “Teaching and classroom life are highly complex phenomena and cannot be reduced to simple variables” (p. 133). I believe that documentation, as a research methodology that teachers can use to yield theoretical insights, begins to address this richness and complexity of children’s learning and making in specific sites in a practically and theoretically useful way.

Furthermore, through documentation, I hope to contribute to what we know and what we would like to know about how children achieve communicative fluency in the visual languages and how images of children produce and sustain educational institutions and relationships.

Throughout this study, I am careful to not confuse “documentation” with the conventional idea of documentary—as presenting facts in an objective way or in a way reconstructed from documents. Although reconstruction is an essential aspect of pedagogical documentation, that process is neither linear nor objective. In fact, it is never objective or generalizable. Rather, it is a rhizomatic, continually interpretive process. This distinction is essential. Documentation is a multi-modal interpretive practice that is always situated (Graue & Walsh, 1998) and re-situating itself. Documentation both documents and instigates action—it is “actualized only in practice” (Graue & Walsh, 1998). This reciprocity is one of its most essential features.
In this section, I am guided by the question: *What can we, as teachers and researchers, learn from documentation?* Within the context of daily teaching practice, documentation can both reveal and generate teaching intuitions and actions. In this way, it is a form of micro-research or action research. It supports the idea of a “reflective practitioner” model. Documentation assists educators and children as they negotiate curriculum and life with young children on a day-to-day basis. In this way, it resembles the reflective theorizing that most teachers do but perhaps do not publicly articulate. Through the more formalized process of documentation, educators can generate theory based upon localized knowledge. In the language of Reggio Emilia, through documentation, adults co-construct knowledge with children. In other words, the children aren’t the only ones learning: All meaning (all knowing and all that is deemed good to know) is contingent upon relationship. In its public and narrative form, documentation makes public what once remained in classrooms. Through the dialogic and reciprocal process of documentation educators generate data which leads them to generate theories that influence their practice that helps them to build and to refine theory, their practice and their process of data generation: This is Rinaldi’s idea of a kind of “spiral” (2006, p. 69). In this way, both the process of documentation and the documentation itself position teachers as generators of theory-in-process through practice. Rinaldi (2006) explains,

> Theory and practice should be in dialogue….When you think, it’s practice, and when you practice, it’s theory. “Practitioner” is not a wrong definition of the teacher. But it’s wrong that they are not also seen as theorists. Instead it is always the university academics that do theories, and the teachers…they are the first to be convinced of it. In fact, when you invite them to think or express their own
opinions, they are not allowed to have an opinion. The way they become theoretical is to quote Bruner, Dewey, Piaget (p. 191).

Documentation, as teachers in Reggio have both conceived and practiced it, allows teachers to generate, test, teach, and reformulate their own theories to become theoretical in their own right. Although established theories and university academics’ theories do influence their teaching practice, educators do not feel bound by these theories. Documentation is a kind of theory building research actualized in specific sites through practice. In their work, Graue and Walsh (1998) make this distinction between theory building and theory testing. They explain, “A curious phenomenon in many disciplines is that theory testing research is viewed as more important than theory building work. In other words, if one is not about testing hypothesis, then one is not really doing research” (p. 21). They are not impermeable. At their best, they lead to new practices and to new questions.

To begin to answer some of the questions above, I would like to examine pedagogical documentation as a qualitative research methodology that can yield particular and vital insights about children as individual and group learners within specific contexts and that can help teachers build theories. Throughout this study, I have placed documentation and my own practice within the context of academic, university-based research and within the context of my daily classroom practice. In each teaching and research context in which I work with children or with theory, I negotiated the contagious relationship between these two constructions of myself—another version of Wilson’s (2005) third pedagogical site. This study helps me to make this disclosure
visible and to negotiate meaning from it through both narrative, autobiographical means and from a reconstruction of documentation from my classroom.

As a research methodology, documentation “makes visible” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 68) ways in which children and adults co-construct knowledge and meanings and teach and learn in contemporary classrooms. I do not claim, nor do the educators in Reggio seek, that documentation be used a methodology to generate statistically relevant or generalizable conclusions—those conclusions, too, are social constructions. Rather, I agree with contemporary theorists in education who advocate “that worthwhile knowledge about children and their learning can be generated and shared by teachers” (Roosevelt, 2007, p. 115). In his discussion of Child Study, Roosevelt explains that Child Study, “in its assumptions about sources of knowledge in teaching and about children, can be thought of as a democratic epistemology” (2007, p. 115). His characterization dually applies to the process of pedagogical documentation. In this way, documentation can illuminate the multiple, conditional, and complex processes through which social actors negotiate roles, mediate and sustain difference, and combine and generate knowledge inside of classrooms. In this way, too, it both overlaps with and deviates from more traditional qualitative methodologies.

In her introduction to the book Getting to Know City Kids, Duckworth quotes Middlebrooks (1998): “By missing the ‘secret places’ where no one but children go, researchers have missed a significant part of children’s lives” (p. vii). Although Duckworth and Middlebrooks are discussing children’s play lives, I would like to draw an analogy between those secret places and the secret places of classrooms where no one but children and teachers go. Although a school is always already a public place, most of
what happens in classrooms remains hidden and private. If some of this knowledge that only teachers know can be made public through documentation, then we will learn about a significant part of children’s and teachers’ lives. Because documentation “makes visible” not only the “invisible” child but the secret spaces and intimate and painful moments of teaching and of learning it is a tool for educational and social advocacy. Inherently political, its evidence challenges incomplete or inadequate constructions of the child, and therefore constructions of teachers and of schools. Essentially dialogic, it invites both participation and questioning.

Documentation began simply with the urge that educators in Reggio felt to make the new school known in the town. In the early days of the experience in Reggio Emilia, teachers

would transport the school to town. Literally, we would pack ourselves, the children, and our tools into a truck and we would teach school and show exhibits in the open air, in the square, in public parks, or under the colonnade of the municipal theater….The people saw; they were surprised and they asked questions (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 52).

As Malaguzzi explained, bringing the school to town once weekly fulfilled an urgent need that the teachers had “to find our cultural identity quickly, make ourselves known, and win trust and respect” (1998, p. 52). This “teaching exhibition,” a kind of living research in dynamic installation, laid the foundation for systemic documentation of children’s and teachers’ efforts in the school.

Within the context of this study, I do not intend to advocate that each teacher become a “researcher” in her classroom or that she undertake extensive projects that
demand her attention outside the processes and relationships of teaching. Rather, I intend to position documentation inside of these processes as a methodology that articulates and augments the conclusions that educators reach through their own cumulative reflections and practice. Teaching young children is inherently theoretical. In this way, documentation is neither an overlay nor a culminating assessment, but a continuous and cyclical process. Its specificity and subjectivity is its strength. Documentation articulates the many processes of teaching—of hypothesizing, observing, and planning—and it works in conjunction with these day-to-day teaching events to reveal what happens when educators strive to get close to and to understand places and processes of learning. As Walkerdine (1997) discloses, the documenter can accept that

> it is an impossible task to avoid the place of the subjective in research, and that, instead of making futile attempts to avoid something which cannot be avoided, we should think more carefully about how to utilize our subjectivity as a feature of the research process (p. 59).

Rinaldi (2006) explains the role of documentation in the Reggio Emilia approach as one that intervenes in the learning path and process and one that gives meaning to the process. She emphasizes that the path is not one wholly predetermined by the teacher, but one negotiated in reflective practice with the children (p. 63). She continues “we have explored this methodology for many years, we place the emphasis on documentation as an integral part of the procedures aimed at fostering learning and for modifying the learning-teaching relationship” (p. 63). Rinaldi explains that within this relationship, observation, interpretation, and documentation are in dynamic relationship, where “Any separation would be artificial and merely for the sake of argument” (p. 69).
Documentation as Process and Product

Documentation is a process and a product, not a singular evaluative event (i.e. a machine grading a multiple choice examination). As a process, documentation, as the teachers in Reggio Emilia use it, encompasses observation, interpretation of observation, and presentation of those interpretations in a narrative form. In its culminating form, “documentation” consists of photographs, interpretations of photographs, narratives, records of conversations, video presentations, and exhibitions and installations. The interplay between text and image is a crucial aesthetic and conceptual feature of documentation. Documentation exhibitions serve three primary purposes. First, they make the private public in a presentation of learning and teaching in classroom life. Within this purpose, they become both a tool for communication with children’s families who do not see their child’s school life unfold and an instrument for advocacy. They reveal the school’s work—children’s and teacher’s thinking in context and in relationship and the spaces of children’s lives that remain private from even their closest family members. Documentation’s second primary purpose is as a tool for teachers and children engaged in negotiated work. Children and teachers can reflect upon and discuss documentation: it is dialogic. From this “memory” or record of their experiences, they can hypothesize new directions, theories, goals, and aims. Piazza (2005) explains, “We think of collecting memory as dynamic rather than memory as placed in storage….Both children and adults are in the process of exploring and constructing knowledge, and we do not know what will happen next” (p. 136). Throughout the process of being in relationship with one another, documentation remains in a dynamic state. Although
“documentation” panels may serve as the “memory” of the school or of a particular classroom, they are not static. They represent a kind of dynamism. Although they may be displayed in curatorial or museum-like ways that evoke an idea of a final work of art, they are always works in progress and in context. They invite interpretation and participation: they are as open to contestation, crisis, and change as they are to praise. In this way, a more apt metaphor for the way in which documentation functions artistically might be that of a site-specific, interactive, installation. There are also problems with this metaphor, and I will return to this idea later in this chapter.

Documentation shares a theoretical and political foundation with other contemporary ways of documenting life with children. In particular, it shares an affinity with current discussion of Child Study (Roosevelt, 2007). As Roosevelt explains,

Child Study is a contextualized practice that seeks to foster teachers’ capacities and inclination….to produce generative understanding about children’s learning (and in doing so to counter the growing tendency of centralized, standardized systems to delegitimate local knowledge) (p. 115).

He continues,

In authorizing teachers as creators of knowledge, and in constructing children’s capacity as both a premise and, in part, a product of educators’ attention, Child Study traditions differ in epistemologically and politically consequential ways from currently dominant modes of perceiving children and positioning teachers. (p. 119).

Although Roosevelt discusses Child Study here as a methodology for democratic teacher education, his words reveal the third purpose of documentation. That is to legitimize
locally produced, contextual, knowledge that teachers—working as practitioners and theoreticians—produce, use, and share.

Through the process of documentation teachers record evidence of children’s learning in a variety of ways. That may involve, but is not limited to, observation, documenting conversations with notes or with video and audio recording, making photographs, documenting actions with notes, video, or audio recording, collecting children’s works in process in paper and digital portfolios, copying works on the copy machine, scanning work, or any number of other ways that might be called “data collection.” I will address the relationships between documentation, data collection and data generation, and research in the next subsection. It should be stressed that these observations are not made from an “outside” perspective, although they are made with an “attitude of research.” The documenter is a participant in the context. Her “observations” are never neutral. She is always missing something, gaining something, concentrating on one thing, perhaps ignoring another. It is not the goal of the documenter to be impartial or to offer an “objective” account of what happens. She knows that this is neither possible nor desirable and so she accepts the value of subjective insights. Although this does not mean that documentation is biased or unethical it also does not mean that documentation is always comfortable or ever predictable. It fits Bresler’s (2006) description of a “dialogic, empathic engagement” (p. 61). In her discussion of ethics in aesthetically based research, Bresler considers ethical and good in a contextual way. Citing Aristotle, she explains:

To be an ethical agent according to Aristotle, is to give up the kind of attachments to generalized knowledge that prevail legitimately in theoretical and technical
fields (Bowman, 2000). It is to act rightly in realms of specifically human endeavors, where right action is always contingent, where circumstances are highly complex and variable, and where the ends of the action are never self-evident and thus can never be outside one’s purview (p. 64).

Because observations never stand alone, they are open to interrogation. Through documentation, an educator does not intend to present a truth; she realizes that any reconstruction is a fiction and she positions this as its primary strength. As Bresler (2006) explains, “Good qualitative research, like art, presents us with complex reality. Bad research and art….distort in the process of oversimplification, creating stereotypes and distancing us from the world” (p. 65). However, the documenter may notice recurrent patterns that she interprets to shape her practice and to generate theory and knowledge in context. Documentation, too, is site-specific and relationship-specific, and while her theories might not be generalizable outside her context, the documenter builds, tests, and re-builds theories as she teaches.

Although a teacher may document events in her classroom as they occur in sequence, she does not see those events as naturally unfolding. She accepts that her presence provokes children’s actions (and her own). She does not see the classroom, or her presence within it, as a neutral or natural place or state. Documentation, too, makes visible her “invisible” presence within the classroom. Her presence is inherently political and personal. Her personal theories, including her constructions of children, childhood, and education, guide her practice. She shares goals of negotiating meaning and her place within “multiple social worlds” with the children.
In the next step, the teacher interprets transcripts and artifacts. In this way, she generates data (Graue & Walsh, 1998). When documenting, she may have been looking toward specific hypotheses or a specific child, but she must remain open to many possibilities. She is not searching to find what she is looking for; rather she is looking for what happens between children in specific, historical moments, always remembering that this is not a natural unfolding. Although I have described interpretation as the “second” step of documentation to make the process more understandable, the boundaries between observation, interpretation, and documentation as teachers use it in Reggio Emilia are not neat. Even observation is an interpretation because the teacher decides what to record at any one moment. But, the teacher does then reflect upon these episodes to instigate further thought and action. Here, there is a qualitative difference between reflection and documentation. A reflection may record the day’s or moment’s events but documentation implies a deepening encounter with reflection—a productive analysis.

Next, the teacher presents her interpretations to colleagues, to families, and back to children. This process is editorial and curatorial—it resembles not only art-making processes that meld visual and textual narratives but contemporary aesthetic research practices. The cyclical process is more accurately “spiral” as collective memories and assemblages of knowledge build and as the use of knowledge extends knowledge (Hawkins, 1965/1974).
Documentation and Qualitative Research Methodologies: Building Big-T Theory

The general outline that I presented in the previous subsection foreshadows affinities that documentation shares with research. Within this subsection, I would like to contribute to a conversation that positions pedagogical documentation in relationship to qualitative research methodologies. I do not believe that documentation yields insights that are generalizable in the way that empirical research produces statistics (which are also always culturally and politically coded), but I do believe it is an ethical and valid form of research. As such, documentation may not only garner new insights into the contemporary questions with which educational researchers grapple but it does so in a form that classroom teachers recognize.

Documentation as research helps to negotiate the division between theory and practice in a way that positions teachers and researchers in a horizontal, not hierarchical relationship. In this way, it repositions teachers not as “adopters” of someone else’s meaning but as producers of specific meanings and contributors to the larger body of knowledge about children, teaching, and learning. As both a researcher with a university affiliation and a teacher in various contexts, I have both sensed and felt the frustration of teachers expected to wholly adopt prescriptive “research-based strategies” and to make “data-driven decisions” based upon someone else’s data and decisions. I have struggled with the intuition that neither I, nor my students, fit neatly inside the ways in which these ways of working would like to categorize us. We are a very messy lot. The children usually do not hesitate to voice their senses of injustice, “I ain’t doin’ THAT! You CAN’T make me!” I have been in many meeting where teachers, although perhaps more
reserved with their words, affect postures of resistance as they fold their arms tightly and “humph” when educational experts present a newly labeled way of working to them. Such presentations often involved well-meaning but feigned empathy and enthusiasm, lackluster PowerPoint compositions, streams of graphic organizers, and thematic hard candies. I have felt my own knowledge and experiences discounted by the emphasis to adopt consistent, prescriptive, numerical data-yielding processes designated by “experts.” In those reductive states, theories are prescriptive but offer teachers little useable insight. At worst, they perpetuate constructions of teachers as mere functionaries. Sutton-Smith (1989) explains, “What is taken to be a research result is eagerly converted into advice for the deficient by a surrounding pack of hungry journalists and writers of books of advice” (p. xii). He emphasizes, “The point of all this is that the discontinuity between ourselves and our children is now deeply engrained” (p. xii). He refers more generally to parenting and to psychological advice about socialization, but his ideas apply equally to ways in which teachers become distanced from their own perceptions of the realities of teaching. Graue & Walsh (1998) explain, “the distance stems from the dominance of a particular psychological perspective in which researchers see children as either windows onto universal physiological laws or as indicators of treatment effects” (p. 1).

I would assume that most teachers do what I do and what I have watched colleagues do throughout my time teaching: they modify the theories and practices on their own, according to their own beliefs about teaching and their own specific and fluid classroom contexts. These modifications generally remain hidden, and as teachers’ practice diverges from and re-creates theory, the divide between theory and practice grows. Documentation of this often-spontaneously and chronically unrecorded process
can change power relationships within classrooms, within schools, and within the larger context of the education profession. As a form of research that generates local insights, documentation is a powerful form of professional development for teachers. As Malaguzzi (1988) has said:

This new child had the right to a school that was more aware and more focused, a school made up of professional teachers. In this way, we also rescued our teachers, who had been humiliated by the narrowness of their preparatory schools, by working with them on their professional development (as cited by Gandini et al, 2005, p. 7).

The assumption that the teacher is a powerful professional, parallel to the image of the child, guides professional practice in the schools in Reggio Emilia. A competent teacher, the complement to a rich child, continually theorizes and reflects upon her theories. With children and with her colleagues, she constructs knowledge about the specific context in which she works. Through the processes of documentation and of reflection, she traces the provenance of her intuitions. This mapping renders her “little-t” theories increasingly sophisticated in their overlap with Big T theories and with the remnants of experience.

Documentation and qualitative methods

Aspects of documentation are related to many methods of qualitative inquiry. Like most contemporary qualitative research, the documenter fuses many methods based upon her purpose. Documentation shares affinities with ethnography, critical
ethnography, microethnography (a study of a smaller experience or everyday reality),
phenomenology (the study of an experience and its essences), and case study (a search
for understanding of an idiosyncratic, complex case) (Stokrocki, 1997). It can also be
related to action research (where teachers study their own practice), and participant
observation (where the researcher is a participant in the context) and with the turn toward
the narrative and interpretive in contemporary educational theory. Throughout the rest of
this subsection, I will consider the connections between ethnography and documentation,
because that they share a particularly close epistemological and ethical relationship.

Stockroki (1997) explains that, as a process, qualitative inquiry begins with a
question but becomes a series of questions. That initial question can be “open-ended,
experiential, and invites a metaphoric response and a vivid portrayal” (p. 33). She
continues, “Some questions come from a review of the literature, while others emerge in
the process of conducting qualitative research” (p. 33). The process that Stockroki
describes parallels much of the process of pedagogical documentation. While
documenting, a teacher may begin with a question: for example, “How might the children
react to this new material? What strategies might they develop?” Additional questions
may appear as shedocuments and works with children, or the original question may be
redefined and represented to the children. However, there are differences between
documentation and much research. The goal of the documenter is not to come to
conclusions (although she may formulate further hypotheses) but to generate both
teaching action and knowledge. The process, like most formal inquiries, does not end
with the ending of a project or an experience. It is maintained as a physical memory, and
it has a spiral structure where it moves around and within itself. In the context of
educational research and theory, this is both a strength and a limitation of documentation as a methodology.

From the perspective of an ethnographer, a teacher attempts to understand what life is like for the participants of the culture inside her classroom. She places herself among them to understand the meanings of an experience. The classroom, in this case, is the field, where she “does” (Ayers, 1989) ethnography. An ethnography is her product. As Ayers (1989) describes it, “Ethnography embraces this dual sense—the study-in-process and the product-of-study” (p. 11). He continues, “There is no simple mechanism of ethnography, no ready recipe of ethnographic inquiry, no methodological machine that, once started, runs itself” (p.11). His words evoke the ways in which documentation, too, is “as dynamic and complex as the human beings it undertakes to study” (Ayers, 1989, p.11). He concludes, “The goal of ethnography is, therefore, not prediction but understanding” (p. 14):

This understanding comes from the ethnographer’s generation of theory. What it means simply is that a local or small theory is generated to account for as much of the observed activity or behavior as possible, rather than the more traditional approach of looking at reality in an attempt to confirm or deny a previously generated grand theory (1989, p.14).

His words seem to support Rinaldi’s (2006) assertion that in Reggio, educators prefer to generate their own theory through practice than to approach practice in way that it is either guided by or supports a particular theory. She explains, “What I mean is a theory which tells you what the end result should be. It is important to avoid any prediction….that becomes a sort of a prison for the child and for the teacher” (p. 181).
Ayers emphasizes that “the educational ethnographer must be clear about position, history, and biography in relation to the study” (1989, p. 14). The ethnographer inserts herself into her work, and is a part of the context—a relationship that she must disclose and a relationship that always exists when one is studying another. The same is true for documentation—a process that is always a subjective interpretation. As Rinaldi (2006) explains,

> When you take a picture or you make a document, in reality you don’t document the child but your knowledge, your concept, your idea. So it’s more and more visible—your limits and your vision about the child. You show not who that child is, but your thought. You don’t show the child, but the relationship and the quality of your relationship, and the quality of your looking at him or her. That is why it’s so dramatic because the king is naked! (p. 196, original emphasis)

And so, in documentation, as in ethnography, the documentation or the ethnography reveal as much about the documenter and the ethnographer as they do about the group being studied. However, this does not render either of these processes invalid. In fact, documentation is a powerful tool through which educators can come to better understand children by understanding themselves and their “intuitions” (which are always socially constructed) and actions as they exist in relationship to and with children. Furthermore, as Ayers explains,

> Successful teachers remember; they are in touch with their childlikeness, which is also their basic humanity. They accept their own fear of separatedness, understand their own struggle for independence, embrace their own ignorance and desire for
competence. They have the capacity to look at things as a child sees them (1989, p. 24).

As Egan (1988) explains, “Childhood is not something we leave behind. The achievements and experiences of childhood are constituents of our later selves” (p. 2). By looking at children in this way, educators who are documenting and studying children can observe, interpret, and document the contradictions and crises of intellectual and social learning and can contribute, as in the case of educators in Reggio Emilia, to a more fully articulated and nuanced image of individual children and groups of children.

In researching children, a documenter takes the stance of a critical ethnographer. She adopts an attitude similar to Tobin and Grace’s (1997):

Our research method is an ethnographically informed case study of children….. We view children not as a distinct cultural group separate from adults but as an interpretive community, a subgroup within the larger culture, with shared interests, experiences, and understandings that reflect their age, generation, and situation as students (p. 162).

In this way, the documenter conducts an “intergenerational interrogation” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p.5) of the specific sites in which adults and children negotiate both shared and separate meanings. In this way, too, like the critical ethnographer, the researcher’s “description itself will be based on a single view constructed by the gendered, classed, and raced position of theorist” (Carspecken & Walford, 2001, p. 2). These disclosures in documentation, as well the act of negotiating meaning with children instead of looking at them, complicate relationships between documentation and qualitative methodologies yet they provide insight into ways in which
humans socially construct knowledge and negotiate meanings that were previously hidden.

**Documentation, cultural studies, media studies, and literary criticism**

As much as documentation shares relationships with qualitative research methodologies it shares relationships with the theoretical methodologies of cultural studies, media studies, and literary criticism. Although I am addressing these affinities within a subsection, I do not intend to represent the boundaries between ethnography, for example, and cultural studies as strict. In fact, they are quite closely related and many early cultural studies texts were ethnographic accounts of subgroups of mainstream culture.

However, as a narrative form, documentation reconstructs children’s productions and the social contexts that support their production. Both the original artifacts of documentation—photographs of children working, children’s drawings and making, video production made by children or in collaboration with teachers—are cultural texts that can be analyzed with various methodologies. Throughout this study, the approach that I have taken to understanding children’s culture, especially children’s relationships to and with popular visual culture, is derived from parts of cultural studies and media studies models. In attempting to understand the ways in which children in my classroom interact with popular visual culture, I have been influenced by McRobbie’s (1999, 2000) work on youth culture and girls’ studies. Her work is based, in turn, upon Hebdige’s (1981) influential work on youth culture. Within that same context, Mitchell and Reid-
Walsh (2002) and Buckingham (1994) use cultural studies and critical geography methodologies to investigate children’s popular culture. Walkerdine (1997) utilizes a feminist post-structural analysis to understand how culture produces girls as subjects and objects.

In particular, Tobin’s (2004) *Pikachu’s Global Adventure* establishes models in which children “do” Pokemon, or do visual and media culture. The case of Pokemon, although specific, provides a context in which some generalizations can be made about how contemporary children consume and produce visual media culture. As Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2004) explain, “Pokemon is something you do, not just something you read or watch or “consume”” (p. 12, original emphasis). In their analysis of structure and agency surrounding children’s interaction with Pokemon, they explain, “In common with others, we want to suggest that the frequent opposition between structure and agency is mistaken; and we want to propose a rather different formation of the relationship, based around the notion of pedagogy” (p. 13, original emphasis). Their emphasis is crucial. Within this study, I am interested in the ways in which children’s making—their visual production—is linked to their knowing. I do not intend to separate the “official” school knowledge (reading, writing, math) from the pedagogical functions of children’s relationships with visual culture. I see each as a site where children not only construct their individual and group identities, but where they construct and co-construct knowledge. As I am inspired by the educators in Reggio Emilia and contemporary educational theorists, my interests are both epistemological and representational. I am interested in how children know and how to make the places where they construct these knowledges visible. While documentation may be a “hard to reach place” (Kroeger &
Cardy, 2006), it can provide invaluably useful teaching insights. Like the action researcher, I look at the place to which I become close in documentation to improve my teaching practice by deepening my understanding of and relationships with children.

There are two pivotal ways in which documentation deviates from these models that I would like to discuss. The difference, here, that I hope to emphasize in comparing documentation with other forms of considering cultural texts resides in the fact that I am hopeful that I can position it as work with children. This first difference is significant; it requires an adjustment of the relationship between the researcher and her participants to a relationship between participants who co-negotiate meanings. As Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) admit, “We have been interested in developing ways of working with children where they are operating in naturalistic settings and where they are not cast as ‘other’” (p. 79). They distinguish between doing work “on behalf of children” (p. 80) and doing work “with” children. They explain, “As Ann Oakley notes, the prepositions attached to childhood studies have been ‘about,’ or ‘on,’ and rarely ‘for’” (1994). Even rarer though in the case of childhood studies has been the use of the preposition “with” (p. 80). Although the naturalistic settings they consider are spaces of leisure—“playrooms, bedrooms, backyards” (p. 80)—the classroom, as it is constructed in Reggio Emilia, is also a naturalistic site. Furthermore, even though the landscape of their research emphasis is that of children’s relationships with popular culture, the conclusions that they draw can be applied to educational research concerned with learning and knowledge. Even so, as is appropriate to their practice, their relationship with children is one of researcher and researched. They are not engaged with children in play—they are observing. They are not co-constructors of knowledge and negotiators of meaning—
collaborators with children. But, even when an adult is playing with a child (e.g., Kelly-Byrne, 1989), there are complications within a conspicuously equal situation: Perhaps no relationship can be wholly balanced. Secondly, within documentation, the research site is contained within the text, not after the text has been created, although documentation does produce texts for further interrogation.

Of course, too, the idea of collaborating with children necessitates a discussion of surveillance, privacy, and colonization. I will address this further in a subsequent subsection of this chapter, and I will return to Kelly-Byrne’s (1989) study of her play life with a child.

Epistemological questions, augmented by discussion of cultural capital, reproduction, class, gender, and race, underlie these approaches to studying children’s constructions of knowledge and meaning. I will return to the implications of investigating the intersections between the image of the child in the Reggio Emilia approach and contemporary studies of children’s visual productions more thoroughly in the epilogue of this study.

**Documentation and arts-based research**

This bold insight led to the development of documentation into a professional art form in Reggio Emilia, involving use of slide shows, posters, short books, and increasingly videotapes, to record children’s project experiences (Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998, p. 12).
As a narrative process and an art form, documentation shares motivations with arts-based research. Essentially, documenters, like other artists, are making meaning through making and through the composition and juxtaposition of visual and verbal artifacts. As products, documentation panels, performances, and recordings are comparable to works of art. They are intended to convey a dialogic meaning and to record visible traces of series of events. Additionally, documentation is displayed in forums that invite contemplation including gallery spaces in schools and—as was the case with the *Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition—in museum spaces.

As a form of arts-based research in art education, documentation is most closely aligned with Bresler’s (2006) conception of aesthetically based research. She describes dialogical qualities of aesthetically based research that exemplify the practice of documentation. She explains, “Prolonged engagement and immersion in both fieldwork and analysis, allows us to ‘move closer’: to linger, connect, perceive, re-see, and grasp a perspective different from our own perspective” (p. 56). In this way, like the aesthetically based qualitative inquiries she describes, documentation shares a “focus on the particular” (p. 57) with art.

Although documentation may resemble visual art, educators do not necessarily intend it to make meaning in the same way. It may be aesthetic, but more accurately, it is also a powerful and provocative tool. Despite their charm, visual images in documentation do not stand alone: Educators situate them within contexts and interpret their meanings. Educators not only position their written, auditory, and photographic interpretations but also children’s visual productions within documentation. When she
discusses children’s drawings for a project about visiting a supermarket in Reggio Emilia, Katz (1998) explains

However, the drawings alone would mean relatively little without the teachers’ documentation of what the children said about what they observed and experienced….The children’s recorded comments and discussions provided teachers with knowledge of the children’s levels of understanding and misunderstanding of this everyday phenomena (p. 31).

In this way, teachers used children’s words to help them to place the children’s drawings within context. Both the drawings and the conversations were data for the teachers as they provoked curricular action. Recording and reflecting upon the language that surrounds and supports episodes of making provides teachers with intimate access to moments of knowing. The image of children making collaborative in a socially distributed way differs quite dramatically from the image of a researcher interpreting a drawing that a child has made in a laboratory context or the image of a researcher looking into only a drawing itself for meaning. When teachers share documentation with families and with other teachers, the children’s conversations continue to support the children’s drawings. In this way, drawings have a use-value in research that conversations augment. Teachers do not “read” drawings as stand-alone. Their interpretation is neither projective nor evaluative. Rather, drawings, as a tool, help to make visible what children understand and articulate through many modes of symbolic language.
What credibility does the adult “outsider” bring to the research site? How might we legitimize (or at least make transparent) the role of parent-researchers in childhood research? And where do we engage in such studies, if, for example, Barbies or Pokemon cards are in circulation only outside of such “official” research sites as classrooms? (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 3)

Who can occupy—or even “lurk in”—such spaces and under what circumstances brings into question the issues on the protection of children from adult predators, the rights of children not to have their cultures tampered with, and of course, the rights of children and their families to privacy (Tobin & Grace, 1997, p. 80).

What is it that has kept them all out of direct research participation in the jungles of children’s fantasy? (Sutton-Smith, 1989, p. x)

In her book *Daddy’s Girl* (1997), Walkerdine discloses that she listened to a young girl, Janie, as she went into the girls’ bathroom to sing *Mickey*: Walkerdine listened to Janie, a good girl, play “bad” in her “fake” life. She explains:

I don’t think I that I will ever forget the impact that listening to this had on me, partly because it was very voyeuristic on my part: I knew Janie was going to the toilet and I did not stop listening (p. 151).

While she listened, she imagined Janie “swaying in front of the mirror and dancing” (p. 152). As a researcher, Walkerdine was interested in the ways that young, working class girls consumed and reproduced popular media through their interpretations and re-interpretations of femininity. She saw achieving femininity as a struggle for
working-class girls, and she interrogated her subjectivity as both a researcher and a
grown-up working class girl in Britain. She was interested in the ways in which children,
like Janie, are good in their public lives, but that “when they go into this private space
with a mirror: they watch themselves and imagine being someone and somewhere else”
(p. 152).

Because children, knowing the contradictions between real and fake lives and
good and bad selves, sometimes hide these performances (Mia, like Janie and me, only
played “bad” in her “fake” life), researchers do not often have access to these episodes.
An exception would be Mitchell and Reid-Walsh’s (2002) notion of “kitchen research”
where researchers have access to their own children’s play lives. Even as parents in
trusting relationships with their children, their presence may change a situation. As
Thompson (2002) explains, “As Tobin points out, the candor of such overheard
conversations may be compromised in indefinable ways by the presence of an adult
lurking nearby.”

By disclosing how she accesses this information, Walkerdine questions whether
or not her intentional act was “surveillance” or research. Neither lurking nor overt, she
was as hidden as the girls. I have, as a researcher and teacher, wondered, too, about
surveillance. In a particular example, I noticed once that several pages from an art studio
sketchbook had been crumpled and placed in the teachers’ toilet at school. I knew that I
would have to remove them or the toilet might clog. Should I look at them? If I did look
at them, would their content violate the school’s “no tolerance” policy? A child would
surely be in trouble for this double infraction. In the end, I put them in the garbage can
unexamined. Often, as a teacher, I have witnessed things that I should not have seen: For
example, children with a huge stack of forbidden *Yu-Gi-Oh!* cards on the playground. But, I have also seen children with razor blades and with bullets in their pockets. I continually have to decide how and when I will intervene in children’s lives, and how I use my power.

Less overtly, documentation places a teacher in a role in which she has access to children’s most intimate thoughts and actions. Of course, her primary goal is that of generating knowledge: to contribute to her own and others’ understandings of how children learn and negotiate meanings. She is making the “invisible” child visible. In doing so, she exposes both herself and the child. For a teacher, this exposure can be dangerous and scary. In his oft-gifted and quoted exposé and advice guide, *The First Days of School*, Wong (1997) explains that teaching is one of the few professions in which the novice is expected to perform as a “veteran” from her first day on the job. As Phelan (1997) explains:

> Teaching requires women to leave their desires at home….Classroom management practices erase eroticism and promote order. In doing so, they foster certain self-containing body gestures, sensations, and feelings that combine to construct a political regime of the body. And it is not simply the student body that is in question; teachers’ desires are at issue as well (p. 78).

Here, Phelan specifically addresses the normalization processes of classroom management. We could, guided by Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence’s (1999) examination of contemporary schools for young children as technologies of normalization, apply her conclusions not only to the ways in which teachers and children quell their desires through self-regulation of their bodily impulses but also the ways in which teachers and
students embody the normalization of the curriculum. Here, we only need to conjure up those frequent images that we have seen of young children making bunny hats (to borrow Bresler’s example) step in toe with their teacher as a leader. The process is neat, orderly, and easy to both account for and explain. It is both comfortable and pleasurable.

Documentation can threaten this equilibrium. Unlike “snapshot” collages or slide shows of children at work, its intention is not to erase or hide difference but to provoke and expand it.

For children, too, exposure can be dangerous. Not only are there real concerns with children’s privacy, especially in some contexts where children may be at danger should their face, name, or image be associated with their school or reveal their location, but there are concerns with emotional exposure and exploitation.

Finally, an investigation of documentation’s role in stimulating curricular changes raises questions about adults co-opting or colonizing children’s culture. Corsaro (1992) explains:

I have found that teachers attempt to co-opt some of the children’s secondary adjustments by introducing new elements into the curriculum….for example, children are allowed (and even encouraged) to bring personal objects from home on certain days….The teachers thus build on the children’s desire to bring personal objects in order to create an activity that stimulates the children’s development of communicative skills and social knowledge….Overall these examples display the complexity of cultural contact between adult and child worlds (p. 174).
Despite these risks and challenges, in this discussion of issues of surveillance and colonization in research I hope to position documentation in such a way that it reveals not only the complexities and challenges of “cultural contact” between the children’s and adults’ culture but that it also reveals how children’s culture and adult culture exist in overlapping spaces: inside of one another.

I do not mean to say that there are not emotional or ethical risks involved in documentation: They are the same dangers inherent in teaching. The relationship, like any other relationship, is never equal, never neutral. Pain and exploitation are dangers in any relationship. But, the difference here is that in documentation and in the project approach as Reggio inspires it, adults and children are working within Wilson’s “third site” to negotiate meanings together. As Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) explain:

we are interested in domestic environments as play spaces or spaces of leisure in consideration of the notion of what geographers call “spatiality” as a dialectical process whereby the spatial becomes the social and the social becomes the spatial (Soja 1985, cited in Aitken, 1998, 22). Neither is value free or neutral (p. 9).

The adult does not invade the child’s space: They are in their unique, classroom space together. Once they enter into this space, it is something different entirely. Yes, this space may bleed between home and school, between the personal and the political, between the public and the private, but that is the strength of the space. Both the adult and the child are subjective participants: Both have something to learn from and to teach the other. They are more capable peers in this deconstruction of the space between adult and child, teacher and student. This does not mean, however, that adults should engage in this space without an attitude of empathy. This is where the space intersects with the
image of the child: as someone who is rich, powerful, and demanding—as someone who is worthy of respect and who deserves care.

In his introduction to Kelly-Byrne’s study of playing with a child, Sutton-Smith (1989) exposes the discontinuity between children and adults as socially constructed along with the advent of childhood in modernity. This separation coexisted with the construction of the modern school. He explains,

A simpler if not unrelated view of the reason for our modern separation from the child might lie in our habit of segregating children in schools…Any present discontinuity of adults and children most certainly rests on this three-hundred-year history of the forcible subjugation of children (p. xi).

In his analysis of Kelly-Byrne’s play with a child as an adult playmate and researcher, Sutton-Smith notes that she “sees the discontinuity between adult and child as more apparent than real” (p. xiv). She exposes this discontinuity as constructed when she and Helen play in the “temporary and segregated space of the play world. Here she and the child put aside their chains of separation and comingle” (p. xiii). I will consider this idea of comingling further in the next subsection, where I begin to explain how the children and I entered into a similarly temporary and segregated classroom space through negotiating curriculum and documenting our efforts.
Documentation and School-Age Children

In her summary of her study of playing with a child, seven-year-old Helen, Kelly-Byrne (1989) outlines some of her findings about both playing with and researching a child’s play life. She explains:

1. Play for all who find themselves engaged in a play relationship leads to trust and a consequent revelation about the self that makes for intimacy. The portrait of this process is one of the major significances of this study.

2. It takes skill and sensitivity to handle carefully a situation in which children give adults their trust and venture to share their thoughts and feelings. This is because children are far more vulnerable and have much less power than their adult counterparts, despite the constant assertions about children’s resilience. In all child/adult relationships, the adults may easily call all the shots.

4. Children want to be understood by adults and are delighted when given the opportunity to play with adults.

11. Playing with children can be very hard work and entail a great deal of psychological expense. In addition, when one faces the anxieties of “collecting good data,” the experience can become exhausting (pp. 233-35).

Despite the fact that she is more generally writing about the play and research experience of working with Helen, her conclusions aptly describe my experiences of the processes of working in a negotiated curriculum and with pedagogical documentation. In her study, she describes how play transgresses and complicates boundaries between adult
and child and reality and fantasy, reveals children’s complexities, and yields insights about children, childhood, and the ethics of research. With her conclusions in mind, in this section I will discuss some parallel experiences that I have had in working with older children (children about Helen’s age) and with pedagogical documentation in a shared classroom space and through intimate and trusting relationships.

Educators in Reggio Emilia developed the process of pedagogical documentation in their work with children under six. Early childhood educators in the United States and in other Reggio-inspired contexts have adopted this practice for use in early childhood settings. In this way, not only does documentation generate and sustain powerful teaching insights, it advocates for and presents children’s daily experiences within a school. Kroeger and Cardy (2006) explain, “Documentation is of great value to parents. Many preschoolers lack the verbal skills to tell their parents about experiences that occur throughout their day in school. Through documentation children’s learning experiences can be shared and created with parents (Bersani & Jarjoura, 2002)” (p. 391).

Their statement speaks of documentation’s exceptional value in revealing children’s lives in school to their families and to other educators. It also recognizes, as is necessary when teachers work with young children, that children may not fully understand or be able articulate how the process of documentation works. Although they are full participants in the educational experience, they are generally (although teachers share documentation with them and revise it) the documented not the documenters. As Rinaldi wrote, then, the documentation reveals as much about the documenter as it does about children.
But, when teachers work with older, elementary school age children, children can not only fully understand the premise behind documentation but also participate in it. In this way, documentation with older children extends the idea of research happening with children. In the catalogue *Children, Art, Artists*, educators in Reggio Emilia begin to consider children as documenters. In this case, they were working with older, eight- and nine-year-old children. They ask “What does it mean to children to be observing and documenting the strategies and learning processes of their peers as they go about arranging their compositions?” (p. 116). This is certainly a direction for future research.

Throughout this process, like Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002), I was interested “in the ways in which the camera—conventionally regarded in anthropological and ethnographic work as a ‘colonizing’ tool—might become, in the hands of children, a tool for decolonization” (p. 89). I was curious about how children’s involvement in documentation could further expose the space in-between customary classroom power relationships. Further, because of my own interest in the ways in which children negotiate individual and group meanings in their relationships with popular culture I wanted to see how “if children’s popular culture offers itself a rich ethnographic site for visual documentation, it is children themselves who might be regarded as obvious ethnographers in its documentation” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 90).

In my own experiences with elementary school children, I have seen that learning the process of documentation parallels learning other processes in the visual languages. When I first began to document work with the children (on the very first day of school), the children generally assumed that I was making snapshots. We were drawing freely and as I photographed their work, I would stop to talk with them about it and to make notes.
The camera was a tool for me as I began to form relationships with the children. In some cases, the children ignored the presence of the camera (they were used to being photographed). In others, they “hammed it up” for the camera: making silly faces and distracting others from their drawings. Those interludes provoked some children to ask why I was taking pictures, while others demanded that I take their picture next. It was an uneasy, but humorous, introduction to the process of documentation. As Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) explain: “Even in homes where the camcorder has replaced the Brownie instamatic, there is often still a convention of ‘holding up’ for the photographer particular play objects” (p. 86). They may be discussing children’s display of holiday loot at home, but the idea of “holding up” is a prominent feature of much classroom photographic work, too. In art, it is related to the idea of children’s art being “whole” or finished: a child may hold up her finished work. A teacher may photograph that work for her teaching portfolio. In applying for graduate school or for teaching positions, I have never been asked to submit a portfolio of unfinished work! So, children are less accustomed to the idea of a teacher recording their works-in-progress or even “messed up” or broken pieces. When children asked me why I was taking pictures of their work, I told them that it would help us to remember what they did and that we would be using these pictures as we worked further together. They accepted this. Because of our particular context and their comfort with change, they were quite easygoing.

At the beginning of the school year, I also began to record children’s conversations as we talked at carpet-time. Again, “community meetings” were part of each classroom, so the children were used to this routine. I made a documentation binder for each class, and I typed and put the children’s conversations in the binder. These
beginning documents were reflections: not necessarily documentation. It is a long process, and I was only beginning, but having the children’s words accessible to them in print intrigued them. Later on in the year, I stopped using the binders: replacing them with Power Point presentations that allowed us to combine words with images and allowed for a more fluid whole-group experience with the media. This was also because I was able to borrow a projector for the classroom. The technology made reflecting quicker and easier in the short periods of time that we had.

As the children became used to the presence of a digital camera, they began to become more directly involved in documentation. When we first watched the slideshows, the children, like those that Grace and Tobin (1997) described, would “giggle, squirm, and nudge one another as they recognize[d] faces on the screen” (p. 159). Sometimes children’s feelings were hurt if I could not include a picture of everyone and everything that they made. This was before we fully understood what we were doing! I had to weigh these concerns too: I would never want to hurt the children’s feelings but I needed to move beyond the idea of the slideshow as a cumulative record. I needed to show how documentation was a tool for us, and that as a tool, it was neither static nor evaluative.

With some time, near the end of the school year, the children began to see the use-value of documentation. They began to more actively solicit my documentation of their own work and to document their own ideas to share. Once they realized the value of documentation for their own use, they were less concerned about who appeared in what. Silly faces gave way to action-shots of hands on techniques and ideas. The concept of documentation seemed to change their idea of what happened in art studio. The studio shifted from a place where you “make stuff,” to a place where you “do stuff and learn
how to do stuff.” A sense of tension over how teachers, peers, and families received their stuff (although they still wanted it to be “cool” and “good” and to make what they imagined) eased along with their definition of “good art.” In this way, working with older children in documentation not only revealed how they negotiated the colonizing tool of the cameras but also how documentation could reposition or question ideas of older children’s development in art. Perhaps it is not that the children become too conventional, that they ride the bottom of a U-shaped curve, but that the definitions of art and development to which their work is measured and compared, are not as complex as their work.

Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

Findings and recommendations

In Chapter One of this study, I consider the image of the child. Specifically, I trace how the image of the child in Reggio Emilia intersects with the image of the child in contemporary educational theory. In my discussion of the image of the child I hoped to revel how a construction of the child is both a relational and productive concept. It is my thesis that images of the eternal child predominate contemporary educational contexts; effectively edging out the historical child as coagent (Hawkins, 1974). My supposition—based in both research and teaching experience—is that the image of the poor child is pernicious and restrictive. Furthermore, the conflation of the eternal child with idyllic educational concepts devalues the knowledge that children build and use within social
and intellectual contexts. In using the term “the child,” I did not mean to perpetuate a construction of the child as rational and male (Walkerdine, 1997) or to dismiss the complications of class, gender, race, and other identity markers that complicated the lives and identities of individual children. In realizing that my project was ambitious, I may have unintentionally simplified a discussion of specific children to a discussion of the metaphor of the image of the child. I did, however, discuss that metaphor intentionally because in its breadth, it allows further space to consider individual children within the idea of the image of the child in Reggio Emilia and in contemporary educational theory.

In Chapter Two, I hoped to reveal ways in which both the processes of negotiated curriculum and pedagogical documentation reveal how children negotiate meanings and construct knowledge and identities through play and through making. In particular, I see the need for further interrogation about ideas of girlhood, boyhood, and race and class in making. Further, I think there is a need for further work on children’s desire and fantasy to more eloquently map why fantasy and narrative hold such pleasurable appeal for individual children and for groups of children. Finally, I see a need to further study how children’s making in multiple media challenges assumptions about the both the directions and experiences of development. Corsaro’s (1992) conception of development as reproductive is an especially useful lens for this consideration. In conclusion, the process of negotiating curriculum and documentation complicates studies that consider how children interpret, receive, and appropriate forms of adult culture in their making by positioning children and adults in a relationship of co-construction where they make meaning together.
In Chapter Three, I sought to begin to articulate some of these ideas and to represent making within a theory of the visual languages. In doing so, I built upon the metaphor of the “hundred languages of children” as Loris Malaguzzi conceived it as he led schools in Reggio Emilia. I considered the aesthetic concerns of looking at children’s making and the physical spaces of schools from a culturally reproductive perspective. Again, there is a need for further interrogation of the ways in which aesthetic is used, how children’s making is valued, and the issues of taste and class that produce spaces for children and a visual construction of childhood. Finally, I began to discuss relationships between art and childhood that perpetuate a safe distance between children and contemporary art practices and culture.

In this chapter, I hoped to contribute to the idea of pedagogical documentation as a research methodology that not only positions teachers as researchers within the spaces of their classrooms but that also positions teachers and children in a horizontal relationship as negotiators and distributors of meaning. Further work on documentation could consider the roles of older children as I have begun to by looking more thoroughly at the confluence of words and images in documentation. For example, older children can read, understand, interpret, critique, and clarify meanings from their own words and words teachers write about them. More work could also consider ways in which teachers can construct, share, and access local forms of knowledge and localized theories. This work would need to address issues of surveillance, privacy, and dissemination.

Throughout the study, I see possibilities for future work. One of these themes concerns teacher preparation and teacher education: this includes both pre-service and in-service programming for teacher and the constraints of access to meaningful professional
development. As I mentioned, without the gracious support from and credibility of a university affiliation, I would have never undertaken this work to this extent or have had the opportunity to share it in this form. The constraints of the public educational system—a lack of time, of resources, construction of teachers and of children as “poor”—produce a system that leaves little room to entertain possibilities and to conscientiously serve some of the most vulnerable children.

Some of the ideas in this chapter that would benefit from additional studies beyond both the scope of a study this size and the capabilities of a teacher working with a group of children over the course of a single school year.

Those include, but are not limited to a more nuanced and fully developed investigation of the relationships between documentation and pedagogical action, constraints upon and challenges to working with documentation in contemporary classroom situations. In those contexts, like my own, school infrastructure is not designed to support teachers’ intense and collaborative investigations into teaching and learning. Furthermore, most public schools, especially those that the Federal government defines as low-income, do not have access to the visual and digital materials that support such documentary efforts. Beyond this, teacher workloads and accountability are already incredibly demanding. There is little time left in the day for documentation and for reflection, unless the teacher has access (as I did, only through my university affiliation) to a tremendous amount of professional, intellectual, and emotional support. In my situation, too, as I revealed at the beginning of this study, the families of the children with whom I worked showed me unparalleled trust and generosity.
Trust and abandonment

Grace (Mia’s older sister), “Did you choose not to be a teacher here again or did the school choose?”

Me, “I chose.”

Grace, “OK. That’s good. But everyone is gonna miss you here. I wish I didn’t have to leave this school, too.”

When one is a researcher, short-term, intense (yet regulated) involvements with participants in research are part of the process. It is typical for a researcher—even one engaged with children in productive projects—to leave when the project ceases. In many cases, a researcher enters into a context in order to do such a project—access to the site is negotiated: the terms are rather fixed.

I have moved from the context in which children and I did so much of the work that appears in the study to help to build a new early childhood program within an established elementary school. I did consider taking a break from teaching, but as one of my committee members joked during our last official meeting, “Do you plan to continue to teach?” “How could you not? That’s what you do.” As Walkerdine (1997) explained, “Everything that I had learned as a PhD student….about the use of the third person was revealed to me as a hiding place, not as a guarantor of objectivity at all” (p. 59). I haven’t even feigned objectivity in this study, nor could I use my place as a researcher as one of objectivity. My position as a teacher was not as comfortable as the one I had as a researcher and as a supervisor where I spent leisurely time in the margins of the classroom. Many times, then, I had wanted badly to intervene. As a teacher, though, my
role was one of constant intervention based on trust and on closeness. It was a complicated process and prospect—one that significantly altered and complicated my idea of research and my awareness of myself as a researcher.
Chapter Three

Relationships between Play, Multiple Languages, Teaching and Learning

Building Theory through Practice

Almost subconsciously, I have structured this chapter so that my writing fluctuates between the practical and theoretical. This unintentional disorganization allows the practical to support, interrogate, and propose action in the theoretical. The relationship between the two is reciprocal. Throughout the chapter, interpretations of narrative documentation from several classroom contexts—an elementary school in a diverse, urban neighborhood, a studio in a Reggio-inspired school for young children, and a preschool and infant/toddler center in Reggio Emilia—represent the practical. Theoretical interventions, underpinnings, and overlays support various readings of these narratives.

I have divided this chapter into subsections that present major themes and that foreshadow directions for future research and reflection. In the first subsection, “Hot Moments: Mythology, Popular Culture, and the Third Site,” I present an interpretation of documentation from a long-term classroom project that mediated the spaces between children’s school art and their play art. The idea of the “hot moment” evokes other metaphors of teaching attunement like Roosevelt’s (1998) construction of teaching as “acts of attention” where teachers look for capacities in lieu of deficits (Roosevelt, 2007).
and teaching as “listening” (Rinaldi, 2006; Schultz, 2003). Within the context of this project, teachers and children co-constructed and co-negotiated meanings. These meanings reveal tensions between the “official” and “unofficial” worlds of childhood and between the official and unofficial worlds of school. Our constructions of knowledge reveal how visual language communication generates and maintains social relationships among groups of children, ways that children produce and reproduce culture, and ways that children choose, appropriate, rework, and compose play episodes in response to popular visual culture and to other forms of adult culture.

In the next subsection, “Learning from Contemporary Literacy Theory: Play and Language,” I begin to draw parallels between children’s socially situated and cognitive processes of communicating through visual and written language. Within that section, Dyson’s (1989, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2003) theories of literacy development inform my interpretations of ways in which children seek communicative fluency in social contexts through drawing. Her theories further support my positioning of making as a culturally-coded visual language in Chapter Three. This subsection is divided further into three smaller discussions about fantasy play and communicative tension, the urban landscape as a pedagogical site, and sketchbooks as a tool to facilitate interplay between the official and unofficial worlds of classroom life.

In the third subsection, “Uglydolls and the Stickies: How Can Popular Culture Mediate Difference?” I consider ways in which making and interpreting popular culture supports social and intellectual relationships among children from diverse backgrounds. Within a smaller section within that section, “Cheesetopia and the Ice Skating Pimp:
Coolness, Older Children, and Fantasy Play,” I explore ways in which older children communicate through making and social play in both traditional and new media.

In the final section, “The TV of All the Nation,” I trace some further relationships between fantasy play, media play, and learning. In this section, I begin to trace ways that teachers’ documentations of children’s play episodes can provoke, sustain, and enrich project work. Documentation of these episodes can augment teachers’ understanding of ways in which children learn and play in individual and group contexts (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001), and how they produce a shared peer culture in response to and in relationship with adult culture.

**Hot Moments: Mythology, Popular Culture, and the Third Site**

Mykisha, “We need six paper tubes and one box.”

Tomika, “We need wings!”

Bina, “Made out of what?”

Mykisha raises her hand eagerly and almost topples over her knees, but Bina answers her own question. I can sense that the children are trying desperately to balance their sense of urgency with the school’s rule, and one that I often enforce in order to allow so many children to see at once, that we must always be seated on bottoms in a classroom situation.

Bina, “Thirteen pieces of paper for the head and beak but two orange pieces of paper for the beak.”

Mykisha, “And we’ll fold it like a beak.”
Logan, “Something for the tail, like 5 pieces of paper.”

Grant, “Or string!”

Mykisha, “Yeah, string!”

Ella, “I know something that we can make out of paper boxes and cut out
part of them and add lines for texture…lines in the boxes for texture.”

Alejandro, “Well, we need 500 pieces of paper and we’ll put them
together in stacks of 100 and then they’ll be thicker.” (We later decide that
we can use card stock instead of paper: Alejandro’s point was not the
amount of paper, but its strength).

Mykisha, “Could we make a hat for him? With a string and with [a hat of]
black felt?” She gestures the outline of a hat with her hands as she speaks.

Mandie, “We need feet!”

Tomika, “We need nails.”

Bina, “And teeth.”

Several girls together, “Eyes!”

Alejandro, “We can make the feet out of boxes.”

Mykisha, “A white piece of paper and put black around it and color in the
middle…”

Ella, interrupting, “It’s called a pupil!”

Bina, “And for the teeth we need 20 little triangles.”

Abigail, “We need googly eyes.”

Me, “Maybe we can make our own.” (Maybe I reveal my aesthetic
preferences here).
Abigail, “Mrs. Gibson (their classroom teacher) has a lot of googly eyes.”

Mandie (repeating), “We need to make feet for it.”

Mykisha, “We can make them from a piece of felt and the nails can be white.”

Bina, “For the tongue we can use half an oval of red paper with a black line on it.”

Alejandro, “We need to color it.”

Mykisha, “We’ll color it red.”

Me, “Do we want the griffin to stand or to sit?” (I ask this because I need to know this information so I can think of how we might accomplish making the griffins).

Isabella acts out the way the Griffin sits on its hind legs to show us.

Abigail, “It will be just like the statue.” (She’s pointing in the air but obviously referring to the griffin statue outside of the school. All of the children and I catch her meaning).

Bina, “We can glue it on a big box like a statue.”

Mykisha, “We can make it hold a flower.” (At this point, the children begin to anthropomorphize the life-size griffins).

Isabella, “We can put wheels in it and make a string to pull it.”

Logan, “We can use pieces of card stock for the wings.”

Mykisha, “We can use a cardboard box for the car and a steering wheel!”

Ella, “We can put the wheels underneath the feet. We can put the wheels inside the tubes of the feet.”
Logan, “We need four paper tubes with wheels like *that* on the bottom.”
(Alejandro points to the wheels on the bottom of the overhead projector cart).

Ella, “That’s not really what I meant. I meant the wheels would be held by the feet.” (She gestures in a way that resembles a ball and claw footed piece of furniture).

Bina, “It can be moveable then and it will spin around!”

Mykisha, “Like a ballerina!”

Bina, “No! But with a tutu! Let’s put a tutu on it!”

Abigail, “A tuxedo!”

Alejandro, “We can glue straws together and use it as the bones.”

Mykisha, “We can make a bunny costume for him.”

Bina, “And a crown.”

Logan, “Did you know it’s both a boy and a girl?”

Abigail, “Two tables should make a boy griffin and two tables should make a girl griffin.”

Alejandro, “We could make an electric one. My dad and my grandpa are good at making electric things and they could help us.”

Mykisha, “We could make a house for it with furniture and with windows.”

Alejandro, “And we’ll put the griffin in there. I have a tent for that.”

Bina, “And we’ll put flowers around the house.”
Isabella, “We’ll make a family of griffins with a dad, mom, a toddler, a teenager, and a baby.”

Alejandro, “And a snake!”

Bina, “And a puppy griffin!”

Alejandro, “And the Arimaspians we’ll make them the griffin’s minions!”

Several children at once, “What are minions?”

Alejandro, “You know…they do stuff because you tell them you have to!”

A class of approximately sixteen first grade children, who generally work cooperatively in groups of four, had this conversation during a cold, late February afternoon in an elementary school art studio. Based upon their experiences creating griffins, their school’s mascot—a winged beast with the head of an eagle and the body of a lion—from clay, they were now confident in undertaking the challenge of building a family of life-size griffins to live permanently in the studio. This culminating project would simultaneously leave their trace within the studio and welcome new children to the studio. I have documented the children’s conversation here as it is transcribed in my handwritten notes. I always carry a clipboard with me as I work with children, in order to write down ideas, note “hot moments,” and keep a collective “memory” (Edwards, 1998 p. 185) to revisit with the children and by myself late into many evenings. This is the daily research record of the classroom. It is an opening move in the process of pedagogical documentation.

Since I was a beginning teacher, I have made notes about classroom experiences with the same clipboard. At the time I knew I was recording and using my recordings to come to know the children, to re-frame my curriculum and assess my teaching, but I did
not frame that work as “research.” As I began graduate school, I was introduced to theories of child art that both affirmed those initial observations from my classroom and begged further questions. Coupled with my participation in an International Study Group in Reggio Emilia and in the studio of a Reggio-inspired school, I began to intentionally frame my “reflections” as research. I began, then, in a small way, to systematize my observations and to interpret them. This helped me to move from merely noting “interesting” or even profoundly exciting occasions to an effort to more closely understand what happened in my classroom and to more carefully reflect upon my role as a teacher in relationship with children. Through my note-taking, I began to map the social spaces of the classroom and the movements of individual children and myself. This was the beginning of my understanding of a “pedagogy of listening” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 15). I began to see that the conversations I recorded “may be the sound of children thinking, together and alone, about art and the experiences it embodies” (Thompson & Bales, 1991, p. 44).

As a teaching metaphor, the idea of “listening” is not exclusive to schools in Reggio Emilia. In 1970, the American Kounin described “withitness.” Although he was discussing classroom management, his idea about teachers’ awareness of what happens in the classroom and his term for their attentiveness is particularly applicable to the multimodal ways in which teachers sense and listen. Contemporarily, Roosevelt (2007) conceptualizes teaching as “acts of attention,” and Shultz proposes that teachers locate listening at the center of teaching (Schultz, 2003, p.1). In a book that presents different modes of listening in classroom and research contexts as “a framework for teaching across differences,” Schultz explains that, “Central to this theory of listening is the
proposition that listening necessitates action. That is, the act of listening is based on interaction rather than simply reception” (2003, p. 9). In articulating the pedagogy of listening in Reggio Emilia, Rinaldi (2006) defines “Listening [as] an active verb that involves interpretation….Listening that does not produce answers but formulates questions; listening that is generated by doubt, by uncertainty” (p. 65). Each of these theories investigates relationships between teachers and students. Each has contributed to how I see listening in my own classroom practice—as an intentional, focused act that involves openness and requires interpretation of classroom events and of my socially constructed teaching “intuitions.”

Although I presented the opening conversation of this subsection in a linear form, in reality there were moments in which children interrupted one another, finished others’ ideas, looked to me for reassurance to continue, leaned forward or climbed up on their knees in an urgent way, and spoke more loudly or more quickly to emphasize their ideas. I have annotated these actions where I can; I have become expert at writing neatly, quickly. I accept that my documentation is both always partial and an interpretation—my interpretation of daily classroom events. I emphasize that it is an interpretation, because I believe that documentation is more than observation (Rinaldi, 2006). The very act of writing—of making—notes is a crucial part of the process for me. In this way, the act of observing implies a particular kind of participation—participation that I frame through my own socially constructed perspective and participation that is subjective and political. In my classroom, my dual role as teacher and as researcher allows me to record every classroom interaction—from banal to brutal—with an “attitude of research” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 101). That is not to say that I am looking—searching—for particular outcomes.
Rather, an attitude of research is not singular—not a research objective. Most researchers who work with qualitative methods and most teachers who work with children in diverse, contemporary contexts notice many things. My attitude of research helps me to not focus too clearly: to be open to multiple interpretations and possibilities. I am trolling for “hot moments.” When I think I may have caught one, I question whether or not to contain it or gamble further. It is a line that the documentor must maintain with vigilance. An attitude of research, then, helps me to frame ways that I see groups of children co-construct knowledges and identities as they work with one another. I am especially interested in how children do this through play, especially fantasy play, and through their production of shared visual culture. Within these frames, I curious about how children’s making—their use of the visual languages—supports learning. This is the point where my practical and theoretical attentions collide. These relationships are unsteady, and I will return to the trials of negotiating meaning as both teacher and researcher further in Chapter Four. In that chapter, I further emphasize that as a researcher and teacher, my observations are partial. Furthermore, the urgencies of working with young children and the demands of teaching often disrupt my observations; I am not on the outskirts of the action, I am in the midst of it. Those interruptions—those moments when “the equilibrium of the classroom has been unsettled” (Grace & Tobin, 1997, p.160)—are a strength of approaching teaching and research in this way. They challenge the children and me when we have become too comfortable, too complacent. Those “dark” moments, points of “crisis,” are new beginning points for us; points that I choose often to represent to children through documentation. I guide them as we choose to welcome these border crossings and to attempt to understand them, rather than ignore or immediately alleviate them.
In order to achieve both “communicative clarity” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 71) and to capture a sense of what I and the children found so important to remember in this conversation—one that I re-read to them several times—the documentation is presented in “narrative form” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 71). In Chapter Four of this study, I will further address the consequences of working with pedagogical documentation as a teacher who works alone in her context. Later in this section, I will foreshadow the limitations and possibilities of working in a documentary way with older children who are both more invested in the process of documentation as a representation of themselves and more comfortable in their own visual cultural milieu with documentation’s tools.

In the course of the griffin project, I did request a tape recorder to use in the studio. However, the background noise made recorded conversations less audible, and the process of transcription was too lengthy to support our immediacy of need. Like Thompson and Bales (1991) I found that the “talk that occurred….was constant, fluid, and decentralized—impossible to capture adequately through technological means, impossible to interpret without direct observation of the context in which remarks were made and acknowledged” (p. 49). In the end, I continued to write and to take notes. And these compositions were a crucial part of the documentation process for me. Writing, and drawing, as I worked with children implicated me further in the subjective experience of interpretation even before my pencil touched my clipboard paper. Serendipitously, the ancient tape recorder lived on to become a protagonist in a later project with a small group of eight year olds—making sound-making machines.

Nevertheless, this transcription is typical. As Thompson and Bales (1991) explain, “These sudden alternations of past and present tense, of task-oriented and task-related
talk, of word and action, were typical of children’s conversations” (p. 50). And its context is equally characteristic—on that day, I hadn’t realized that we were going to have this particular conversation! In moments such as these, inside some of those “hundreds of split-second decisions” (Schultz, 2003, p. 5) that shape teaching practice, tensions between the “official” and “unofficial” worlds (Dyson, 1993, pp. 19) of the classroom and between the power distributed between teacher and students arise. To paraphrase Schultz (2003), in this moment I chose to “hand power and control over” to the children; in other moments, I felt equally as compelled to “reclaim” my “authority” (p. 5). As the vignette that opens Chapter One reveals—often the mere presence of my teaching body achieved this reclamation.

Dyson would describe my classroom context as “permeable,” as one in which a teacher and her students actively negotiate the gulf between official and unofficial worlds. Across this permeable membrane, then, teachers and students negotiate and re-negotiate channel walls. Dyson’s metaphor of the classroom as a cell—as a self-contained site with permeable membranes—complements the Reggio Emilian metaphor of classrooms melting into and contaminating the shared spaces of the school. The process is viral (Rayport, 1996) in the contemporary sense that term—contamination came through already open social channels. The idea of a school as spaces, in the sense in which Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) propose them, supports the idea of site-specific pedagogy that I will return to further within this chapter.

The day of the griffin conversation began like most other days. It was not atypical, rather it was typical of the conversations children carried on throughout their project work. At the beginning of our forty minute period (in that context, each of
fourteen classes in the school met for art for forty minutes on a three-day rotation that results in one or two art studio meetings per week), we gathered on the large pine-green carpet in the center of the room to talk. This was one of our favorite routines. The children had had recess and lunch, and were eager to get started on their afternoon work. The topic of our talk was directions that we may take in furthering our griffin project. At the beginning of the conversation, I proposed several ideas to the children. For example, I had noticed that several children had constructed golden mountains to accompany their clay griffins, and I thought that the children might like to work further with clay. They did, but they did not want to make any more clay griffins. And, indeed, perhaps in rhythmic harmony with an incursion of Disney’s® thoughtful marketing of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy, we moved on to make clay sea life creatures.

These propositions were based upon my interpretation of classroom conversations, notes, and artifacts. I had prepared for us to move in several different directions, perhaps all together, perhaps in smaller groups. At the same time, I was open to the children’s plausible suggestions. I was curious as to whether or not the griffin project would continue to motivate them. Was it completed? Did we need a break? Was it time to change directions? As I have hinted previously, during the course of this larger project we also engaged in smaller, parallel projects and deviated from our plans completely on other days. For example, we took one day to make photographs for a school art auction; we drew in sketchbooks, and worked with new and favorite materials in centers. These deviations reveal that a long-term project is not always an easily manageable whole. A negotiated approach requires continued negotiation: projects may be left, reinvigorated by new learning and motivation, or they may linger. As Bresler
(2006) explains, this *lingering* can be quite productive. The organic nature of project timing and the uncertain movements of project “progress” do not necessarily correspond well with school time. I will return to this idea in Chapter Four.

I want to emphasize that my openness to the griffin conversation, and to the meandering nature of project work, is not the result of not having “planned a lesson” for this or other days. A negotiated approach does not mean that everything that children do becomes a project or that children do what they want while I look for a project. It is negotiated but I remain the teacher. I offer choices, but I make many, too. Perhaps I find it necessary to defend my authority as a teacher by writing this—to show that “my” process and “my” class are within my control. Like the student teacher who Phelan (1997) describes, I tend to “think the other teachers tend to measure your ability as a teacher on the way you allow your children to conduct themselves” (p. 76). Implementing “the procedures necessary to establish and maintain the flow in a lesson” (Phelan, 1997, p. 81) seems all the more crucial when a teacher is working with many children who fit the definition of “unacceptable” children. The specter of a loss of control lurks just beneath the surface of order. As Phelan explains (citing Walkerdine, Apple and King) “the binaries of work/play and disorder/order organize classroom life” (1997, p. 80). She continues, “We tend to define work *in opposition to* rather than *in tension* with the erotic” (p.80, original emphasis). She refers to ways in which teachers suppress their own desires and children’s desires in order to maintain the performance of work “euphemistically termed *learning*” (p. 81, original emphasis) within the well-defined space of a school and within the context of “managing” the classroom. A negotiated or permeable classroom
space holds work and play and disorder and order in a kind of positive tension that is as susceptible to productive intervention as it is to chaos.

For a teacher, negotiating project work with children means that she does not fully leave herself or her desires at home when she enters the classroom. As Malaguzzi explained, she embodies those pieces of the world that are attached to her. She lives and selectively displays them through her performative relationships with the children and her presence is shared social worlds. So, in her practice she continually transgresses boundaries, as do the children. They are Giroux’s (1992) border crossers. But, as Grace and Tobin (1997) explain in their description of the carnivalesque in children’s video productions, these “transgressions….are] organized and authorized within the curriculum” (p. 161, original emphasis). In their context, those transgressions ranged from the scatological and grotesque to the philosophical. The very idea of children and teachers working as collaborators implies transgression. Both parties must cross borders to build new spaces. The geographic metaphor is apropos. In her interview with Malaguzzi, Gandini (1998) asks how educators in Reggio maintain the level of positive tension within the schools. She has noticed that there is a pleasurable atmosphere that seems to balance tensions between work and play, order and disorder, and fantasy and reality. I noticed this tension, too, when I visited the schools: it is almost palpable, but then again, I was looking for it.

Within a negotiated approach, the teacher remains in primary control of the classroom and of the project, and she addresses and reveals this tension. When she uses this power consciously and responsibly—always noting the dangers of miscommunications and mistakes but not cowering from them—her power helps the
teacher make choices about how to share control and negotiate the course of the project with children. To apply Rinaldi’s (2006) and Schultz’s (2003) metaphors, these choices are based upon “listening.” That listening implies much more than noting what children like and might enjoy doing. It requires what educators in Reggio call “real participation.” Rinaldi (2006) describes the actions such listening supports:

*Listening* is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and at the same time a suspension of our judgments and above all our prejudices; it requires openness to change. It demands that we have clearly in mind the value of the unknown and that we are able to overcome the sense of emptiness and precariousness that we experience whenever our certainties are questioned (p. 65, original emphasis).

She continues, “*Listening* that takes the individual out of anonymity, that legitimizes us, gives us visibility, enriching both those who listen and those who produce the message (and children cannot bear to be anonymous)” (p. 65, original emphasis).

Thus, planning for multiple directions and outcomes—understandably not in its traditional sense of step-by-step and ordered outcomes—is crucial to supporting a negotiated curriculum. I am using the term “negotiated curriculum,” in the sense that is often used by programs and educators “inspired” by the Reggio approach, because it best describes how I work with children in my elementary art studio. It reflects the time in which I learned to work in this way by working in a teacher-researcher collaboration (Schultz, 1991) in the studio of a Reggio-inspired school for young children. I have purposefully chosen to not use the term *progettazione* as it is used in Reggio because I want to emphasize that I am not “doing Reggio” in my classroom. That is not possible, even though the concept of *progettazione* as “a more global and flexible approach in
which initial hypothesis are made about classroom work….but are subject to modifications and changes of direction as the actual work progresses” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. xi), profoundly influences my pedagogical attitudes, theory, and practice. Other discourses inform the hybrid practice of negotiated curriculum. They include Katz and Chard’s (1989) “project approach,” Dyson’s “permeable curriculum” (1993, p. 30), and Wilson’s (2005) idea of the “third pedagogical site.”

The children’s interest in the griffin appeared nearly at the beginning of the school year. They were fascinated by the idea of the mascot, and curious about the strange appearance of a griffin statue at the front of our school (Figure 5). We made several research trips to visit the griffin statue, and the children were most interested in touching the griffin to feel its texture, a word that the children repeated often months later as they were sculpting clay griffins. They were as curious about the griffin’s mythology as its appearance and began to ask questions about the griffin. Because I, too, as a teacher new to this school, knew little about the griffin or why it was chosen as our school mascot several years ago, we began an investigation of the ancient Greek mythology surrounding the griffin. Throughout the course of this project, we would find that the distance between “the stuff of school-introduced Greek myths,” and that of “Saturday morning cartoons,” (Dyson, 1997b, p. 3) was not so great as to be immigitable. In fact, it was so close that it was navigable in a way that allowed children to act as “composers” and “meaning negotiators” (Dyson, 1997b, p. 4), to “achieve a sense of personhood and social belonging, of control and agency in a shared world” (Dyson, 1997b, p. 2). In this way, we created a third, hybrid culture. This culture questioned “the ‘single-item-ness’ of various popular culture items and the tendency of adults to go after a particular popular
culture item in either a celebratory way or in a condemning way” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 93).

As Fiske (1987) notes:

despite the power of ideology to reproduce itself in its subjects, despite the
hegemonic force of the dominant classes, the people still manage to make their
own meanings and to construct their own culture within, and often against that
which the industry provides for them (in Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, p. 27).

Although Mitchell and Reid-Walsh and Fiske discuss popular culture here in a
critique of the construction of the consumer as a dupe, their conclusions support ways in
which children more generally negotiate their own meanings with adult culture. In a
dichotomous construct, children are generally in the “one-down” (Sutton-Smith, 1997)
position. Not content with the possibilities projected onto them, they choose and

Figure 5: The griffin statue at the front entrance of our school and the griffin as school mascot.
negotiate their own meanings and produce their own cultural artifacts. In this way, working in a negotiated approach helps to open shared third sites or spaces between both official and unofficial children’s and school culture. School, however, did not contain these sites; their boundaries, too, were permeable. Spaces “melted” into the worlds of home and life outside of school. As Dyson (1993) notes “There are no neat boundaries between ‘home’ and ‘school,’ or between the official (teacher-controlled) sphere and that of peers” (p. 3).

Furthermore, this project positioned children not only as consumers of culture—as receivers and interpreters—but as actors and producers whose productions are a social practice that do social work. In this way, an investigation of the third site can contribute to our ways of knowing about how children, and we, make and know. Within this kind of research—and I will return to these ideas in Chapter Four—children are no longer the objects of research but the subjects of research. They are generating new knowledge. As their teacher and a researcher, I am not only learning about them but we are negotiating new meanings together.

In their first griffin drawings, the children were very interested in depicting each detail of the specific griffin that represented our school (Figure 6). They had seen him on folders, in newsletters, and on t-shirts worn by children and teachers each Friday. In response to their enthusiasm and to one child’s request, I made quite a few copy-machine copies of the griffin drawing from an old folder that I found in the schoolroom closet to distribute to the children so that they could use it as a model. In this context, I felt that it was important to provide children with this model because their concerns were to accurately portray this specific griffin. In subsequent and parallel projects with this class
and other classes, I provided models that the children requested for them to refer to as they worked. In those cases, we searched for models in old reference books that our school library had discarded or on Google® images. In those projects, too, a close examination of the qualities of subject we were studying was necessary. Accurate replication, at least at the outset of a project, motivated the children to strive for precision in their portrayals. This precision had both artistic and social value. As Thompson and Bales (1991) found, “The veracity of representations was open to question as children continually compared their knowledge of the objects depicted with the renditions offered by their peers” (p. 51).

Figure 6: Two drawings made by six-year-old children of a griffin as our school mascot.

Children’s looking was often concentrated upon an achievement of verisimilitude. In one example, the “cracker,” or giant squid that sinks pirate ships in the Disney® movie Pirates of the Caribbean, motivated children’s productions of drawings and sculptures of sea life. When Diego, one of the project’s main protagonists, told me that he needed a
picture of the cracker, I wasn’t sure where to turn. I had never heard of a cracker. I am still unsure as to whether or not the characters in the movie even refer to giant squids as crackers. Nonetheless, Diego was able to locate illustrations of giant squid in the discarded reference books. Immediately, I understood his meaning: The squid cracked and sunk ships with the force of its tentacles.

In each of these cases, I was not motivated to provide models because I sought for the children to produce particular “school art” (Efland, 1976) outcomes, although I was interested in the qualities of their visual perception and what they would choose to reproduce from models. I was not concerned that a model might hamper the children’s creativity or that I would “unduly and unfortunately” (Wilson & Wilson, 1981) influence the children. Perhaps this was because I was not so much troubled with how what the children made and/or experience might be framed as “art,” but rather, in how they constructed both knowledges and identities within this context. How did they approach and mediate both visual and social problems? Like Thompson and Bales (1991), I found that the children approached both making and friendship from a critical perspective. They wrote, “Adults may wince at such unvarnished assessments, yet research suggests that critical comments levied by other children often seem to stimulate and focus subsequent drawing activity” (p. 47). I will return to idea of the visual implications of how children function as more capable peers in Chapter Three. Separating children’s work from the label of art and positioning it as “social work” (Dyson, 1993) or “social practice” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002) is a theme that I will discuss further in Chapter Three.

In addition, within the context of this project, we researched other appearances of the griffin. We used a projector borrowed from the school library that allowed us to
access both Google images and the British Museum website on a pull-down screen. That experience allowed us to see images of griffins from ancient Greek mythology (Figure 7). Several of these scenes showed the griffin engaged in fierce battle with an Arimaspian. The Arimaspians were a tribe of one-eyed men who lived at the bottom of the Rhipaion mountains. Usually mounted on horses, they were continually at war with the griffins. These scenes were especially interesting to us: they helped to transform the symbol of the school griffin to a character. This was a pivotal moment for the children most interested in the griffin mythology. The griffin’s actions, not just his appearance, motivated their continued visual narratives. As a character, the griffin assumed a vaulted position in their drawing play: that akin to the action heroes and heroines of popular visual culture.

Figure 7: One of the depictions of griffins in Greek mythology that we studied. Here, the griffins are battling the Arimaspians.

In order to refer to the griffin and Arimaspian scenes more carefully, we saved and printed the images to make transparencies. Although we could only make black and
white copies, we referred to them often. Our school had intended to discard five or six old overhead projectors. We rescued the dinosaurs of classroom technology for the studio, and we used them to project the griffin scenes large-scale on the studio walls and ceilings. As Diego explained, “We made our own movies.” I will return to theme of transforming and altering the studio environment further within the subsection that addresses fantasy in this section and in Chapter Three.

We later found, with the assistance of our school librarian, that Maurice Sendak had illustrated a version of Frank R. Stockton’s children’s book, *The Griffin and Minor Canon*. The book featured a griffin as its central character. Although it is now difficult to find, a local independent bookstore was able to locate a copy of the book for us. We made transparency slides from this book, including a special scene in which the misunderstood and outcast griffin appears as an unwelcome visitor in a school for “bad” children. Throughout this period, at the beginning of the project, we often engaged in discussions that helped to solidify and unify our mutual understanding of the griffin—our construction of him. Here, I do refer to him as male based upon these initial decisions. However, as the conversation I shared reveals, this later become a point of provocation. But, in particular, we needed to know if he was “good.” As in Tobin’s (2000) *Good Guys Don’t Wear Hats*, the children first considered the griffin’s appearance. He did seem a bit unfriendly with his gaping beak and spiked mane. And we did see him in the midst of all those swords. Several children were concerned about these “bad” attributes. In the end, on the basis of the information we had amassed in our research, several children decided that yes, the griffin was good. It was clear: he was guarding the Golden Mountains so that no one would steal the gold. He did not hurt anyone, he merely frightened them. The
children did not think that the “gods” would have granted him the important post of guarding the Golden Mountains unless he was a good guy and perhaps Stockton’s characterization of the griffin as socially outcast based upon his appearance informed these conclusions. With this consensus, we bestowed the status of “hero” upon our griffin and we never further breached the subject of his righteousness. In this way, children integrated the griffin (and the Arimaspians, and the Golden Mountains) quite seamlessly into their “superhero play” (Paley, 1986; Dyson, 1997b), drawings, fantasy worlds, and their negotiated school art. The next subsection will further discuss implications of both superhero, “rough and tumble,” (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005) and “war play” (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2006)—“material….ideologically unsettling to many adults” (Dyson, 1997b, p.3). That discussion will reveal how the image of the child permeates adults’ interpretations of children’s play and will present the possibilities in constructing “permeable but official” (Dyson, 1997b, p. 16) classroom spaces that mediate the space in between the “unofficial world of childhood” (Dyson, 1997b, p. 29) and the official, adult world of education, to produce third sites.

Throughout this project experience, I was surprised by the fluidity with which the children incorporated the griffin, a mythological creature that generally inhabits the realms of museum culture, into their play drawings that generally featured superheroes from video games. Those characters, although more socially sanctioned by the subversive kinderculture (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997) of the classroom are, too, built upon the substrate idea of a kind of supernatural fantasy. The compulsions, pleasures, and social and intellectual ends that fuel children’s attraction to fantasy is of great interest to me. As Egan (1988) explains, “Children’s fantastic narratives, the stories that most engage
children, have this quality of freedom, this mind-wandering lack of apparent logic” (p.15). He credits part of the fantastic impulse to children’s capacity to encounter and act upon abstract ideas, like feelings of abandonment, safety, fear, or loss. Thompson and Bales (1991) comment on children’s affections for the fantastic. They explain:

> The images children chose to draw and model were rarely derived from direct personal experience, seldom rooted in the present, always a shade removed from the everyday. Snakes, tornadoes, castles, dinosaurs, vampires, witches, spaceships, and the assorted denizens of cartoons and movies proliferated, reflecting children’s shared preoccupation with the inexplicable and the exotic (p. 52).

It seems to me that each of the projects in which I have worked with children in a negotiated curriculum share an affinity for fantasy, even if they are based upon some personal collective *real* experience. Further along in this chapter, I will discuss the idea of “defamiliarizing” the everyday that represents much making practice in Reggio Emilian schools.

In its fantastic, illogical, meandering, narrative form, the collaborative construction of the griffin opened the third site “between school classrooms and kids’ self-initiated visual cultural spaces” (Wilson, 2005, p. 18). This third site, then, opened and exposed an ample, uncharted, space between kinderculture and more socially acceptable and adult sanctioned places for children. That in-between space raises questions about the very perceived polarity between the vulgar appeal of the villains of movies, television, and video games and the fluffy sweetness of safety.
Writing more generally about popular culture, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) repeatedly use a spatial metaphor to illustrate how the “high culture” of acceptable childhood exists within the “low” culture of unacceptable childhood (as it is in the contemporary guise of popular media culture). As they explain:

Although popular culture is usually considered in opposition to high culture, we suggest that the relationship between them is more complex: that popular culture exists also within or inside high culture. If this complexity is recast into a spatial metaphor, perhaps high culture and popular culture do not exist in two separate spaces, but one inside the other (p. 15).

In one of his studies of peer cultures, Corsaro (1992) further articulates the relationships between adult culture and child culture. His work is significant because he does not limit child culture to popular culture or visual culture. The idea of “adult” culture more generally includes those qualifiers as well as all media made by adults and intended for either adult’s or children’s consumption. In his view, children use whatever cultural media available in their transformations and constructions of peer culture. He explains:

The production of peer culture is neither a matter of simple imitation nor a direct appropriation of the adult world. Children creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own unique peer cultures. Such appropriation is creative in that it extends or elaborates peer culture (transforms information from the adult world to meet the concerns of the peer world) and simultaneously contributes to the reproduction of the adult culture (p. 168).
He continues, “children become a part of adult culture—that is, they contribute to its reproduction—through their negotiations with adults and their creative production of a series of peer cultures with other children” (p. 169).

Within these overlapping spaces—what Dyson calls “social worlds” or what Mitchell & Reid-Walsh (2002) call “spaces”—children not only consume but produce visual culture. In doing so, they make “distinctions” (Bourdieu, 1984)—choices that are motivated by and that maintain or change their social standing within their particular peer cultures. In this process, children recombine, reconfigure, and transform culture and their identities. They construct and exercise taste and they build social relationships to and with one another based upon these distinctions. Within the multiple social worlds of kinderculture, children distinguish between “aesthetic codes” (Rosario & Collazo, 1981) as they are propelled by ever-changing social motives. They also “incorporate the material they observed as spectators of adult art into their own productions” (Wilson, 1976, p. 47). This adult art includes not only fine arts but also adult visual culture and visual culture produced by adults for children.

Though the children were interested in seeing other portrayals of griffins, most preferred “our” griffin. In most cases, they cited “inaccuracies” in the appearance of “other” griffins, even though those griffins, as artisans had depicted them on Greek vases, were the “original” griffins. In these critical stances, they made distinctions—and exercised “aesthetic competence” (Bourdieu as cited by Rosario & Collazo, 1981)—within collaboratively defined contexts. As Thompson and Bales (1991) explain, “At this age, children also became interested in the activities of their companions, comparing
drawings, sharing stories, and questioning and evaluating the images around them” (p. 47).

Such visual and factual accuracy would prove a consistent theme throughout the drawing and sculpting portions of the project. Each new drawing or making endeavor provided an opportunity to both “polish” one’s Griffin-making mojo and to extend the Griffin’s exploits in a simultaneously punishing and nurturing imaginary play landscape (Figure 8, Figure 9). In this way, the children had both adopted a repetitive routine of griffin play and embellished (Corsaro, 1992) this routine. Corsaro explains that, “repetition prolongs routines, allowing children to savor the shared meaning of the activity. Such prolonging, in turn, widens the parameters of opportunity for embellishment and thus increases the productive power of routines for children” (1992, p. 167). Furthermore, in his discussion of children’s embellishments to play routines or scripts, he concludes, “These embellishments enhance or intensify the tension or danger embedded in the structure of the routine, thus making the activity seem more real while reminding the children that it is, after all, just pretend” (1992, p. 167).
Repetition and embellishment provided individual children with an opportunity to “specialize” their knowledge of the griffin, either through developing a particularly novel technique to replicate some part of the creature like his spiked mane (Figure 10, Figure 11) or by “romancing” the griffin’s role in his latest adventure. To do this satisfactorily, they needed to know how the griffin’s feathers were attached to his or her wings, where his or her fur began and feathers ended. What part was lion? What part was
eagle? How do you spell “Arimaspian” in order to include him or her in your narrative?
They needed to know the rules to have a “ticket” (Dyson, 1997b) to play. I will return to
the actual processes of constructing the griffins in Chapter Three.

Figure 10: Mykisha makes the griffin’s feathers by cutting clay into tiny pieces that she attaches to wings.
As we moved forward in the project to make both maquette-size and life-size griffins, we often revisited and revised our documentation. This led the children to discussions about how they could divide the labor in their groups and in between other groups. Using documentation and memory, they began to officially and unofficially assign tasks to various children based upon their interpretations of those children’s competencies and potential contributions to the goal. For example, when the goal of making a griffin stand became paramount, taller children held the top of the griffin’s head steady while smaller children measured the legs near the ground. Children with steady hands made the cut marks on the paper tubes and children who were good with scissors either cut or showed others how to get the most power from the scissors. These competencies, in turn, ensured that each child was a valued member, a participatory “expert,” in some fashion in their group. As Corsaro (1992) explains, “all learning throughout time and space represents a move into social practice” (p. 168). In this way,
learning and social practice were fused as Vygotsky had envisioned them. Within this conception of learning the children became “their own and one another’s more capable peers” and each child became “a protagonist in his or her own development” (New, 1998, p. 274). By focusing on negotiating the meaning of the griffin in the particular context of school (this was for all of the children the first year at the school) the children used peer culture to mediate difference. As Corsaro (1992) explains, “by their very participation, children communally produce and share a sense of membership in their peer culture” (p. 168). In this particular case, that sense of membership was tantamount to sharing a sense of membership in the official school culture. This shared culture, the griffin culture, was a foundation on which a child could build, maintain, and alter her positions within an emerging social network. Within this moving network, all children worked through the overlapping and redundant processes of mediating difference, exerting defiance, and gaining acceptance within the social spheres of the classroom.

In our particular school situation—one in which children frequently move into and out of already-established contexts with little or no notice—these roles supported and comforted groups of children through change. This mutually constructed social structure allowed a new member to easily negotiate her space into the group—to contribute based upon what she could offer and to join in ownership of a project already in motion. The griffin culture provided a structure through which children could forge both group and individual identities while working toward a singular purpose. In this way, the children not only co-constructed knowledge, but an “identity” (Dahlberg et al, 1999, p. 56) contingent to a specific context and supported by particular relationships. Perhaps, too, the instability that many children who attend our school face propels a collective concern
that the griffins remain in the art studio. They were the children’s joint property, but they were a “trace” that made them “visible” in a historical moment and in a space that was meaningful to them. The griffins would remain even if a child or teacher could not, and the griffin culture could be resurrected for the possibility of future play and embellishment.

Although the life-size griffin project was a long term project undertaken by one particular class of first grade children, its antecedents were in other “official” school contexts that sustained and supported relationships between the children and me. Although I was the school’s art specialist, I spent each morning teaching supplemental reading and math classes to small groups of children. For several months, I had been working exclusively with three first grade groups. Each group was relatively stable for our context, and consisted of about six children. Experiences in those groups proved to both provide catalysts for projects in the art studio and provoke questions for me about relationships between different ways of learning and knowing for children. Themes that we discussed during these small-group meetings both generated ideas for large-scale project work and situated children from the original small groups as leaders of these project initiatives during whole-class art studio time. The integration between “subjects” that are generally separate in the elementary school context, like reading, math, and art, was seamless for the children in a way that it tended to spill over, or in Malaguzzi’s words, “melted” (as cited in Rabitti, 1992, p. 21), into other parts of the children’s day and their experiences in school.

Visual accuracy became less important as we built the life-size griffins. Perhaps this was a dual function of the difficulties we experienced in negotiating the look of the
donated materials with which we worked and the children’s desire to re-cast the family of griffins as fantasy figures. But, as they initially drew on white paper with black felt-tip marker, children were eager to point out inconsistencies in one another’s drawings and to achieve an “expert” status about their knowledge of the griffin. This often involved narrating complex stories about the griffin’s heroic defense of the Golden Mountains (Figure 12) from the cycloptic tribe of arch-rivals, the Arimaspians. The children began to weave the griffin’s story into their play and their “play” (Wilson, 1974) drawings. They brought him or her into their drawn and enacted narratives, and he or she was the protagonist of a plurality of situations.

![Figure 12: A detail from a griffin battle scene where the Arimaspian is clearly marked.](image)

While this particular reading emphasizes the successes of the griffin project and this project as a metaphor for the “third site” negotiated with a group of children, it would be unjust to portray the experience of living through a project as seamless. In fact, there were many “knots” (Edwards, 1998, p.187) within this project, quite a few
disappointments, and the requisite amount of classroom intrusions. In addition, there were places in which children did not get along, and instances—several in particular—in which children exerted their power through what teachers often call “misbehavior.”

During a later carpet meeting, a group of boys chose to continue a “food fight” that they had minutes earlier in the school cafeteria by throwing art supplies at one another across the studio. In another moment, one of the main protagonists of the life-size griffin project, Mykisha, collapsed in a fit of nearly inconsolable frustration and rage after squashing her clay griffin into a muddled ball. There were also moments in which sharing control of the classroom situation with the children dangled precipitously on the precipice of my “better judgment” as a teacher. One of the incidents ended with a child cutting another’s finger with scissors. Whilst a fountain of red blood spattered the floor before I could grab my first aid kit and its “universal precautions,” the injured child in nearly the same moment crumpled into my arms in a heap of sobs and composed herself stoically as she walked, escorted by the remorseful offender, to the health office. When she returned in good spirits, I knew that I would have to offer explanations. Why were such young children using sharp scissors to cut duct tape? In those moments—as in the conversation that opens this chapter—we negotiated and solidified our identity as a group. We were forced to not only compromise but also to accept the times when no concession could alleviate the tension or heal the hurt in an injustice. All the while, the children in this class—one representative of the school as a whole and its diversity—were negotiating, defining, and supporting difference. The many ways in which they articulated and defined difference—by race, culture, religion, gender, griffin-part-rendering skill, age, height—supported their constructions of identities in this particular context.
I deeply empathize with those teachers who would feel nervous about devoting the little time normally allocated to art to talk, and to negotiation, instead of to direct instruction and art production. This was a risk that I prepared to assume in this situation. Risks such as these, along with slow starts, false starts, wrong turns, “knots,” and dissonance define the experiencing of living through a project in a negotiated curriculum. Although they can seem confusing, sometimes devastating, they are a vital part of the process through which a teacher negotiates control with and among children. A teacher can nurture a project but not orchestrate it. The experience is simultaneously frightening and exhilarating. It takes a tremendously long time, and it is difficult.

Learning from Contemporary Literacy Theory: Play and Language

Throughout this section, I am especially indebted to Dyson’s (1989, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2003) research concerning young children who are learning to write. In her works, she continually examines ways in which children become “writers” as they negotiate meaning and compose in the complex “real” and “imaginary” social words of urban public schools and popular culture. The frameworks she has developed and the insights she has garnered produce a foundation for me as I attempt to draw parallels between her insights about children’s literacy and the socially-anchored and contingent processes of drawing and making for young children.

Within this section, then, and supported by the image of the child in Reggio Emilia, I will examine relationships between play and visual languages—including not only drawing but also new media languages—in young children’s making. My
understanding of contemporary literacy theories informs my analyses of events from classrooms in which I have either taught or observed. I am hopeful that this discussion will contribute to and extend theories of child art, especially developmental theories that tend to emphasize ways in which children’s “progress” toward visual realism in drawing naturally unfolds in predictable stages or phases. In doing this, I would like to emphasize that making is a “socio-cultural and cognitive process,” (Schultz, 1992, emphasis added) and I would like to point to some beginning points where social learning leads to motivation that leads to development. In this case, too, like Corsaro (1992), I see development not as linear but as productive and reproductive. I plan to continually keep in mind that development does not mean linear movement from naïf to sophisticate; it doesn’t just happen to children. Here, too, I see development as a rhizomatic process that leads to children’s increased fluency in complementary languages. For these reasons, I generally choose to refer to children’s making or their visual productions rather than their art. The label “art” is generally one that adults place as an evaluation upon children’s making. When children produce, they are not necessary consciously making art. Rather, they are communicating. Even more specifically, they are using language. The graphic language of scribbles and of initial mark making is a child’s initial attempt at symbolic communication. She has realized that signs signify—that they can be written and read. In this way, drawing is a primary language for young children. Young children first acquire language by speaking, then by writing (which includes scribble drawings), and then by reading. Writing and reading are culturally-coded—symbols are not inherently related to what they signify—they only make sense within particular cultural contexts. A child who begins to make is beginning to place herself within this culturally communicative
context. As Gillen and Hall (2003) explain, “Social semiotic theory points out that as forms of meaning making they, and all other forms of meaning, have as many similarities as differences, and that it is only history and ideology that assign particular values to these differences” (p.9).

Although developmental theories have made significant contributions to an understanding of children’s drawings, most do not anchor drawing as a sociocultural and cognitive process in particular historic contexts in which children both compose and perform worlds and identity through their use and re-use of “available” images and their invention of “new” images within cultural codes (Dyson, 1997b). As is the case with spoken and written language, children understand visual cultural codes of communication. In their analysis of the ways in which Vygotsky and Bakhtin define dialogue, Cheyne and Tarulli explain that a child incorporates “the knowledge structure of her culture so that she may occupy the same epistemological space as her compatriots” (2005). Children use these codes to make their own communicative efforts understandable and meaningful in their particular cultural context. As Corsaro (1992) explains, “According to Youniss, for example, the child’s conceptualization of the social world is not a private activity but rather is a social event involving an exchange of action” (p. 160). In this way, I hope to contribute to Wilson’s (1976) call to add to an explanation of “the relationships between the complex thematic and symbolic aspects of child art and the enticement that the drawing act holds for young people” (p. 45).

Situating children’s making in this specific, conditional, and temporal way opens space in which children’s making can be considered not only in terms of development but in terms of motivation. If, as Vygotsky attests, learning leads development, producing
motivation, then as children learn further how to communicate by visual means, they are more motivated to do so. That learning and motivation is not only cognitive, but social. So the practice of making takes on the connotation of “social work” and “social practice.” By engaging in this work, children strive for attention and for acceptance within specific cultural and social words. This learning helps children to develop more complex and more nuanced systems of visual communication and motivates them to do so through the possibilities in which they achieve acceptance in a variety of overlapping social groups. Finally, this section extends developmental theories in two other foundational ways. First, it considers children’s making digital languages including digital photography, video, digital manipulation of images, and mixed-media assemblage. Second, I hope to position making and writing in a horizontal, rather than hierarchical, relationship to foreshadow both how visual productions function as visual language and my interpretation of Malaguzzi’s theory of the hundred languages within my own teaching context. Relationships between visual languages, play, and knowing partially characterize the practice in the schools of Reggio Emilia. An understanding and extension of these relationships could have significant implications for educators in contexts like my own. Positioning children’s making as a visual language and as a primary language exposes the socially constructed ways in which writing and drawing are placed at odds with one another. It provides an opportunity to build theory that more accurately describes the processes of symbolic meaning-making and language acquisition. This repositioning has educational and epistemological theoretical significance for both teachers who work with young children and researchers who study how young children come to know.
In discussing these implications I acknowledge the predominance of my own voice, and my role as a partial participant in the context. My constructions of children, childhood, teaching, and myself are contingent and historical—influenced by my experiences and framed by my concerns. As Korzenik (1981) concludes when she discusses Rousseau treatment of child art in *Emile*, “Through *Emile*, Rousseau permitted us to glimpse the tensions surrounding the late eighteenth century concept of the child” (p. 22). She continues, “It is useful to remember that art education grows within a culture with wider concerns. The manifestation of this culture nevertheless may be expected to be visible and play themselves out within the content of art education” (p. 24). I am sure that this study and my voice within it does the same for the early 21st century concept of the child and “adult preoccupation with issues and conflicts within their society at the time” (Korzenik, 1981, p. 24).

**This is tiny foot: drawing as a language in classroom mythologies**

Drawing is a primary language for young children. Most children draw, or make marks, before they write. Some scholars (Matthews, 1999) ascribe representative meaning to even the most rudimentary marks, while other emphasize the physical delight that children seem to take in making marks. It seems that when they are first learning to make marks, children do not necessarily differentiate between symbols or representations of things in the visual world (i.e. people, places, animals, homes, etc.) and symbols or representations of spoken words. Essentially, pre-writing and pre-drawing seem to both take on the form of the “scribble,” although children know that even by doing so, they are
communicating. For example, in a particularly illustrative story of five-year-old children in Reggio Emilia who are making an “instruction booklet” (Edwards, 1993, p. 165) about their school for three-year-old children, one child, Silvio, chooses to “write” in the three-year-olds’ “language” of scribbles so that they understand (Figure 13). Edwards explains, “Silvio then asserted that little children speak differently than big ones do, so they should write their instructions in ‘scribbles’ to speak the language of 3-year-olds” (p. 165).

Although other children disagree with Silvio’s hypothesis, the class nonetheless tests his theory of the group of three-year-old children. As we might expect, the three-year-old children do not choose or understand the instruction booklet that Silvio has prepared. We could argue that this vignette, which Edwards uses to illustrate a teacher’s empathy for Silvio and his ill-fated theory, is merely the idiosyncratic story of a child who has misunderstood how other children communicate. But, within this context, it reveals that as children begin to make marks they realize that they can communicate in representative form. I am not supposing that all marks or scribbles have meaning but that they have communicative, representative, symbolic potential. Children may not yet understand fully how a semiotic or representation system works, but they do make distinctions between symbols that have meaning and symbols that have none. They may also begin to sense that meanings are not linked directly to their symbol—that there is a semiotic conceit—through which meanings are “held” not in symbols themselves but within their social contexts. In this way, I see that writing and drawing function as primary, experimental languages for young children. Furthermore, I do not propose that writing and drawing are the same but I do propose that their origins arise from similar communicative motivations. Children do make distinctions between them as the Bigfoot vignette will
illustrate and they feel motivating, communicative tensions. I attempt to begin to explore some of those relationships below.

Like most teachers who work with young children, I have received “notes” from children that include a drawing or perhaps a series of marks that represent either my name or their name or some other form of “writing.” In that context, children are communicating with me and with one another. They are not placing drawing and writing within a hierarchical relationship; as Dyson offers, their works are “multimedia affairs, interweavings of written words, spoken ones, and pictures” (1993, p. 4). This does not mean that children are unaware of qualitative differences between writing and “drawing” and other languages. They may also distinguish between what is “fake” or “real” writing, and they learn to manipulate these distinctions in situations. For example, a child once gave me a “dirty” note that he had written about a female classmate. When I asked him if he knew what the note meant, he told me that he did not know how to write. Several days later, swollen with guilt, he apologized and admitted that he did know…which I knew. At
the same time, children may be particularly sensitive that their efforts, even the “fake”
ones, be taken seriously.

**Bigfoot’s narrative velocity**

When I met Bigfoot, I was a participant observer in the studio of a Reggio-inspired school for young children, where several consistent groups of four- and five-year-old children were involved in a long-term project about Bigfoot. The project began when a child returned from a camping trip outside of the city. He had learned about the legend of Bigfoot, and enthusiastically shared this information with the class. Throughout the school year, Bigfoot, whose brood had expanded to include Medium Foot, Little Foot and Tiny Foot, populated children’s drawings and contaminated their play lives. The Bigfoot mythology intersected with other classroom play routines, and provided children with opportunities for pleasurable embellishment. One day, four children (two girls and two boys), the studio educator, and I embarked upon a trip around the school’s urban campus grounds to search for clues—to record traces of Bigfoot.

We met briefly in the school’s entryway before leaving. The studio educator provided the children with clipboards on which she had put pieces of white paper that were divided into four equal segments in which children could record their clues and observations, along with fine-tip Sharpie markers. In her role as a “dispenser of occasions” (Edwards, 1993, p. 162), she explained, “This is a surprise for you. You can use this paper to organize the clues.” Before we had even left the building, one of the boys drew a dot in one of the boxes and exclaimed, “Little Foot put out Little Foot
“bombs!” Another boy concluded aloud, “So, it’s a clue book, not a story.” The boys were motivated to look for more clues, but one of the girls was concerned. She explained, “They don’t know enough to write the clues down.” At this point, a boy interrupted her to explain, “We need to draw the clues.” His assurance provoked her next comment, “It’s not fair to us! They get to pick everything. It’s not fun! It’s not fair. You guys get to do everything!” The other girl intervened, “They can do the clues and we can do the story.” The first girl retorted, “We don’t know how to write that well,” and her friend generously offered, “I do! I can teach you!”

As soon as we left the school, one of the boy’s Sharpie cap fell off. He cried out, “Look what Medium Foot did,” as he held up the maimed marker. When they approached a fat, gnarly rock, his friend interrupted, “I found a clue! Medium foot was biting it!” They drew almost the same image, again a big dot, on their clue sheets. When we rounded the corner, we saw that yellow “caution” tape was posted around a small construction site. When the boys saw the tape, they exclaimed, “Medium Foot did it!” They then began to run off to “check the bus stop.” They ran with such urgency that we had to chase and catch them before they reached the busy urban thoroughfare. As one of the girls stopped to sit on the bench near the bus stop (Figure 14) she asked me, “How do you draw a bikini?”
This vignette can be read in several ways. I have purposefully chosen not to edit the vignette extensively to lead to a particular reading: I wanted to leave the seemingly “unrelated” parts intact. I realize that may seem to be a confusing choice. After reading one of these vignettes, a colleague of mine commented, “I don’t see what the children learned that made them so smart.” I empathize with the comment: within this work, I have tried to avoid “the typical adult tendency to try to interpret everything children do as some sort of learning experience” (Corsaro, 1992, p. 161). At the same time, I cannot avoid an after-the-fact interpretation, even as I try to punctuate my conclusions with consistent and systematic theoretical interventions. In this way, I think that it is crucial to include narrative non-sequiturs for two reasons. First, it is important to illustrate that any reflection can be read in multiple ways for multiple meanings. What made the children so
smart is a matter of interpretation; so is what they learned. Second, I want to begin to foreshadow the difference between reflection and documentation. The meaning is in the interpretation.

In this vignette, the children were motivated to sustain and embellish the Bigfoot mythology and its play routine in multiple ways. They were motivated to write, whether or not they could compose in official ways. Indeed, as the studio educator had hypothesized in her thoughtful anticipation of this occasion, the activity would provide them with a way to begin to translate and extend their already rich Bigfoot play into multiple languages. Throughout the experience, children dedicated drawings, graphic narratives that resembled comic books, paintings, and a life-size sculpture to Bigfoot. Like the griffin experience, the project reached one point of culmination when the children made Bigfoot “real.” The impulse that seemed to motivate their construction of Bigfoot was double: they were able to merge fantasy and reality—to make a life size kind of “prop” to sustain their play—and they were afforded an opportunity to involve others in their play as they presented Bigfoot as an installation at a school carnival (Figure 15).

Figure 15: The children’s life-size sculpture of Bigfoot.
In another reading, the vignette begins to map the multiple and contradictory social contexts of the Bigfoot mythology. It began with one child, the boy who had gone camping. In a way, the original protagonist of the story was closest to it, while other children wavered in and out of this world—engaged intently in some play episodes, distracted in others—“How do you draw a bikini?” The play-frame was porous, and the mythology was both sustainable and unpredictable. Although it developed from a foundational consensus, it was permeated both by other children’s presence and their augmentation and embellishment of the first storylines. For example, as they were drawing in the studio, one of the boys clarified and enlarged the scope of the story at the same time. Speaking rapidly, he told me: “Tiny Foot. He doesn’t live where Bigfoot lives. He lives in the forest. Tiny Foot is a grown-up. He was a toy that escaped from the house. Then they escaped from the mean kids’ house. He put him in a cage…he bit through his bars with his double sided tongue…” Another boy who was drawing with him at the time continued, “This is evil! And we’re trying to kill Medium Foot and Little Foot. Because they’re bad.” Even as they were explaining the storyline to me, they were embellishing it and borrowing freely from available sources of adult and child culture. Like Corsaro, by documenting the Bigfoot mythology, the studio educator was “documenting the children’s creative production of and participation in a shared peer culture” (1992, p. 160).

In another reading, it illustrates, like the griffin story above, how some of the children positioned Bigfoot as a protagonist in a type of “Superhero” play that included “good guys” and “bad guys.” Bigfoot, like the griffin, occupied a space somewhere in between adult-sanctioned child culture and the worlds of good guys and bad guys. Unlike
other superheroes, however, Bigfoot did not originate within the context of popular visual culture. The children hadn’t seen representations of Bigfoot. They invented the way he looked, and the way that he looked changed fluidly and remarkably. While some children drew him in a way that he resembled a large robot with a box-shaped head and six eyes, others drew him in a way that resembled a dragon or monster. When the children built him in three dimensions to present at the university carnival, they constructed him with a thick torso, a large, round head, six eyes, and human-like hands and feet. The teachers appropriately referred to the Bigfoot project as a “mythology,” or “a set of stories, traditions, and beliefs associated with a particular group of people.” (SOURCE) There was not one Bigfoot narrative, but many overlapping Bigfoot narratives authored collaboratively by a series of protagonists that were both stable and changeable. The stories that children created about Bigfoot helped them to establish traditions in their play. As Thompson and Bales (1991) explain, citing Dyson:

Dyson found that children’s relations to the symbolic worlds they created changed over time, becoming more objective as they learned to approach their work from multiple perspectives. First- and second-grade children began to enjoy their prerogatives as artists and writers: As they endowed the characters they created with personal histories, prospects, and predicaments, they became increasingly concerned with the forms of their representations (p. 48).

The Bigfoot mythology does bear a rather striking resemblance to the griffin stories that filled my studio nearly a year later. It further resembles the story of the “Most Powerful Transformer” that I watched unfold in my kindergarten art classroom nearly four years ago, and the experiences that I had working with a group of four- and five-
year-old children and “Art Cat,” a mascot in a museum program for children. The similarities between the ways in which children of similar ages but from divergent and diverse backgrounds in several areas of the country created and sustained these long-term narratives seemed to beg important questions about how children establish and maintain social structures within the child collective or “critical mass” (Dyson, 1993) of children. Why are children so motivated to create and sustain mythologies? What keeps their long-held interest? All the mythologies to which I refer lasted for the duration of the children’s experiences together and withstood both an influx and outflow of particular children. In this way, they both withstood change and maintained a certain status quo in mediating relationships. Like Corsaro (1992), I am interested in “what it is like to be or to have a friend in children’s social worlds, or how developing conceptions of friendship become embedded in peer culture” (p. 161). This is one of the things that children learned that made them so smart. Corsaro concludes, “Once children recognize that they have the ability to produce their own shared world without direct dependence on adults, the nature of the socialization process itself is transformed” (1992, p. 162).

Although I hesitate to make claims that children’s mythologies represent a “universal” narrative impulse, I am struck by the kinship that these stories share. Other educators and researchers who work with young children have presented accounts of children’s play that reveals their sustenance of particular play themes (Dyson, 1989, 1993, 1997b, 1999, 2003; Paley, 1986, 1990, 1992, 2004) and their attraction to themes that they can weave in and out of reality and fantasy. For example, Egan (1988) argues that part of children’s attraction to fantasy stems from their desire to play out abstract affective concepts. In addition, in a reflection of her study of girls’ comics that feature
working-class and orphan girls as heroines, Walkerdine (1997) explains that these narratives “actually operated with certain distancing devices, like removal in historical time or geographical location (to the nineteenth century, to the jungle, for example)” (p. 47). She argues “that the very factor which made these stories palatable was that they were removed from the reality of the girls’ lives, which, it is arguable, would have rendered them far too painful to cope with” (1997, p. 47). Her argument, coupled with Egan’s, is intriguing. She investigated comics, then considered “the worst, most offensive and stereotyped literature around” (p. 46). She read them herself and enjoyed reading them. She surmised, “If that was the case, I figured, there was either something severely wrong with me or wrong with the explanation. I plumped for the latter and set to work!” (p. 46). She investigated the comics in terms of girls’ desire. The comics presented the realities of the poverty in which the girls lived, but they offered the possibility of redemption. In them, the heroines assumed the guise of child “superheroes” (Dyson, 1997b). Perhaps there is a confluence between Egan’s idea that fantastic narratives draw children in because children can act out abstract affective concepts through them and Walkerdine’s idea that this (even slight) removal from the pain of reality helps children to reposition themselves as heroines if they act like them. If today’s most offensive fantastic narratives—video games perhaps—were considered from this point of view and from the perspective that children translate and re-work the storylines, then we could learn more about why fantasy is such a powerful force in children’s play and making lives.
Landscape as site: defamiliarizing everyday experience

Within the Bigfoot story, the school’s urban landscape plays a primary role. The children are comfortable within the city sounds and sites that surround their school, and they incorporate them and transform them in their fantasy play. In developing a site-specific pedagogy and a specific identity, the school melts into and distinguishes itself from its urban environment. Although fantasy play supported the project, it was anchored in the children’s immediate experiences. As Katz (1998) distinguishes,

Many US teachers prefer to introduce esoteric topics with which they hope to capture or excite the children’s interests, presumably under the assumption that everyday objects and events are uninteresting. However, the work of preschoolers in Reggio Emilia indicates that the processes of ‘unpacking’ or defamiliarizing everyday objects and events can be deeply meaningful, interesting, and instructive (p. 33).

Her words echo the impulse for reality in early childhood education espoused by other educational programs for young children. In particular, Katz’s ideas seem to reference Montessori’s conviction that children’s work must be real—connected to their daily experiences. For many contemporary children, those experiences come not only from participation in household or community life but also from participation in kinderculture through their consumption of popular media.

Former Reggio atelierista Piazza’s idea of a “rich normality” (Gandini et al, 2005, p. 134) supports Katz’s conclusions. He explains, “[Art] means the skill to ‘defamiliarize’ situations, daily events as well as objects” (as cited in Rabitti, 1992, p. 20). In this case,
defamiliarization implies a transformation—the kind of transformations that children make in play. In this kind of transformation, the meanings of situations or objects are not fixed. Children, and adults, can transform experiences and objects through their interpretation (Zurmuehlen, 1986). Often, these moves transform the real in the fantastic, as I have mentioned. The studio educator with whom I worked at the school was especially inspired by Piazza’s philosophical orientation. She had seen him speak about a soundscape project that he had made with children in the studio of La Villetta School in Reggio Emilia. Within that project, he and the children had recorded the sounds of the city that surrounded their school and had taken photographs of the sources of the sounds. For example, they had recorded the sound of a city bus and then had taken a picture of the city bus. The picture was affixed to a button that would play the sound when a child or an adult pushed it. In this way, they re-fashioned the soundscape of their city into a transformed composition. Although this is an aside, it is emblematic of the ways in which contemporary artistic impulses (like those of installation and of mapping) inform practice in Reggio Emilia.

In the early childhood programs that Katz mentions and in contemporary elementary schools, Rousseau’s child lingers. As in the 19th century, culture, cities, and progress threaten children’s innocence. In her discussion of children’s art, Korzenik cites Shapiro (who in turn, is citing Champfleury). Shapiro (1941) explains that children’s art, “offers the charm of innocence….They have escaped the progress of the cities” (1941, p. 179). Korzenik continues, “[Champfleury’s] child must survive by being independent of adult society” (1981, p. 22). Likewise, Duncum (1989) argues, “Such typical subjects as ‘When we went to visit the farm’ deny children’s experience of the world as conflict
ridden, contradictory, and violent” (p. 254). Furthermore, a curriculum that places emphasis upon “expanding horizons” (Egan, 1995) maintains a dichotomous antagonism between the everyday (children themselves, home, friends, and family) and “outward” concepts such as “other communities, the nation, and other nations” (p. 119). Egan does not see “home” and “away” as binary constructs but as poles of a vast continuum through which children actively mediate polarities. I believe that he would place “reality” and “fantasy” in a parallel relationship. Egan makes an important distinction: these choices are not either/or. Privileging the local over the global in curriculum for young children does not mean that either is unified or decontextualized. Rather, Egan argues for treading upon the territory in-between—whether that in-between is far away or close to home or fantasy and reality. This is the “defamiliarizing” of which I believe Piazza speaks—that tendency of children to actively blend as much as they distinguish between reality and fantasy. It does not mean simply a study of what surrounds children, but implies a transformation. As Zurmuehlen explains, this transformative interpretation purges objects and situations from sinking “in the everydayness of [their] own life” (Percy, 1960 as cited by Zurmuehlen, 1986, p. 34). The griffin project and the Bigfoot project would not have been nearly as pleasurable if they had been objective studies of a school mascot, Greek myths, or the myth of a Sasquatch. Egan himself even mentions the appeal of a Sasquatch as a creature who mediates between the human and animal, like Peter Rabbit (1995, p. 121). He explains, “Clearly something other than familiarity with everyday experiences makes narratives and their content engaging to children” (p. 119). He continues,

The key to what children can learn is not simply content associations with what they already know. We can observe medieval forests, galaxies long ago and far
away, witches, giants, and space warriors all becoming immediately and vividly relevant to children’s interests by embodying abstract affective concepts (p. 119-120).

Indeed if Bigfoot can survey his vast empire of a large, urban university campus in the American East with his six eyes, so, too, can a griffin fly out of the sky above an urban elementary school in the American Midwest. They are in good company!

Furthermore, Egan’s discussion of children’s apprehension of abstract concepts explains the narrative velocity with which these stories—collaborative mixtures of cultural stories and legends and children’s intimate fantasies—move. He explains that the tensions that are built into and that children manufacture within their stories—binary conflicts like “security/danger, courage/cowardice, cleverness/stupidity, and so on….are constantly deployed by children in making sense of the world and their experience” (1995, p. 119).

He continues, “What seems abstract to adults is the concept of anxiety, the verbal mark of an experience that we all as children have felt vividly” (1995, p. 120, original emphasis).

Although Egan argues for a restructuring of curriculum to appeal to children’s concerns, his insights are equally as revealing when we consider them in light of the “enticement that the drawing act holds for young people” (Wilson, 1976b, p. 45). As Wilson explains in his study of J.C. Holz’s superheroes, “Whether [JC] recognized it or not, it was the playlike aspect that made drawing so captivating” (1974, p. 2).

Separating children from the complex contexts in which they live is an impossible charge for most contemporary schools, one with a questionable goal. Nonetheless a sentiment seems to remain that children are in danger in many contemporary sites—those unacceptable sites produce unacceptable children. Those sites are often urban. I do not
intend that my statements here idealistically gloss over the very real dangers that children may experience in their living situations. That kind of nostalgic desire produces the naturalized assumptions that nature and natural materials are the best-suited to produce ideal children. There, Katz’s “esoteric” topics are neutral, not imbued with the same possibilities of corruption of the everyday worlds of children. It is not my intention to argue that natural materials and environments are not appropriate for children. These experiences can be meaningful. However, I am hopeful that I can present teaching, and therefore educational contexts and content, as inherently political. I hope to position the close-in site of children’s everyday worlds—the worlds of home, school, the backyard and playground, and social worlds— as appropriate sites in which to begin and build projects.

The Reggio approach is an exemplary model of this, as it embraces the density of contemporary urban life. Children live in the city, leave their “traces” upon it, and allow themselves to be seen. In turn, the city is one of the specific sites for learning and for children’s burgeoning sense of civic engagement. Adults do not shield children from the uncomfortable aspects of life and change in the city or the painful aspects of life within classrooms. They accept them, and encourage the children to ask questions and to cooperatively and collaboratively engage with them. Educators in Reggio have chosen this specific response to their perception of their own social and cultural needs and goals, and have included children in developing and extending these identities and goals. As an “attitude” or “mind set” (Gandini et al, 2005, p. 59), this approach provides a beginning point with which other schools can accept and question their own specificity, no matter their context.
Pirates of the Caribbean Means So Much to me: Sketchbooks and the Third Pedagogical Site in an Elementary School

In the early winter of last year, I introduced sketchbooks into my elementary art classes. We made the sketchbooks one or two grade levels at a time. We began with first grade, then second grade, and then third, fourth, and fifth grades. Our school district’s production department had donated a ream of 500 sheets of large blue paper. We folded these papers in half to make covers, and stuffed the insides with copy machine paper. We bound the books on a hand comb-binding machine we borrowed from the school’s volunteer office. Our self-binding made them versatile: we could remove, add, and rearrange pages. Many children did this throughout the year. On other occasions, they removed drawings to publicly present to friends and to me. Yet, other times they removed drawings to hide or to surreptitiously pass under tables and in the hallway. Once, a seven-year-old child gave me one of these contraband “notes,” (Figure 16) and the admonition, “Don’t open this ‘till after school and don’t feel bad for the robot.” As is the case in many schools, there was a regular, artistically regulated counter-culture. In that counter-culture, there was a “sense of ‘being in this together,’ as they reacted—as children do—to the constraints and regulations of the official school world” (Dyson, 1993, p. 13). In Corsaro’s (1992) view, “children’s active opposition to adult rules can lead to 1) extension of the peer culture and 2) contributions to the maintenance of the adult culture” (p. 173). Because of the particular permeability of the boundaries of the art studio, this marginal world continually leaked into our collective negotiations of meaning, and in Corsaro’s words lead to “social changes in that culture” (1992, p. 173).
I had introduced the sketchbooks for two reasons. First, I thought that they would mediate the spaces between the official school culture and unofficial child culture—Wilson’s (2005) “vast ‘territory’ containing many informal spaces outside of and beyond classrooms where kids….both construct their own visual cultural texts and consume the visual cultural texts made by others” (p. 18). My intention in opening this space was not only to “listen” to the children in my classroom but to also provide them with a space that was less-regulated than much of their school experience. Second, I was interested in supporting the “social work” (Dyson, 1993, p.11) of drawing and making in my classroom. Supported by research that addresses the social worlds of young children drawing together in both voluntary ways and in sketchbooks (Thompson & Bales, 1991; Thompson, 2005), I offered sketchbooks to both young and older children.

In the beginning, we did have to clarify the purpose of the sketchbooks. As first grader Jayden asked, “What are these for?” I responded, “You can draw or make what you would like to make in them.” He pressed, “Does it have to be a story?” I answered, “It doesn’t have to be a story, but it can be. It can be about what you would like for it to
be about. It can be about what’s important to you. It’s yours.” Satisfied, Jayden concluded in front of the class, “Well, then mine’s gonna be about *Pirates of the Caribbean*. *Pirates of the Caribbean* means so much to me. I love them!” He took great care in drawing a pirate flag and swords on his sketchbook cover, and he filled the book page by page, with only drawings but in a storied fashion. We had to add new paper to his book on the second day. When Jayden suddenly moved from school a few weeks later, his classmates were especially concerned that he was “allowed” to take his sketchbook with him. He did.

Each child responded to the sketchbooks differently. Some, like Jayden made “stories” about particular themes (Figure 17). These stories sometimes had words, sometimes they did not. Some made “designs” (Figure 19), while others drew different things on different days. Often, children’s peers—especially those at their tables— influenced their work. In some cases, it was easy to see where a child sat and who they sat with because of what they drew. In other cases, certain imagery spread rampantly across class and table boundaries and became especially emblematic of children’s sketchbook drawings. The “Super S” (Figure 18) was one such marker of affinity (New, 1998). It spread quickly because children continuously taught one another how to repeat it. The sketchbooks did begin to mediate the space between official and unofficial children’s culture but they also maintained that separation.
Figure 17: Six-year-old Jayden’s sketchbook became a book—a series of “stories” and drawings with a superhero theme.

Figure 18: A few children’s drawings of the Super S.

Figure 19: Seven-year-old Miguel’s book was a series of repetitive designs that resemble graffiti, even though he said he had not seen graffiti.
Questions of “inappropriateness” often arose with one child accusing another of making something “not OK for school.” Some children would even pre-qualify drawings that they thought might elicit my objection. Perhaps, as Tobin (1997) explains, they interpreted their sketchbook in this way:

Most often, when teachers tell students, “You can write about anything that you want to,” the students interpret this invitation to mean “anything you want to that I, a teacher and an adult, will consider appropriate for a school assignment” (p. 163)

First grader Dave did this often. As I visited with him at his table (as was my habit), he began to dramatize his latest drawing. He explained, “I’m making military weapons. But, it’s OK. They’re not violent.” I nodded and he continued, “They’re OK. It’s just some drawings of guns and swords and stuff but I’m good at drawing this. It’s not for real. It’s not violent. I’m an ARTIST!” (Figure 20) It seemed as if Dave thought that if he told me he was an “artist,” I would accept his drawings of weapons as art, and as “art” they were exempt from the censorship of the official school world. This is what he thought I wanted at that time. Negotiating projects and communicating with children is a process ripe with these types of miscommunications that cannot be “let go” but must be addressed and discussed. In another particularly witty incident, second grader Joaquin offered this explanation of why his tank was not “violent.” He declared, “It’s paper. It’s not real!” (Figure 21) On another occasion, fifth grader Dirck pushed his perception of the limits of school culture by making a three-dimensional paper gun. He gave it to me at the end of class. I got the message: it was not real (Figure 21). Finally, third grader Kotumba, an African student, gave me a drawing that clearly referenced his interest in Manga,
Japanimation and video games. He named his new character “Mr. Killer” and on the
drawing he wrote an apology to me about the character’s name.

Figure 20: Dave self-consciously qualified his violent drawings by emphasizing their
artistic attributes.

Figure 21: Ten-year-old Dirck’s sculptural gun.

By positioning their “inappropriate” drawing worlds as “not real” and a part of
their “fake lives” (Dyson, 1993, p. 1) the children were able to bypass the imposition of
official school culture (of which sketchbooks were a part as they were keenly aware,
despite my continued efforts to offer them this space) in a way that allowed them to continue drawing, playing, and making for pleasure. In Corsaro’s view (1992), this subversion served to maintain the “rules” of the adult culture. However, this negotiation was usually not effortless. I was in this, too, and it was difficult for me to reconcile my role. By opening this space, I did not realize that I was positioning the art studio in a subversive position within the school. Because our space was relatively isolated, we had a certain autonomy. At the same time, when we crossed this boundary into official school culture, the terrain was less certain. That happened one day during recess time. Some fourth and fifth grade boys were drawing scenes from their own mythologies (some derived from video games) during recess. Another teacher, one of my closest friends, questioned them about their violent drawings and they responded, “We can do it in art class.” In this way, the art studio became a specific site in and of itself, and a sometimes unruly force in the lives of children in the school. My permissive stance toward popular visual culture complicated my position of authority and my certainty about our curricular direction. As Grace and Tobin (1997) explain:

A second reason for the traditional exclusion of popular culture from the curriculum is the threat it poses to teacher supremacy. Teachers like to feel that they are standing on secured ground when it comes to curriculum. Students often know more than their teachers do about popular television shows, movies, and video games. In this domain, the children are the experts (p. 165).

Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) conclude:

These children are experts based on their experiential knowledge and their zeal. The idea, however, that children can be experts at anything when pitted against
the experience and expertise of adults is troubling, and is, in itself, a feature of age studies worthy of interrogation (p. 10).

Their statements are especially noteworthy to me as I reflect both upon the sketchbook experiences and the griffin experiences and the nuances of the third site in which both levitated. Within the context of sketchbooks, especially as they spilled into the children’s school and home lives outside of the art studio, children were the experts. Although I provided paper, pencils, markers, and pens, their drawings were essentially free from my intervention. At the most, for me as a teacher, they were artifacts from which I learned about the children and their worlds. However, as Grace and Tobin (1997) caution, “We are aware, however, that bringing popular culture into the official curriculum carries with it the danger that adults will colonize one of the last outposts of children’s culture” (p. 166). By opening this space, I did not attempt to colonize or co-opt the children’s culture. However, I cannot prove that my presence was neither authoritarian nor imperialist. I am an adult, a teacher, and a researcher: I knew what I was doing and why. In the case of the griffin project, I was attempting to work as a collaborator with the children to co-construct a kind of third, hybrid, culture that mediated the territory of the third site and that was both motivating and pleasurable. In doing so, I did exploit the children’s propensity toward narrative and I was motivated both by my research concerns and by my desire for the children to experience certain intellectual and educational outcomes. Perhaps that is one of the dangers of a teacher acting as a researcher in her school. My position was never neutral, and while I did share control with the children, I remained “in charge” both of the classroom and ultimately
(although I did work to create a permeable, negotiated curriculum) the course of the project.

Within the griffin project and other “negotiated” projects, the children and I shared expertise. While the children may have been “expert” at writing, drawing, and playing the griffin storylines, I provided them with the technical expertise to accomplish their desires. In one case, that was to make “real” griffins. In others (especially as I worked with older children) it was to make their ideas or photographs of themselves “cool.” In this way, the metaphor of the third site, like that of the image of the child, is not singular or ahistorical but is based within context.

In positioning the studio in a way inspired by the ateliers of Reggio Emilia, my understanding of social constructivist practice, and my interest in children’s voluntary making and made worlds, I had intended it to be subversive. As Malaguzzi (1998) explained, “It [the atelier] has always repaid us. It has, as desired, proved to be subversive—generating complexity and new tools for thought. It has allowed rich combinations and creative possibilities among the different (symbolic) languages of children” (p. 74). That was the kind of subversion that I had hoped for, along with “contaminations” (Davoli as cited in Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwall, 1995) between the different languages (graphic, written, digital) of making. However, our studio repaid me with a different kind of contamination—one of the official school culture.

The sketchbooks and the culture that they supported among children nurtured children’s affinity for the carnivalesque (Grace & Tobin, 2002) and their impetus to play in those ways that are “ideologically unsettling” (Dyson, 1997b) to adults. In several instances, drawing in sketchbooks—while often a quiet way to begin or end an art studio
meeting time—supported “war play” and “rough and tumble” play. This play spilled out from the pages of sketchbooks and under tables, out of chairs, and onto the carpet. In several cases, I was called upon to intervene. In each case, I felt discomfort both because of my awkward interventions and because I had opened this space within the classroom context that I had hoped to construct as “safe.” It was clear to me that I, too, was not fully comfortable with “violent” drawings, “war play” or rough and tumble play. It is important to note here that these play episodes involved not only younger children but older children. Some of those children were bigger and stronger than me—a further complication of my teaching identity and authority in the situation.

Children played in a variety of “unsettling” ways. I have already discussed the art-supply food fight, but children played in a military style (war games), played out and created scenes from video games, and played out scenes that they had seen or drawn from WWE: professional wrestling. As their teacher, I needed to decide upon my “approach” in responding to their play. Based upon my “intuitions” and my “attitude of research,” I chose “Option 4” as Levin and Carlsson (2006) explain it: to actively facilitate war play (p. 53). Of course, I did not find their book until after the fact. I only “knew,” as teachers do, that in order to begin to understand how the play was pleasurable for them, I would need to learn more about it. Levin and Carlsson continue, “Using this approach involves trying to figure out how children are using their play to work out feelings and ideas,” and “This approach is difficult for many of us to accept….It places extra demands on us to pay closer attention to the play than many of us would choose to do” (p. 54).

In their book, Levin and Carlsson (2006) explore the polarities in interpretations of “war play”: the developmental view that “play, including war play, is a primary
“vehicle through which children work on developmental issues” (p. 25, original emphasis) and the sociopolitical view that “children learn militaristic lessons about violence and conflict from their war play” (p. 31). Levin and Carlsson conclude that the division between these apparently oppositional views is not as crisp as adults might like. Like Duncum (1989), they reveal that children’s “violent pictures” address children’s social needs and reveal the contradictions between peace and violence in contemporary society. Duncum explains, “children’s depictions of violence should be seen as constitutive of a central social contradiction which involves simultaneously condemning and approving violence” (1989, p. 249). He argues that adults discomfort with and resistance to violence in drawings “appears to rest on purely sentimental grounds” (p.249). In my interpretation, those sentimental grounds support the image of the ideal, eternal child rather than the complicated, active child who is using influence from a variety of visual cultural and media sources to negotiate her own senses of meaning, power, and identity within a specific cultural and social context. Duncum quotes Feinberg (1973), who explains that children “select from the abundance of stimuli afforded them those subjects which, either because of their direct or indirect association, lend themselves to the examination of what is immediately relevant in terms of development and mastery” (p. 38).

Although Duncum was writing nearly twenty years ago, the concerns he outlines remain, especially with the perceived influx of increasingly violent video games and other media (television shows and toys) in young children’s culture. Children do play violent games and games intended for adults. Their preference for video media appears in their play art (Figure 22). As seven-year-old Tyler told me, “Yeah, I play M [M is the Mature rating]. Everybody plays M. It’s all fake.” Games earn an M rating for attributes
like “Blood and Gore,” “Partial Nudity,” “Language,” “Drugs,” and “Suggestive themes,” according to the Entertainment Software Rating Board. As Tyler qualifies without my solicitation, the games are “fake”—fantasy—and children can and do distinguish between fantasy and reality in their play and drawings. But, too, they admire fantasy in a way that inspires them to act in their “real” lives. The drawings, like war play and rough and tumble play, exist within a play frame—one with rules.

Figure 22: It is obvious that much of children’s play art consists of themes derived from video game playing experiences. However, children seem to incorporate these experiences and visual markers into their play art in the same way that they make graphic references to other important experiences.

As Freeman and Brown (2004) explain in their essay “Ban the Banning,” “Rough and tumble, like all play, exists within a play frame—it occurs in a special ‘what if’ space where ordinary rules governing acceptable interactions are suspended, replaced by the mutually agreed upon rules of the game” (p. 220). They continue, “In R & T players always wear a ‘play face’ which helps to create the frame in which behaviors that might ordinarily be interpreted as aggression are transformed into play” (p. 220). In their argument for an increased understanding of rough and tumble play they explain that “R & T is played among friends and is a major staging area or context for expressions of
friendship and caring” (p. 223). Although they are discussing rough and tumble play and not drawing play or war play, there are clear relationships but not clear distinctions between each of these types of play. In my classroom, they occurred in a fluid, dynamic relationship. Children, like fifth graders D’Angelo and Jonas, would draw or sculpt a WWE ring or draw their favorite wrestlers’ logos (Figure 23), which would lead to them talking about “moves,” which sometimes lead to them trying out moves on each other or making up new “moves” in the margins of classroom life or on the playground. Levin and Carlsson distinguish between “imitation” play and “creative” play. In “creative” play children extend the storylines and resolve conflicts through their selective reinterpretation of ideas from many kinds of media and experiences. D’Angelo and Jonas engaged in this kind of play and making, and solidified their friendship.

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Through his play drawings, too, Tyler was able to show his tablemates (and me) that he was “‘in the know’ regarding the latest and most prestigious cultural icons” (Thompson, 2006, p. 34), whether or not he was in actuality, playing an “M” game. I recall, myself, as a third grader “swearing” in front of my group of socially powerful
girlfriends that I had seen the “Freddie” movie. I had not seen it, but I had to appear to be “in the know.” It was the same year that I lied to my parents and shoved my Cabbage Patch premie inside my bookbag to transport the “banned” doll to the school playground. In my own “afterlife” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002) of childhood, I remember choosing quite fluidly from an amalgamation of contradictory identities. I easily looked the part of the innocent, pleasant, friendly, “good” girl. Like Mia, however, I played at being “bad” in my “fake” lives.

**Uglydolls and the Stickies: How can Popular Culture Mediate Difference?**

Children moving between cultures, as many contemporary children do, may find their efforts to establish friendships facilitated by the global marketing strategies of Disney, Mattel, and Nintendo. The abilities to enact appropriate story lines and to create convincing likenesses, to incorporate in visual representations the telling details, are potent sources of cultural capital, eagerly accumulated by children striving to establish their own identities and membership within the group (Thompson, 2006, p. 34)

Our sense of being part of a community is established, at least in part, by our shared knowledge of a set of well-known stories. Lacking that knowledge, a person is unable to participate fully in the social community to which he or she belongs (Jackson, 1995, p.5)

These videos [that children made] addressed the diversity and inequity of life….not in the modern liberal mode, which dictates that no one should be
laughed at or treated as different, but in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque mode, in which everyone is laughed at and differences are to be freely acknowledged. There is a fear in schools, and in society in general, that if differences and inequities are frankly acknowledged, the already frayed social fabric will be torn further apart (Grace & Tobin, 1997, p. 182)

Near the end of the school year, a new child joined our school. Donnie had been living in a refugee camp in Tanzania. He had never been in a school building before, and our English Language Learners (ELL) teacher explained in her memo that he came from an area with “virtually no resources.” His situation was not new for our school with its significant and supportive proportion of African families and its extensive ELL programming. Another relatively new child in Donnie’s class, Leo, also spoke Kirundi and could communicate with Donnie. A few weeks later, another Tanzanian child joined the class but moved away after only a few days. The two boys became fast friends as Leo acted as both Donnie’s ambassador and his partner in crime.

During Donnie’s first trip to the art studio, he seemed unintentionally physically aggressive. It was easy for me to see he was playing, but he climbed on top of another student and inadvertently frightened him. In that situation, I felt especially let-down by my extensive teaching preparations. I called for our assistant principal to come to console the child that was accidentally hurt. He was frustrated with me because I had failed to restrain Donnie. Several other children were frightened while others were angered by the injustice that they had witnessed. While Donnie continued to roll and play on the carpet, they pressed him in Kirundi by saying “Sit down! Sit down!”—the first words they knew from his language. Donnie fell back and hit his head on the carpet. He began to cry. As I
bent over to comfort him, he turned and looked up at me, laughing. Leo was laughing, too. He had known what had been happening all long. It had been a performance. It was the first of many interpersonal communicative misfires between Donnie, the children, and me, as we renegotiated our roles together.

With the support of his classroom teacher, school volunteers, our ELL teacher, and the children in his class, Donnie was welcomed into the folds of the child collective. In the art studio, he began to explore materials. He worked with markers (Figure 24), with paint, and with clay. He made a sketchbook. He had been accepted into a web of classroom relationships that had already begun a trajectory for a new project in the art studio. Several of Donnie’s classmates, including Leo, were in reading and math class together with me in the morning. We had recently read a book in which illustrations reminded the children of a how-to-draw book in their classroom. That book was How to Draw Uglydolls. George asked if he could bring the book to art studio time later in the day. He had a small spiral-bound notebook (about 2 ½ x 3 inches) clipped to his belt loop. In that small booklet, he had drawn a series of Ugly Dolls and had augmented them with his own characters and designs (Figure 25).
Knowing that artists Leo Horvath and Sun-Min Kim has created the *Uglydolls*, I had purchased one a few years before in the MOMA Shop. This was before the dolls, designer toys that are still handmade, were marketed to children, as they now are (Thompson, 2006, p. 37). I brought Bop’N’Beep with me to school the next day. Bop’N’Beep are best friends. One friend’s face is on each side of the doll. As Thompson (quoting a *New York Times Magazine* writer) explains, “Each character comes with a tag explaining the character’s back story and how they all ‘know’ one another….the Uglydoll
characterizations are important: ‘The stories, in the end, sell the dolls’” (Walker as cited in Thompson, 2006, pp. 37-8). The children’s classroom teacher allowed me to bring Bop’N’Beep in to share before school began, and the children were enthralled. George, one of the project’s main protagonists, showed me how he had continued to embellish his notebook with Ugly designs. Donnie took Bop’N’Beep and began to dance with them on the floor, hugging them and swaying back and forth with them. It was a watershed moment: Donnie realized that the representations that we had discussed and that so motivated his classmates were something real. He could now more fully participate in their kindercultural interchange. It is important to note here that the children had not seen a “real” Uglydoll until I brought “them” to school. Because of the nature of the school population (where federal programs defined more than fifty per cent of families as eligible for meal programs) much of children’s toy consumption was limited to representations of toys. The children saw toys in books at school (the Uglydolls book was a classroom book) and on cartoon and live-action programs. They did not bring toys with them to school often, but they often consumed media characters in a visual way, so drawing them was a way of possessing them—an equal-access way of participating in the media exchange and of “knowing” the most popular characters. As Zac, “a long-time fan of the Transformers” explains, “My friends and I would save ones from each year, committing the figures to memory, owning them all in our minds, even if we couldn’t in actuality” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002, p. 85). Perhaps, as Buckingham and Sefton-Green (2004) argue, these visual possessions are popular because they can be easily integrated into the routines of children’s everyday lives (p. 13). Although they were discussing Pokemon cards, any small media used for play can easily embellish children’s
routines in this way. Furthermore, the visual exchange was open to all the children in the school, regardless of children’s access to resources.

Later that day, when the children came to the art studio, George was carrying the *How to Draw Uglydolls* book. During our carpet-meeting, the children asked if it would be possible for us to make *Uglydolls*. Because of the way in which we had established the process of negotiating our projects, I thought that they might ask this, and I had hypothesized about several directions that the project could take. They were curious about how they were made, “Do you sew them?” I explained that we could sew them (I am still sewing one now as I write)! But, we would have to learn how to design the dolls and to make a pattern for sewing. We decided to move forward and to design our own dolls. However, the children decided that we could not call our dolls “*Uglydolls,*” but that we needed a new name. Several children who had only been marginally involved in launching the project came up with our new name, “The Stickies.” This name was derived from the children’s most controversial suggestion, “The Stinkies,” but the girls rendered it more “appropriate” for school.

The children began to draw their Stickies, and their designs mediated their relationship with *Uglydolls* in multiple ways. While some children’s patterns remained fairly accurate appropriations of the dolls to which they felt most close, other children elaborated on the designs to augment their own continuing narratives, while other children created the dolls as markers of affiliation in this specific classroom social world (Figure 26). The Stickies performed social work in varied ways, while the children were engaged in the social practices of consuming, appropriating, and transforming the Uglies into the Stickies: into something else entirely. Like the Bigfoot and griffin projects, the
Stickies project culminated in the children deciding to make a Stickie as a good-bye gift to their classroom and as a welcome gift to next year’s class of children. The apparent impulse of most of the groups of children with whom I have worked and about whom I have chosen to write is to leave traces, or legacies, an urge that demands further interrogation. I should disclose that I do not see it as coincidental that almost every group of children with whom I have worked has exercised a desire to make themselves known within their contexts. This legacy performs social work within the context of the school; through it, children begin to build social and group identities within the school culture. They make distinctions. In these cases, these identities were formed around either groups of friends (in the case of the Bigfoot mythology) or specific classes (in the case of the griffin project and the Stickies). As public elementary schools generally separate children into autonomous classes with little or no overlap, it is not surprising that the children began to form class-based identities and began to show anxiety about leaving these identities behind as they move into new classes. In their study of children in Saturday art school, Thompson and Bales (1991) found that children “formed communities within each class, stable ateliers devoted to common interests or transitory subcultures grounded in mutual admiration” (p. 45).
Furthermore, as I sensed the children shared these desires, my intervention provided opportunities for them to transform these impulses and desires into an action-based project. No doubt, as it is essential that I disclose my presence throughout this study, my own interest in installation and interactive and new media ways of making, supported the children both ideologically and technically as we undertook these projects. In a different context with a different teacher, the negotiated outcome would have differed. In this way, we were “doing us” within our classroom. The griffins and the Stickies, and my documentation of these projects, performed social work for me as well.

As I read over this story, I feel that it seems too simple, and I sense how incredibly difficult it is to discuss difference. Donnie’s example is the most obvious: he seems to be the most “different” child in the class, and he entered the class after identities and routines had been established collectively by the other children. For me, as a teacher and researcher, writing about Donnie as a focal child troubles contemporary constructions of diversity and difference in educational contexts. These constructions tend to over-designate a “different” child in a holistic way: one identity marker of “difference” renders
that child outside of the perception of a homogenous whole. I sense two primary problems with this reasoning. First, no child possesses a unitary, essential identity. Many of the children with whom I have worked, like those that Thompson (2006) describes, negotiate multiple cultural worlds and identities. In this way, Donnie was no different from the other children in the class, which is not to say that they were all the same. Second, their identities were constantly in flux, and were only individual within this context in their relationship to the particular whole of the class.

Furthermore, I do not intend to portray the ending of the story as “happy,” although the children did succeed in rebuilding their classroom community and it was stronger than it had been before. They were supported by an especially thoughtful and confident classroom teacher and by a group of families who were eager to support Donnie’s adjustment to our school. Even as I write, this, however it seems to me to sound like a gloss or a cliché; this is the least of my intentions. I did intend to show how the shared children’s culture of the classroom—that culture that exists somewhere between popular visual and consumer culture and official school culture—can help children to address and to mediate difference without erasing it. Tobin (2004) has addressed ways in which the globalization and localization of children’s media culture has perpetuated the popularity of Pokemon. In his specific case study—an economic and ideological analysis—he emphasizes ways in which Nintendo and Nintendo of America (NOA) have assessed children’s markets in the United States and in Asia in order to construct the Pokemon narrative in ways that appeal to the desires and nuances of each market. His work provides a template for researching ways in which a seemingly increasingly global corporate kinderculture threatens to universalize children’s experiences with media and
the ways in which children, acting as producers of culture, make this global culture local and specific. As Corsaro (1992) explains, “Even children’s experience with the media, however, is a cultural event in which information is coded and presented in ways consistent with the basic routines of particular cultures” (p. 170).

**Cheesetopia and the Ice Skating Pimp: Coolness, Older Children, and Fantasy Play**

Justin and Coleman are giggling. Coleman is holding a small piece of paper in his hand. He has drawn a man with pencil and colored him in with pink highlighter. He has cut carefully around the man’s body. The man wears a pink suit and has a feather in his hair (Figure 27). He’s wearing what appear to be ice-skates. Justin smiles widely, barely able to contain his laughter, as they hand the “gift” to me. They explain that they’ve cut it out so that I can tape it to the classroom computer. It will take its place among various cards, letters, my ID card from a fourth grade child’s school-wide “video” game (Figure 29), and the “Halloween costume for a pencil” that another fourth grader made for me. The punchline? It’s an ice-skating pimp. I know that pimps are cool in school. The word pimp appears frequently on children’s drawings (Figure 28). I have heard that one third grade child wrote “pimp” instead of his name on his spelling folder.
Figure 27: The ice-skating pimp.

Figure 28: A seven-year-old boy’s drawing of himself as a pimp.

Figure 29: My video game ID card.
Of course, Justin and Coleman knew that they were boundary-crossers. No doubt they calculated the risks involved in presenting me with the pimp: it was simultaneously a compliment (a marker of affiliation) and a taunt. They asserted their power and their coolness. I needed to decide: should I tape the pimp to my computer? I could send them to the office for this obvious violation of appropriate conduct. I could engage them in a discussion of what pimp really means—what it means other than the “cool guy” in rap videos—they might feel ashamed or they might further resist. I have used this example to illustrate two uneasy points: one, that for older children, play in art sometimes means play with what is cool in popular visual culture, and what is cool is often (from an adult’s or a teacher’s perspective) offensive or dangerous (I could lose my job!). Second, that interrogating the cool in older children’s fantasy play and making is no easy proposition. One often has to choose between banning or displaying pimps, as it goes. The cool has often been a site of cultural production, an interrogation. In those studies (Hebdige, 1979; McRobbie, 1999, 2000) cool was a site of struggle: of subversion, of resistance, and of power. In their study of children’s popular culture, Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) look at various sites of coolness—for example, junk food and children’s candies—as resistance. In each of these cases, cool and its companion, resistance, are aesthetic choices or tropes.

Although Hebdige’s and McRobbie’s studies focus on teenagers, cool functions in many of the same ways for young children. In their sense “of being in this together,” children exercise resistance and assert power through their transgression of boundaries and their subversion of the official school culture. Within this subsection, I consider ways in which the aesthetic or the appearance of the cool motivates and supports the social
work that older elementary children accomplish through making. Beyond this, I will begin to consider how older children consume and appropriate “coolness” in popular visual culture in their making and fantasy play. In doing this, I hope to place discussions of coolness, of making, and of play within the discourse of educational environments for elementary children.

Much literature in education devoted to play also addresses teachers of children in the early years. There is, understandably, an emphasis on ways in which young children learn through play and ways in which curricula can support play. Within my experience, however, and within this study, I would like to address how aspects of the Reggio approach can intersect with theories of older children’s visual productions and play. Within this subsection, I will share documentation from several project experiences involving collaborative groups of fourth and fifth grade children. Their collaborative work is especially revealing in a discussion of play and of the ways in which children communicate through and construct identity within their production and consumption of visual culture.

Throughout the course of several months, cooperative groups of fourth and fifth grade children created installations in the art studio. Various concerns motivated these installations or site-specific works. Play, and its compatriots—“laugh and parody,” “the fantastic and horrific,” “the grotesque body,” and “the forbidden” (Grace & Tobin, 1997, p.169-173)—was one of the primary motivating factors for several groups of children. Beyond this, sympathy, empathy, justice, and inclusion motivated groups of children in their making. Skilled appropriators, the older children could simultaneously exalt and subvert popular visual culture within their work. Ways in which they negotiated
collaborative tasks, divided labor, and reached consensus revealed the contradictory pressures of their social worlds.

*Cheesetopia* was a series of collaborative works made by a group of four fourth and fifth grade boys. The premise was simple: *Cheesetopia* is a world made from cheese puffs, from orange junk food. In its final third site form, *Cheestetopia* was a collaboratively hand built and glazed clay sculpture of a city overrun by cheese puffs driving SUVs and convertibles (Figure 30). Beyond this, *Cheesetopia* was a mania constructed by the initial group of boys but joined by other children. *Cheesetopia*, no pun intended, melted into the boundaries of official and unofficial school culture.

![Cheesetopia being realized in clay](image)

*Figure 30: Cheesetopia* being realized in clay.

As a narrative, *Cheesetopia* had considerable staying power and velocity. As a social movement, *Cheesetopia* (although essentially a parody, a farce) gained a considerable force of followers—of Cheese Puffs, or fanatics. Cheese Puffs invited to join *Cheesetopia* had to go through an application process, be approved by the governing
board of initial members, and sign a pledge (Figure 31). In this way, the “original” children were concerned with access to their play routine. This may have been due to their “recognition that too many participants threatened the social and communicative order of the ongoing play” (Corsaro, 1992, p. 172). Like the Empire City boys in Thompson and Bales (1991) study, “Excited and elliptical conversations surrounded their activity. Their group was exclusive by virtue of the specialized and somewhat graphic nature of their imagery” (p. 52).

Figure 31: Cheesetopia ephemera.
I found memos and other items intended to be distributed to members of the Cheese Puffs in my mailbox ready to be copied on the Xerox machine. I succumbed; I was curious to see how the Cheesetopia mythology would influence the official spaces of the art studio. In several ways, the older children’s play of Cheesetopia was quite similar to the other classroom mythologies that we experienced throughout the arc of the school year. It was initiated by a small group of children, spread throughout but contained within a particular class group, based upon a play between fantasy and reality, and perpetuated by children making the props for further and extended play.

In other ways, Cheesetopia modified a substrate regularly available (one of those available compositions or images) to children engaged within contemporary visual and popular culture. Familiar with the ideas of fads, fanaticism (there were self-professed Harry Potter and Pokemon “freaks,” and Yu-Gi-Oh! players within these groups of children), fan clubs, and fan sites, the children constructed their own “fad” or exclusive club upon this substrate (Figure 32). In other ways, the ways in which the boys promoted Cheesetopia resembled the global marketing strategies of companies like Disney and Nintendo. They advertised Cheesetopia and offered tie-ins for those whom they converted. They provided opportunities for the children within their class to take part in this new media culture: for our final art studio meeting of the year, we all ate cheese puffs together. Like Grace and Tobin (1997), I found “that they used this medium to play with the meanings and messages of the culture rather than absorbing them uncritically” (p. 165). While Grace and Tobin are specifically discussing ways in which elementary children work with video production, I find their statement can be more generally applicable to ways in which children respond to and make objects in the various media to
which they have access. Within the framework of Cheesetopia, the children wrote, drafted documents, made drawings, and made a sculpture within the context of and with the materials available in our art studio. The pleasure that they gained in the narrative of Cheesetopia seems to easily permeate these boundaries: had more materials or time been available to the children, their play might have moved in other directions and through other media as well. In this sense, media did mediate the narrative of Cheesetopia.

Cheesetopia was not an isolated kind of narrative within the art studio. Although I have chosen to relate it here because it is particularly rich and emblematic of the issues that I hope to address, other children sustained similar kinds of narratives. Cheesetopia differs in one important respect, however; it was overt. The humor with which the children sustained the situation and its status as a kind of parody allowed it to be both subversive and acceptable in the school context. Indeed, both the children’s classroom

Figure 32: Harry Potter themes abounded in sketchbooks. They were rarely isolated—taken on only by children invested in the narrative over time.

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teacher and I found it intriguing. We actively shared our control of the situation with the children; we supported their sustained play. Like the contemporary teachers whom Corsaro (1992) describes, we changed our curriculum in accordance with children’s interests and motivations.

But, as Wilson (1976) has eloquently revealed, “it will be shown later how adept children are at hiding from adults some of their more interesting work” (p. 46). Other narratives, like *Cheesetopia* and even portions of *Cheesetopia* itself, were hidden from adults within the school. Despite their subaltern status and the children’s well-developed “concealment strategies” (Corsaro, 1992, p. 173), these narratives seemed to perform the same kind of social work for children and were based in the same ways on children’s interpretations of media events, characters, and compositional strategies. The children whom I described in the opening vignette of this study, Coleman and Justin, were especially concerned with coolness and with popularity. In the margins of their classroom, they made books. Their classroom teacher, in much the same way in which Dyson describes the teachers with whom she worked, was intently interested in how children come to construct knowledge in social contexts as writers. She provided children with ample time to compose their stories. She and I collaborated often, and we generally spent much of our time after school discussing the children’s stories—especially the uncomfortable aspects of their writing and making. Because we were neighbors and philosophical conspirators (our classrooms were right next to one another’s and spilled into one another’s space), we were both often involved in facilitating the children’s writing and making. On several occasions, the children would write or compose stories in their home classroom and come to the art studio to video record their performances. In
one case, a group of fourth and fifth grade boys formed a band and composed their own songs. The children in the band were from White, African-American, African, and Iraqi backgrounds: reflective of the diversity of our school. The band that they formed was a barbershop quintet and they say *a capella* doo-wop songs about bubblegum and the USA. As is the case with Donnie’s story, the children’s collaborative construction of hybrid cultures seemed to mediate their personal differences.

Despite the generous space that their classroom teacher and I afforded the children to compose within third spaces, they continued to compose covertly and to pilfer classroom materials to support their compositions. Flip books (animation books) and “books” were their primary currency. Homemade books (Figure 33) could be rude and crude, and positioned children who were perceived to be less socially successful as the butt of in-jokes. The narrative impulse and pleasure in fantasy and play was residual but the children enhanced the subversive possibilities of the social work their compositions performed: they professed coolness and supported popularity.
In their study of children’s perceptions of popular peers, LaFontana and Cillessen (2002) explain that children “use these perceptions or social categories to help interpret social situations and guide their behavior in social situations” (p. 635). Within this context, children adjust their behaviors—and thus, their making—to negotiate, change, or maintain their place or their perception of their place within the child collective.

LaFontana and Cillessen explain that “children become increasingly concerned with their own peer status and, as a result, increasingly susceptible to peer influence” (2002, p. 635). Their statement reveals the anxieties that culture and increased social competence impose upon Rousseau’s lingering child within the public school. Not only does “adult” culture corrupt the innocent: peer culture is even more insidious and difficult to regulate. As LaFontana and Cillessen show within the results of their study, while “actual” popularity correlates with prosocial behaviors, perceived popularity “a
reputation of peer popularity,” was “linked with prosocial as well as aggressive or disruptive behaviors” (p. 636). My assumption is that these disruptive behaviors can be overt or tacit: Children’s hidden productions are motivated in some cases by the desire to be “cool,” to be disruptive or subversive, and the desire to “play,” like Mia and me, at “being bad.” In this way, children’s making helps them to achieve a level of social competence. As LaFontana and Cillessen (2002) conclude, although “social competence may be viewed as being prosocial….social competence may be seen as the ability to achieve one’s goals in social settings” (p. 645). In their study of African-American children’s perceptions of popularity, Xie, Li, Boucher, Hutchins, and Cairns (2006) explain, “the peer social network is a powerful context in which children observe their peers’ social behaviors and use these perceptions to guide their own behavior” (p. 599).

The children’s fantasy play and making in multiple media seem to fulfill their desire to participate in the multiple social worlds and peer contexts of the classroom. It also seems to fulfill a personal need to engage pleasurably in fantasy play. Egan’s (1988) study informs my inclusion of this section. He explains,

My purpose here, however, is not to praise children’s fantasy, nor, obviously, to bury it, and there seems to survive an equally regrettable tendency in some to sentimentalize it and try to preserve it in children and even offer it as a model for adult thought. Nor do I want to seem to be suggesting that the kinds of fantasy stories and characters common in Western middle-class children’s literature and talk are natural engagements for the young mind (p. 15).

Like Egan, I believe that children’s desires to engage in fantasy play and making are socially constructed and fulfill social needs and that children scaffold one another’s
making as they move toward both increased fluency in social forms and increased participation in social worlds.

The TV of All the Nation: Fantasy Play, New Media Play and Learning

Several children together, “Garrison, Garrison, Garrison!”

Susanne, “Oh no! It’s about to explode in 5-4-3-2-1!” (She is talking into an “announcers” microphone that she has fashioned from twisted wire.)

Garrison, “I fixed it!” (He’s holding up an outstretched “antenna” wire). “I fixed it, we’re OK.” (He looks at me reassuringly as he says this). “We’re OK!”

He continues, “It didn’t explode! That means the channels are back on track! Yep, wait!”

Sarah interrupts me—she wants to show me the puppy prototypes she has made from “practice” clay. She has succeeded in making each one stand on four legs of equal size. We carefully save them on my desk to refer to when we make the “real” puppies.

Several children, “What one [channel]?”

Michelle, “This one! This one’s got the movie! Lookie! This one’s got the movie, lookee!” She tries to catch both Garrison and Ellie’s attention but Ellie is “singing in her microphone” while Garrison and Sharif are diligently repairing the TV wires.

Several children, “We already got this channel!”

Garrison, “Looks like we’ve got TV around the nation!”
Natalia, “No we don’t! Attach this to this!”

Garrison, “We did it!” (Again, he looks at me; this time he is proud! These acknowledging “looks” have become a part of the expectation that I might be taping the children’s play).

Several children together, “No! No! One minute! One minute guys! We got TV around the nation!”

Garrison, “10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1—I think we got it! It’s pretty easy!”

Sharif, “I’m going under!” (He swoops “under” the TV—under the art table—to reassess the situation with the wires). Ellie climbs up on top of a chair. She sees me and sits down safely. Even as a playmate, I am still the teacher.

Michelle, “Time’s up! Time’s up! One more minute!” (The children noticed that the art class period is nearly over…they know it will soon be time to clean up and to move back into reality. This pressure increases their sense of urgency—they incorporate it into their play—they must finish the TV).

I have transcribed the above play episode from a class of first grade children who were playing with materials in the art studio. In this case, the children were playing with a package of *Twistees* sculpture wire that I had stored in a plastic bin with a snap-on lid. The wire was one of the “centers” that we used frequently in the studio. Based upon both my interpretations of how children might make with materials and children’s requests, we had amassed various centers with which children could make in the studio. Making derived from centers was generally collaborative and usually temporary: The children knew that they would need to recycle the materials to continue the play on a future day. In this way, most were not particularly concerned with either ownership (since most
things were made collaboratively) or with keeping what they had made. The process of making, and the process of documenting this making, was important to us together as we negotiated meanings.

**Children as Makers in New Media**

Historically, research about children’s making in schools has centered upon a discussion of children’s graphic media, especially their drawings. Children’s drawings have generally been easy to solicit and collect, and readily available in settings (such as schools and homes) where children make.

Despite this emphasis on children’s graphic media—children’s drawings are still a primary source of data for me in my classroom work and a primary language through which children communicate, plan, and perform “social work”—contemporary theorists in the field of art education have sought to call attention to children’s making in other media (Tavin, personal communication, November 15, 2004). Within this chapter, and further within Chapter Three, I will examine episodes of children’s making in new media—specifically digital photography, altered digital photography, and assemblage. In doing so, I will begin to position this making as accomplishing social work in the same sense as children’s drawings. Furthermore, looking at children’s making in new media questions assumptions about the trajectory and stages or phases of children’s artistic development. In the recent past, several studies have examined children at work in media other than graphic media. Grace and Tobin (1997, 2002) considered how
children’s video productions transgress taken-for-granted classroom authority and power boundaries. They explain:

We argue that video production opens up a space where students can play with the boundaries of language and ideology and enjoy transgressive collective pleasures. This boundary-crossing and pleasure-getting activity by the children pushes teachers to think about their authority in new ways (1997, p. 161).

Grace and Tobin position children as discriminating consumers, and more importantly for this study, as discerning producers of visual culture. They continue, “Other media education scholars have shown that children are sophisticated media viewers” but that “a narrow, often distorted, and limited view of children’s interest in and knowledge about media persists” (1997, p. 165). Their position meets Mitchell and Reid-Walsh’s assertion that:

Other cultural critics, notably John Fiske (1987, 1993) argue for a more potent position for the viewer of popular culture, one that allows agency: the “user” of popular culture can construct meanings that are in opposition to, or which resist, the status quo (2002, p. 2).

Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) continue, “In being considered to be members of an audience, and for this to be seen as a social practice, not a fixed state, children as viewers are recognized as possessing the ability to make meaning” (p. 2). They conclude, citing Henry Jenkins, that “the close emotional relationship between popular culture (television) fans and their material enables them to feel free to criticize, consume, and remake texts” (p. 2).
For the purposes of this study, I would like to focus on children’s production of and remaking of texts—whether they take those texts directly from popular culture or base their own unique texts upon ideas from popular culture. I will consider ways in which children compose from “available images” influenced by their observations of adult art (in this case, visual culture made by adults for both adults and children) and augment these compositions with their invented images. These are the spaces in which children can make significant contributions to research about their visual productions.

However, it is equally as important to emphasize that while this is an essential point for further inquiry—an “entry point” (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002) to understanding children and childhood—these are the experiences of Minority world (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999) children. In classrooms much like those in which I have worked with children, children may have limited access to experiences with digital and video media. In our studio, we did not have the capacity to make large-scale video productions because we did not have access to the necessary equipment (for example, a video camera). We did, however, have a small digital camera (my own) that we could use to make both digital images and record shorter video. Despite this, we did not have software that allowed us to alter images or to view our video outside of the view window of the camera. Therefore, for larger projects that required photo manipulation, we used software templates from the internet, like Flickr toys. Had I (as their teacher) not had access to the tremendous support of grants from the school district foundation and the generous support from families, even this level of access might not have been possible. Additionally, I had intellectual and emotional support from my university affiliation not afforded to a teacher who was not also a full-time graduate student. Indeed, except for my
very first year as I teacher, I have been a graduate student as I have taught. In this way, I have been researching my teaching for the last five years.

When I first proposed to fourth and fifth grade students that we could make video productions, they were not interested! It is important to note that when working in a negotiated, project approach, many provocations fail—all proposals need to be negotiated and re-negotiated. Beyond that, some projects failed, or we had to postpone them to solve problems, investigate new ideas, or acquire new skills. There was often more than one point of frustration—a “dark point” (Krakowski, personal communication, March 15, 2007)—within the context of the project. These frustrations ranged from the context of working without a definite plan—the crisis of decision-making—to negotiating ownership of collaboratively made work. Both the children and I experienced this. It was especially challenging for me in instances when I knew that I could easily intervene to right the course of the children’s ideas. I struggled to hold myself back and to lead the children to make their own decisions, even as I remained in “umbrella” control of the project. I resisted staying more than a few steps ahead of them to lead them to easy answers and to make my own teaching situation more comfortable. I teetered between feeling like a puppet-master and an ineffective instructional dilettante. Neither of these polarized characterizations was entirely apropos: I had to conscientiously cultivate an attraction toward ambivalence.

Throughout our experiences in the studio, we used technology in various forms. Our uses of technology were not limited to using new media in a strict interpretation of that idea: We used old technology, like the overhead projector and transparencies, in ways that shared conceptual foundations with new media art. For example, in many
instances, we used the overhead project to transform the environment of the studio. As I described, we projected griffin scenes onto the walls and ceilings of the studio. In addition, we used the overhead projector as a light table to trace images. Finally, we projected images that we made on transparencies and on the overhead. This last idea proved to spark a project in which groups of fourth and fifth grade children made narrative silhouettes from scenes that they acted out and photographed with a digital camera. In their silhouette stories, video games, movies, musicals, sporting events and practices (like hockey, fishing, and karate) and the carnivalesque intersected with their interest in iPod commercials to provoke the idea of making iPod-like silhouettes (Figure 34) by tracing digitally altered photographs. Like the photography students Mitchell and Reid-Walsh describe, they “‘inserted’ themselves and their photographs into popular television and film narratives. They conclude that it is the “dialogic play between the subjective self, and the social self” (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, p. 106) “that is important” (p. 103).
As was the case with the griffin project, we “caught” the idea of the children’s interests in iPods. iPods were a popular contraband item to have at school: Most children did not have “real” iPods but some smuggled “fake” iPods to school to show to others and others made iPods and cell phones from paper (Figure 36) and from erasers. I coupled this interest in the iPod commercials with the children’s interest to make and act out scenes in their play. I have already shared how D’Angelo and Jonas acted out scenes from WWE wrestling in school and on the playground. I observed this impulse regularly.

Figure 34: Some of children’s silhouette and altered digital photography stories. On the top, girls try to form their bodies into a star. On the bottom, boys act out a scene from *Pokemon*.
in the children’s play: Some of the most popular scenes to act out or embellish were from *American Idol®* and Disney’s *High School Musical®* and *Suite Life of Zack and Cody®* (Figure 35).

Figure 35: A cut paper installation of the Tipton Hotel (with red carpet) from the *Suite Life of Zack and Cody®*.

Figure 36: A nine-year-old student’s cell phone made from paper. The outside (shown at right) has a Motorola® logo. The phone opens and folds.
When we began the project, children worked in groups to make scenes to photograph. Those groups, formed early on in the school year, were based upon friendships and were relatively stable: Most of the children worked in the same groups on later projects. *Cheesetopia* was one of these examples. So was SOCK JR., a group that made its name from the members’ initials. As I will discuss, the members of SOCK JR. broke away from the silhouette idea of the initial photography project to make a series of fantastic narratives centered on their escape from the school (Figure 37).

![Figure 37: SOCK JR’s escape from the school. In this altered photo, the children pretend to fall down the stairs.](image)

After discussing their narrative ideas, groups of children acted them out and photographed them. At this point, although I had noticed their interest in the iPod silhouette, we had not yet introduced this idea. One of the children actually brought it up while we were making the photographs. We then had to figure out how to do it!
Because we did not have access to photo editing software at school, I took the photographs home and enhanced their edges on Photoshop. I brought the enhanced photos back to school and the children traced around them (using windows and overheads) to make silhouettes. By this time, we had discussed the idea of silhouette and had also looked at Kara Walker’s silhouette installations.

As was the case with the other projects we began, the silhouette project “invaded” (Malaguzzi as cited by Gandini et al, 2005) the school. Children came to the studio at all times with new ideas for “silhouettes.” Despite this, we never actually made most of the silhouettes! It seemed that the process of transcribing stories into the photographs and then into drawings was what motivated the children. This was the case with the members of SOCK JR, who requested that we spend time after school (the school needed to be empty) to take the series of photographs that would depict what happened when the school suddenly lost gravity. They arranged the chairs on the floor and pretended like they had fallen; they were pushed through the art studio door and down the stairs (they arranged themselves on the stairs—perhaps this is one of the points that silhouettes did not fulfill as the children were concerned with their facial expressions); they flew down the hallway, and escaped through the back door.

Throughout the rest of the school year, children continued to express a desire to make stories collaboratively through visual means. While they shared concerns for representation (for example, in the cases of clay stories like Cheesetopia and SOCK JR’s Dave Pearl race car assemblage (Figure 38)), they also shared concerns with choreography, composition, and the ways in which an audience would receive and interact with their works.
These experiences suggest that children’s making in multiple media supports an interpretive, reproductive assessment of their development in visual languages. While children may develop graphically in generalizable ways, an exclusive emphasis on only children’s graphic development limits an understanding of the ways in which they develop communicative fluency in many media and multiple ways when their concern is not only for realistic representation, but also for the communicative potential and meaning of their works.

Figure 38: Members of SOCK JR. make Dave Pearl’s race car from clay.
Chapter Four

Building a Theory of Visual Language

Positioning Children’s Making as “Social Work” (Dyson, 1993, p.11)

The purpose of this chapter is three-fold. First, I hope to contribute to theories of children’s visual productions that describe how children communicate and designate multiple meaning through visual means. This is based in analyses of relationships between children’s development and motivation in making. Second, I will attempt to illustrate how theories of visual production guide practice and theory in Reggio Emilia, and the implications these theories have for early childhood and art educators. Third, I would like to contribute to a theory of making in the visual languages that includes not only the graphic languages but also emerging languages, like digital languages and new media. Within that theory, I believe that visual realism is not the only end-point of children’s artistic development but that children continue to strive for communicative fluency and continued development though their use of multiple culturally coded languages in complex social and intellectual contexts. I hope to contribute to Wilson’s (1970) position that children’s visual productions are not a universal language limited to a “series of moves toward a greater correspondence between things in drawings and the outside world,” but that children progress on multiple pathways toward “a culturally specific art language having great communicative power” (pp. 6-7).
In the classroom stories included in the last section, I intended to allude to an idea that visual realism is one of many goals that children pursue for communicative ends. In some instances, a griffin must be that particular griffin. He is identifiable by his unique possession of distinct features: eagle’s wings, a lion’s face, obvious muscular structure, and a “spiked” mane. Like other figures who feature prominently in contemporary children’s works and worlds—for example, *Sponge Bob*—he needs to be identified readily by the work’s varied audiences (Figure 39). Children may have a great deal to gain socially through their accuracy and virtuosity. In her Bakhtinian analysis, Dyson (1993) explains that children’s productions accomplish “social work,” (p. 11). The type of social work that the production does is dependent upon the author’s goals, her skills, and her audience(s) at any one historical moment. Dyson explains:

![Figure 39: Sponge Bob Square Pants®](image-url)
they ‘temporarily crystallize a network of relations’ between themselves and other people, as Morson (1986, p.89) explains; those relations include the author’s sense of (a) her or his power and status vis-à-vis others, (b) the purposes that have brought them together, (c) the topic of their discourse, and (d) the history of other conversations, other dialogues, they have had (1993, p.10).

In this way, a child asserts and cements her identity through the visible trace of her relationships. Although Dyson and Morson are discussing writing and speech, respectively, their theses are central to my interpretation of the ways in which I have seen making function within social spaces in elementary and early childhood classrooms. While Dyson’s main concern is “writing,” she does not limit her analyses to children’s written work but rather to their way of composing in a variety of “languages,” including visual language, speech, written language, song, and dramatic performance. Like Gillen and Hall (2003), she does not draw boundaries between multiple modes of making. In her many series of classroom observations in diverse, urban, school contexts quite similar to my most recent, she not only considers children’s “official writing” as part of their literacy learning, but also their “unofficial” or “play” writing. In this way, she composes portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) of individual children and groups of children as they “grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (Vygotsky as cited in Dyson, 1993, p. 39) by learning to compose and perform with language. As it facilitates performance, children’s mark making accomplishes social work as a social practice. In his discussion of children’s oral story narratives, Sutton-Smith (1995) sees the attention that children accrue from performing as motivational. He explains, “My own theory is that they tell such stories (when allowed) because they are the kind of stories
that make for an arresting performance” (p. 81). He continues “It looks very much as if they put these disequilibrating elements into stories told to permissive peers or adults in order to startle, or at least capture attention” (p. 81). His words support Tobin and Grace’s (1997) explanation of children’s actions when they viewed their video productions. They describe a “festive moment…formed in relation to us, the authority figures, and fueled by the knowledge that classroom norms have been transgressed” (p. 160). They conclude, “Clearly, the children’s sense of audience influenced the type of videos they produced. When the intended viewers included parents, relatives, or other community members, their videos took on quite different forms” (1997, p. 167). These examples describe ways in which children both negotiate contradictory social worlds and make to gain acceptance into the multiple intellectual lives that surround them.

Children’s goals of visual realism in graphic languages are not only linked to the social contexts of their making but also to the ease with which they can learn to copy pertinent features of their heroes and heroines. It is probably easier for children to draw and sculpt Sponge Bob (indeed, I have watched them teach one another), Bender, Token, the AOL man, or the G Unit logo than 50 Cent or Hannah Montana (Figure 40, Figure 42, Figure 41). In the same way, it might be easier for a small child to write “cat” instead of writing “gray tabby kitten,” even though they may know and be able to talk about this important detail about their pet. 50 Cent, a real person, sometimes needs only identified by his name on a drawing or by wearing the $ necklaces that help him to represent himself as a rapper. Of course, being a rapper is only part of Curtis James Jackson’s identity: 50 Cent is his stage name. Like many of the characters who inspire children’s imagination, his existence as 50 implies a transformation. The details of this
transformation, the markers of this identity, seem to motivate children’s accuracy in representations of characters from multiple media sources. As Thompson (2006) explains,

Figure 40: Token from *South Park®* as sculpted by a ten-year-old boy. The AOL man as drawn by a seven-year-old boy.

Figure 41: Drawings of 50 Cent.
Even the most rudimentary representations of characters drawn from media sources attest to the artist’s attempt to specify the unique attributes of that particular subject, to capture the distinguishing physical traits and accoutrements of dress, cuisine, and weaponry….Homages of this sort betray an unexpected competence in the observation and depiction of relevant details, even as they follow an expected evolutionary sequence from early depictions of figures standing alone against an undifferentiated ground toward an increasing interest in portraying action and interactions within settings that are more fully described (p. 36).

Here, movement toward greater realism is simultaneously a movement toward greater communicative fluency. In this way, visual realism is not necessary a goal in and of itself but a necessary context for communicative success and social participation.

Figure 42: Bender from the defunct adult cartoon *Futurama®* as sculpted by an eight-year-old boy and a ten-year-old boy.
When children draw me, for example, they focus on one or more of my most “defining” characteristics—for example, my long blonde hair (which I usually wear in a ponytail when I teach), my glasses, and my clothes. From their representations of me (Figure 43), it is obvious not only that they are looking carefully but also that they are re-casting me into a cuter version of myself. I accept their renditions of me as both markers of affiliation and affection. Just the same, children do not always draw their teachers or their classmates in such flattering ways. This is where the cute and the cool (Cross, 2004) diverge. While those drawings demand a certain level of precision, children’s motivations for making are many. The audience must recognize the person and the situation and the author’s intent might be funny, hurtful, or both. In school, children, too, are learning that they can manipulate the act of drawing and of making to solicit different desired responses and to actively manage and change their social positions. So, any one drawing that child makes communicates in multiple ways to varied audiences at any given time. Additionally, separating the drawing from its initial, performative context, creates opportunities for misinterpretation as Thompson (2002) explains, “It is a temptation difficult to resist to interpret a child's drawing too quickly and too summarily” (p. ) and for viewers to construct multiple meanings that the author did not intend.
Further, Thompson’s (2006) statement reveals a significant aspect of the relationship between motivation, context, and development in children’s making. As children learn and gain social and cultural capital through their depictions, they are further motivated to make their drawings even more precise. Thompson and Bales (1991) share Korzenik’s (1973-74) description of this development of visual fluency:

Korzenik (1973-74) concluded that “children seem to learn that pictorial communication is contingent on what is visible on the paper. They appear to learn to inhibit any extraneous behavior that is outside the graphic medium” (p. 20). Children appear to “learn the rules of representation through the practice of drawing in the social context” (p. 17). As children speak to each other, they learn to create images that speak for themselves. As they confront incomprehension, they modify their drawings to allow the graphic medium to carry their meaning, unassisted, to anonymous viewers (pp. 47-48, original emphasis).

Children develop in their ability to make both more accurate and visually realistic drawings that communicate more fluently in their social words. When images begin to
carry full meaning on their own, there is less need for authors to augment the circumstances of their creation with public narrative. In this way, just as Vygotsky explained that learning leads development so, motivation, too, leads learning, which leads development. This development, then, is not necessarily linear, but productive and reproductive in the sense that Corsaro (1992) describes. With increased communicative fluency, children do join in the intellectual and social life that surrounds them. To return to Dyson’s (1997b) metaphor, representations are their “tickets” to play. These representations are a social practice and they perform social work.

In these examples, researchers and I have referred primarily to children’s “voluntary” artworks. They are made in school with a choice of school materials, but without the intervention of drawing instruction. No doubt, were I to work with children to help them to draw 50 cent more realistically (something that I have been asked to do—something that I had to teach myself to do), their drawings might rely on more elaborate, and more specific characteristics of 50. Their drawings might look like him. But, this is not necessarily the children’s primary goal in drawing him, although it may well develop into a goal for them. Their goals are participation and communication in the peer culture, the “child collective,” that surrounds and supports them within the school. Within that goal of participation, they “work to create more intimate, more particular worlds that capture some aspect of the experiences [they] share with other people” (Dyson, 1993, p.11). As children negotiate and shuffle places within these child-size social spheres, they would probably neither intend nor imagine that their making might interest their teacher so profoundly! And, of course, my interest raises another problem that I will address more thoroughly in Chapter Four: that of the anxious intersections between observation,
understanding, and surveillance and the uneasy spaces that adult’s and children’s culture collectively occupy.

Beyond children’s voluntary works—those that frequent sketchbook pages, notes passed slyly in class, and even vandalism—there are the visual productions that children make for the projects we undertake in the “permeable” (Dyson, 1993), official space of the art studio. These are the productions that waiver somewhere in the third site, the in-between of official and unofficial school culture. They accomplish a different kind of “social work.” That work allows children to experience communicating in the official language of artistic or visual discourse. They are learning to communicate in the larger context of visual production and communication. In doing so, they have the opportunity to present their ideas in a form that is received beyond the scope of friends—they share their productions with the other children in the school who were not directly involved with the project, with their families and teachers, and in the case of gallery exhibitions, with the public. In each of these cases, the documentation that accompanies children’s work also performs “social work” by revealing, or in the language of Reggio Emilia, “making visible” the “invisible” child.

It is important to clarify that the work that children produced in this possible third space does not stand on its own. I do not intend to position it as either child art, school art, or even art. It is not intended to be a “product,” to be interpreted in a decontextualized way. It only exists within a dynamic relationship with documentation. And, of course, it is crucial that I disclose my role in placing works within both the context of documentation and the context of sharing with our school community. It was generally my provocation that the children share their work. In most cases, however, the children
did express a desire to share their work with their peers in other classes and with their teachers and families. In many instances, those children, too, were a part of the play frames of these children’s making. In other instances, the children felt that it was important to share what they had done with future students, as I discussed in the last section.

A Short Overview of Some Theories of Child Art

Like children and childhood, “child art” is a category of relatively recent invention category. As such it is socially constructed and historically contingent. It reveals much about its milieu and the social and epistemological concerns of specific cultures, times, and places. It is often site-specific. For example, it has been noted that children in Franz Cizek’s classes reproduced his child art style because it was continually displayed in the classroom. The uniqueness of the style, then, was self-replicating and self-perpetuating as children referenced what they saw within their own works. In the art educational context, both educational aims and the art world have laid claims upon children’s art. Although it is not necessary to present an exhaustive overview of theories of children’s visual productions within this chapter, I do feel that it is important to present some of the most influential of those theories. I hope to do this in a way that illustrates how these Big-T theories continue to influence contemporary practice while foreshadowing potential practical and theoretical augmentations. For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to review how adults have designated children’s visual productions as art in order to propose how we might describe them as language.
Scholarship on children’s visual productions has been divided according to the interests, desires, and frame of reference of the researcher. Since the “discovery” of children’s art, major disciplines, including psychology and psychoanalysis, art education, and educational theory have maintained prolonged interest in children’s visual productions, especially drawings. Much of the interest in drawing was a matter of convenience—drawings required little material and could be easily saved and transported. Additionally, children were often asked to draw for researchers in clinical situations. Like other experimental measures, those drawings were decontextualized, an important distinction for the ways in which I look at children’s making within this study—within the social context(s) of classrooms. Finally, children’s drawings have been a primary subject of research on children’s making in art education because children may have fewer opportunities to work with diverse materials or because teachers may provide more explicit direction when children work with those materials (Thompson, 2006). Indeed, in many classrooms in which I have observed, teachers create a boundary between whole-class project time, where teachers dictate project specifications and criteria, and “free draw” time where children may draw what they like. Within these classrooms, “free draw” time can be either a “reward” for a job well-completed or “filler” for extra time. In my observations, the option of “free draw” motivates some children to “rush” through the teacher-directed projects to get to the good parts. This kind of context sustains the separation between school art and play art—children make school “art” to placate their teacher. They play by producing visual works for themselves and for one another.
Throughout the history of study concerning children’s making, each discipline framed and named children’s products in a way that both reflected and supported the concerns of their time and revealed desires they associated with and expressed through images of children. Rosario and Collazo (1981) distinguish between two main approaches: the psychological that focuses on development and the sociological that focuses on how the social shapes the aesthetic. Malvern (2000) summarizes, “a conception of childhood as a separate and distinctive state of being, which could be made visible through ‘child art,’ was itself a consequence of the advent of modernity” (p. 629). This framing continues to shape current theory about children’s visual productions and art education. I do it, self-consciously, within this study. Leeds (1989) explains, “students of child art continue to reveal their own value judgments through the elements they emphasize in their analyses” (p. 101). Korzenik (1981) explains, “Despite our contemporary rhetoric, we find ourselves …. with an adult-centered view of the content of art education” (p. 24). Korzenik’s concerns are with the historical and cultural contexts that have given children’s visual productions the label of “art,” and thus, currency within the art world and the content of the field of art education. As Leeds (1989) explains, “Attitudes toward children’s art stem from the interplay of two distinct sets of ideas: those having to do with children and childhood, and those having to do with art and aesthetic values” (p. 93). Korzenik’s and Leeds’s conclusions are revealing: Children’s visual productions often reveal more about the historical contexts of their interpreters than about the children who compose them. Furthermore, neither of these sets of knowledge can be separated from its particular social and historical contexts.
A permanent exhibition: Inventing child art

By several accounts, the Italian art historian and critic Corrado Ricci, was one of the first scholars to use the term “child art” (Viola, 1945). As Wilson (2004) notes, Ricci’s account came a generation after the “Swiss pedagogue and graphic narrator Rudolf Töpffer….wrote about child art as a special category” (p. 305). As Leeds explains Töpffer wrote that children’s art, while inferior to adult art, reveals children’s intentions; children’s art required a movement of thought.

Wilson also acknowledges that the groups responsible for writing the “master narrative” of child art “hardly took note” of one another (p. 299). They discovered child art at around the same time but in varied contexts. This was not coincidental: It was emblematic of larger societal and cultural concerns in late 19th century Western Europe. Their conclusions coincided with and supported other theories of childhood, development, and psychology. Around the same time that Ricci wrote his booklet, many other accounts of “child art” appeared in different contexts in Western Europe and in the United States. After these first studies were published (1898), every major European city held an exhibition of child art (Malvern, 2000).

The durability of Ricci’s scholarship has much to do with the fanciful published account of his discovery in the 1887 pamphlet L’arte dei bambini. In his description, he describes how he was forced to take shelter under a one of those famous Bolognese porticos in a rainstorm. As he turned his face from the rain, he found a “permanent exhibition” of children’s work. His account supports Malvern’s (2000) statement that, “Child art was frequently described as a matter of chance discovery, rather than
invention” (p. 627). “Oddness” in the figures (for example, back-mounted arms) compelled Ricci to begin an analytic study of the motives behind their production (Golomb, 2002). He also noticed that the more realistic drawings were higher on the wall, and surmised that older, taller, children had created them. This astute observation lead to the beginning of “stage” theories of graphic development; as children became older, their works increased in sophistication and progressed toward visual realism. In his long-term study, Ricci analyzed over one thousand drawings from Bolognese elementary school children (Leeds, 1989). Ricci’s account remains relevant because of his emphasis on children’s graphic development, not on the aesthetic qualities of children’s productions. Leeds (1989) explains that Ricci

showed a deep empathy with children’s work….He set out to understand the logic behind the child’s method of picture construction, which he saw as totally consistent with the child’s form of logic, although contradictory to the visual logic of adults (p. 97).

Although we can glean from his accounts that Ricci did see children’s logic as inferior to adult logic in the sense that children’s development was a “movement from immaturity to adult competence” (Corsaro, 1992, p. 161), he equated making with the idea of language. He explained, “Children describe the man and things instead of rendering them artistically….In short, they make with signs the same sort of description that they would make with words” (Ricci as cited by Leeds, 1989, p. 97). In this way, Ricci does not position children’s making in direct relationship with adult art, but as a communicative and representational act.
Although he does not characterize drawing as “child art,” Rousseau discussed drawing from nature. In *Emile, or On Education*, which was first published in 1752, Rousseau defines childhood “as a distinct and important stage in our development towards adulthood” (Cox, 1993, p. 3). In his story of Emile’s (his invented pupil) education, Rousseau stressed the importance of sense experience and began to teach Emile how to draw from nature at age twelve. As Leeds (1989) explains, “Rousseau assumed that the child was by nature irrational until the age of twelve” (p. 94). Before this, Rousseau felt that children were both fickle and susceptible to imitating the ways of the villain if adults exposed them to fairy tales (Egan, 1998, p.18). Although Rousseau saw Emile’s drawing as having a moral and emotional value, he did not see them as having an aesthetic one. As a critic of the bourgeoisie, Rousseau valued nature over culture. Korzenik (1981) explains, “With positive results from instruction, Rousseau expected the child to outgrow the need for gilt frames for his drawings” (p. 21). She concludes, “Through this act [Rousseau] could thereby ridicule what the society called art, denigrating both the inept child and the adult artist of his time” (p. 21). What seems to remain from Rousseau’s efforts is not so much his account of the value of realistic drawing but his construction of the child as *innocent*. Leeds (1989) explains, “Rousseau most clearly crystallized the idea of childhood as a distinct state of being. The influence of his theories of education runs deep, and can still be felt in many forms of child-centered education” (p. 94). She continues,

Rousseau’s attitudes exemplify the romantic stance toward childhood. It was from the Romantic Movement in the arts and in philosophy that ideas of childhood as
an ideal state of innocence, and of creativity as a general human characteristic both emerged (p. 94).

Sutton-Smith (1989) links Rousseau’s theory to educational impulses especially applicable to art education. He explains, “Rousseau…is generally accepted as the precursor of all modern child study with his notion that the child is both driven by consuming impulses as well as perfectible if we educate him correctly” (p. ix). Therefore, if in education, we return the child to her original natural state, she will be peaceful and immune to the corruption of modern society. It is important to note, here, that Rousseau did not study actual children: His musings were not scientific but philosophical.

**Stage or phase theories of artistic development**

Much research in both art education and developmental psychology concerns “stage” and phase (Louis, 2005) theories of children’s graphic development. Stage theorists sought to explain how children progress in drawing from scribbling to the rendering of accurate, realistic forms. Contemporary phase theories, like Louis’, seek to determine “When is art?” She is not necessarily concerned with development wholesale but with when a child consciously produces what could be called “art.” Her theory, however, seems to deviate somewhat from the psychological emphasis of most stage theories. Those theories generally focus on a development toward competence in the form of increased realism in children’s drawings. Wilson (1976a) explains, “It is not surprising that development would be viewed in this fashion since, generally speaking, representational art is still valued highly even among those who study and teach children”
Later in this chapter, I will begin to address the naturalistic bias in terms of class, taste, and popularity, and in reference to expanded ideas of “art” entertained in Reggio Emilia.

Luquet (1913), Piaget (1956)—whom Luquet influenced—(Golomb, 2002), Lowenfeld (1947), Matthews (1999), Cox (1992, 1993, 1997), Kellogg (1955, 1967, 1970), and others have proposed variations of stage theories. Several of these scholars, in the tradition of baby biographies, studied their own children for extended periods of time, generally from birth to adolescence. All were concerned with the mental processes that underlie children’s graphic production and how these processes might be understood through an interpretation of children’s graphic making. In Piaget’s stage theory, graphic development was “matched” with stages of cognitive development (Kindler, 2004; Louis, 2005). As an epistemologist, he was not interested in “art” per se, but in the nature of thought, and he saw children’s graphic productions as a kind of printout of their thought processes. This was consistent with his other work. For example, he “considered egocentric speech a direct reflection of young children’s egocentric habits of mind” (Thompson & Bales, 1991, p. 45).

Other stage theorists (Kellogg, 1970) isolated alphabets of symbols through which children progressed in their scribbles and then later combined in their drawings to make more sophisticated forms. Kellogg called these Gestalts and they existed for people, animals, houses, and other archetypical symbols. Kellogg coded an enormous pool of children’s drawings to classify the scribbles, shapes, and Gestalts that she found recurring in children’s work. Kellogg also used her research to compare the ways in which children in different cultural contexts progress in drawing, concluding that there are universal
aspects of children’s art in all cultures. Like other stage theorists, Kellogg was interested in the psychology of children’s art. None of the stage theorists was particularly concerned with the contexts of children’s drawings but with their revelation of children’s states of mind. Ironically, this emphasis on children’s drawings as products—as printouts—led not to a greater assessment of children’s cognitive capacities but to the aura of child art products themselves as stand-alone conveyors of meaning and of the universality of human experience. Because stage theorists were often concerned with universal thought processes, contemporary scholars have emphasized the role of context in discussing children’s work.

In addition, contemporary theorists (Matthews, 1999) describe meaning in children’s marks even prior to a “scribbling” stage. Like many scholars of children’s art before him, Matthews (1999) conducted a longitudinal study of the graphic development of his son, Ben. As a teenager Ben suffered from a tragic brain tumor. He became very interested in drawing, and comic books and Dungeons and Dragons influenced his drawings. Here, Matthews begins to illustrate relationships between making, meaning-making and popular visual culture in Ben’s visual productions. More recently, Matthews (2004) studied the ways in which children make in their use of electronic media. Golomb (2002, 2004a, 2004b) has written about and researched children’s visual development extensively. Recently, she investigated children’s development in clay modeling. Her work has shown that children employ multiple, situationally-dictated, models (or schema) as they work in different situations.

Historically, limitations of stage theories may be seen as similar to the limitations of development theories of children’s narrative development. As Sutton-Smith (1995)
explains, “most of our current analyses of children’s development through narratives are quite ethnocentric in their interpretation, and decidedly unliterary in their being restricted largely to structural elements” (p. 75). Although he is discussing interpretations of children’s development in storytelling, there are parallels to how children’s visual development has been examined. First, children’s development was assumed, as it is in the case of narrative development, to develop toward greater structural competence. In the case of storytelling or writing that meant “increasingly complex segments of story structure….in terms of plot, syntax” (Sutton-Smith, 1995, p.74). The assumption, as Sutton-Smith points out is that researchers “really know the true directions of development” (p. 74). Thus, the direction of narrative development is one of progression to more culturally acceptable forms of recognizable storytelling. The corollary in artistic development is children’s progression toward an increasing differentiation of forms and an increasing correspondence between drawn forms and what they represent in the world: i.e., 50 Cent will look more and more like 50 Cent until he is universally recognizable. This directional emphasis is socially constructed—drawings need not be visually realistic in the same way that stories need not have a conclusive conclusion. As Sutton-Smith explains, “Many cultures tell tales which do not have resolution. They may attempt resolutions that are failures, or talk of nullifications of threats but without real resolution” (p. 74). Likewise, many cultures celebrate visual productions that are not realistic. Perhaps it is the misreading of this fact that allowed for the relationship between the art of many Majority world peoples and children to be compared formally in the early 20th century. Perhaps, also, it led to Lowenfeld’s conception of the haptic type, the artist whose work is less realistic, more emotional, and more decorative. In his idea of the
visual-haptic continuum, Lowenfeld was characterizing young people’s visual productions that did not necessarily fit progression toward visual realism. Furthermore, most development theories place emphasis upon *individual* children’s development. Like Piaget’s theories, they do not necessarily consider the role of social context in development. The individual is privileged over the collective, or the social.

Despite these facts, in his essay, Sutton-Smith uses data he previously collected “to show all the unusual things that are left out of the way children tell stories by focusing on the bare bones of narrative grammar alone” (1995, p. 75). Again, we can draw parallels between his investigation of children’s storytelling and historical examinations of children’s art when we consider what types of visual productions researchers have most frequently studied. Those productions are not the outliers, not the unusual or unacceptable things, but those that can not be fit into some kind of culturally determined norm. Generally speaking, outliers have been considered on their own or in investigations of children who experience special needs (like children experiencing autism or children who are considered gifted). As Wilson and Wilson (1981) explain, “these are dismissed as flukes or the children as having been unduly and unfortunately influenced by adults” (p. 5). In reality, it would seem that the landscape of children’s making is as varied, and as thematic, as children’s storytelling and writing. Perhaps meaning lies not so much in an outside interpretation of a product but in the inside interpretation of children’s intellectual and social milieus.

Additionally, it seems that adults place much attention on “child art” that is whole—that is a finished composition. Cizek’s students made wonderfully composed “wholes.” Contemporary art educators often oblige children to “fill the space” when
making teacher-directed projects. In their study of children’s art experiences in preschools, Rosario and Collazo (1981) found that:

In this case, too, the “completeness” of the object was determined by the teacher, and the criteria were based on how closely the child’s production resembled the model or instructions given. Only when the objects were completed did the teachers comment on their aesthetic value (p. 78).

Little attention is paid to productions that are unfinished, that are in margins, are uncharismatic or especially “conventional.” Wilson (1974) explains,

It is the spontaneous play art of young people….It has little of the polished lushness of art classroom art, but once one learns to look at tatty little drawings done in ball point on lined paper, a whole world of excitement unfolds (p. 3, original emphasis).

I will return to these ideas later in this chapter when I consider how children and teachers use visual languages for a variety of communicative purposes.

**Some Relationships between Child Art and Art Education**

Because to-day’s the last lesson before Christmas we are going to make something very nice, and something to do with Christmas. Once we made houses here with Christmas trees inside. The children….did them, and did them very beautifully. The made three, four, and even five little houses. In these little houses Santa Claus came with a Christmas tree….We will make such things to-day….. In each house something different is to be seen. Now be quick! First we
shall draw. Then we shall outline the whole drawing, and then we shall paint…..

You can’t draw windows and the doors, but you should draw the four walls, the floor and the ceiling…. I see a girl who does not make a Christmas tree but a “zigzag” tree. We don’t have “zigzag” trees….. Only the thoughtless make a “zigzag” tree….Who cannot think cannot draw (Cizek as cited in Viola, 1945, p. 118).

Cizek, the “father” of art education, was an Austrian artist and educator closely affiliated with the Secession movement in Vienna. He showed children’s drawings to his friend Gustav Klimt, and Klimt encouraged him to open an art school for children. In 1897, he received a permit to open the Juvenile Art Class in which he taught until 1938. Cizek held impressive exhibitions of the work that children created in his art class. In a particularly transparent statement, Viola’s explains, “First came Cizek, and then followed the psychologists. This is important. Child Art is primarily Art” (1945, p. 13). Children produced work in Cizek’s classes that is still emblematic of a recognizable “child art” style that consists of flat, brightly colored, and decorative patterns. Perhaps unintentionally, Cizek taught children to make “child art.” Wilson (1974) explains, “He gave children big paper, large brushes, juicy tempera paint, and soft clay and in subtle ways suggested the subject matter….the child art Cizek observed was done under his influence in circumstances he controlled so completely, albeit unknowingly” (p. 2). I will return to the idea of materials and teacher influence further in this section. As Malvern (2000) explains, “What tends to escape the attention of modernist interest in child art….is how much children had to be taught how to do it” (p. 628). Following Cizek, many contemporary educators continue to teach children how to make “child art” or “school
art.” This category is far-removed from children’s “play” art (Wilson, 1976b). Furthermore, the question of why artists and educators found—and still find it—necessary to call children’s visual productions “art” remains, and continues to complicate ways in which children’s work is received, interpreted, and valued in cultural and educational contexts.

The above excerpt from Viola’s observation of Cizek’s teaching is particularly instructive of how adults can construct and make child art. Cizek’s biases come through in his teaching. Children in his classes drew astutely and decoratively because he taught them to do so, and because they were motivated to join in the communicative and artistic life of his classroom. Malvern (2000) explains, “Pictures by children were constantly displayed in his classroom, however, and what evolved was a self-regenerating Cizek child style, cultivated to look naïve and unsophisticated” (p. 628). Although Malvern adopts an understandable critical position, the idea of displays of children’s work regenerating a style is of particular interest in my study of the Reggio approach. There, “memories” of children’s past graphic work fill environments, sustaining a seemingly consistent style in children’s drawings over time. In this way, like the “Super S” in my classroom, children participate in a reproductive artistic culture that not only has a specific historical and contextual meaning but also an emblematic look: an artistic dialect, of sorts (Figure 44).
Tarr (2001) looked at “aesthetic codes” (Rosario & Collazo, 1981) in early childhood schools and institutions in North America and found that consistent codes communicate and sustain values and assumptions underlying the school. In short, they support the institutions’ images of children, childhood, and education. In this way, Tarr and Rosario and Collazo explicitly build upon Bourdieu’s work. As Rosario and Collazo (1981) explain, “According to Bourdieu, aesthetic perception is a deciphering operation that is learned or socially acquired and may be conscious or unconscious” (p. 74, original emphasis). This construction is useful for not only exploring the aesthetic codes of institutions—for example, the aesthetic codes in Reggio Emilia that I will discuss later in this section but also for examining the aesthetic codes that exist among children in the “child collective.” Although I realize that “aesthetic” is a problematic label within current discourse in art education (Duncum, 2007; Tavin, 2007), I am hopeful that in situating the term within social contexts that produce and sustain it, I am rendering it specific, historical, and contingent. In this way, aspects of Bourdieu’s (1984) constructions of aesthetic perception and aesthetic competence are useful for this analysis, and in some
ways parallel the kinds of communicative fluency that Dyson describes and the kinds of distinctions that children craft and maintain in their work.

Although I do not propose to make the mistake of conflating child art and art education (Wilson, 1976a), Rousseau’s child and Cizek’s children seem to continue to influence practice in art education and constructions of art making in early childhood contexts. This is manifest in the idea that the child creates purely, pleasurably, and freely and that her works have a certain “look”: that this work is outside of culture, and therefore is untainted. In its most extreme forms (as described by Cox, 1993), this belief causes adults to fear intervention in children’s work—paralyzed by the feeling that they might somehow ruin the child’s free expression. As Leeds (1989) explained, the child who makes child art is subject to the influence not only of ideas about childhood but about art. The confluence of these ideas continues to influence ways in which adults categorize children’s visual productions. These categorizations can obscure the intellectual and social processes at work when children make.

After Cizek, Lowenfeld (who assisted Cizek in his art school before immigrating to the United States) became one of the most influential child art theorists of the 20th century. *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947) has been published in numerous translations and editions and continues to influence educators worldwide. Lowenfeld was interested in how children and adolescents develop artistically. He advocates for the “potentially vital role” art has “in the education of our children” (1970, p. 1). Lowenfeld felt that art experiences could foster emotional growth, intellectual growth, physical growth, social growth, and aesthetic growth, and that art was an important part of society and culture. He dedicated much of his research to working with visually impaired children,
developing a distinction between two expressive types, the visual and the haptic, which
came to dominance around the age of twelve (Kelly, 2004). The haptic was more
cconcerned with knowing through feeling and emotion, while the visual was more inclined
toward observation. As Kindler (2004) observes, the opposition between these two types
fit the characteristics of modernist art—expressiveness and visual realism. She positions
Lowenfeld’s seemingly ahistorical analysis firmly within the Modernist tradition, within
his particular historical and cultural context.

Expressive theories drove much instruction in art education from the middle of
the twentieth century, but late in the century, interest shifted from product to process.
Wilson and Wilson (1976, 1977, 1982) began to study children’s motivations in
making—even children’s pleasures in reproducing and producing popular culture. They
situated once-decontextualized children within social, historical, and cultural contexts
and acknowledged that children did not produce anything in a vacuum. They recognized
that children’s drawings have social functions and that children’s cultural milieus
influence their schemas. They interrogated the distinctions between children’s
spontaneous drawings and “school art” (Efland, 1977 as cited in Wilson, 2004). Further,
they made a functional distinction between children’s graphic play and the world of adult
“art.” They did not study children’s drawings as “art” per se but as visual artifacts of
children’s intellectual and social cultures. An emphasis began to shift from structure to
content and social practices and children’s relationships with visual culture.

In his study of girls drawing horses, Duncum (1985) considered the role of
gender, pleasure, and desire in children’s drawings of preferred subject matter. Thompson
(1995, 2003, 2004) has considered the ways in which young children’s drawings function
socially to solidify children’s alliances with peers and to subjugate adults’ desires. These studies, along with trends in art, cultural studies, and critical theories, have opened a space for children’s visual productions to be considered within the complexities of their contexts and from the points of view and the performances of their creators. In a later study (1989), Duncum explores ways in which children’s violent drawings reveal a larger social context ripe with contradictions. Duncum explains, “It is to be expected that children, who in exploring social values, learning how to co-operate together, and achieving a sense of mastery, competence, and personal power, should draw upon cultural models of a violent society” (p. 253). He continues,

While children adopt images and ideas from adult cultural forms, they do not necessarily do so in total. The notion that users of popular culture are passive recipients…is unsupported by research. Research shows that media is not directly manipulative (McQuail, 1983), but rather that audiences exploit the media for their own purposes (Curran, Gurevitch, & Woolcot, 1977) (1989, p.253).

Scholars interested in children’s visual culture—the cultures that children consume and produce—have augmented conversation about children’s visual productions to include children’s making in many media and their clothing choices, television viewing habits, their bedroom decorations, and the candy that they buy and eat (for example, see Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002). Children’s visual and cultural productions have been recently considered within an increasing number of both traditional and emerging disciplines (including Girls’ Studies and Children’s Studies). In these frameworks, children’s productions are analyzed using critical theories that originate in literary, film, and cultural studies.
Despite the vast amount of scholarship concerning children’s art and visual imagery produced by children over the past century, the idea of child art remains wrought with tension. Different disciplines continue to look at children’s visual productions in different ways and continue to employ divergent (and sometimes contradictory) methods to analyze what they see. “Child art” is perhaps one of the most multifarious and problematic categories of children’s visual production. The effects of Modernism and residual effects of Romanticism and the Enlightenment have imbued children and their productions with an immense amount of power, while at the same time often rendering children themselves as objects of study and not as subjects who produce culture.

The current state of scholarship on the visual imagery that children produce is provocative and branches out in new directions while it also interrogates divisions between disciplines. Psychologists, sociologists, educators, and artists will continue to be both fascinated with and puzzled by children’s struggle to represent what they see and feel, and the cognitive processes that motivate seemingly aesthetic or artistic representations and performances. Throughout the remainder of this section, I employ a theory of the visual languages exemplified in theory and practice by educators and children working in Reggio Emilia. I use this theory as a lens through which I propose both augmentations to contemporary theories of children’s visual productions. I, too, place a theory of the visual languages in Reggio inside of contemporary theories.
Making in Reggio Emilia: Problems with Multiple Labels and Stages

Examining children’s art within the context of the theory and practice of schools in Reggio Emilia is a problematic endeavor. I do not think that I have ever heard an educator in Reggio refer to “child art” nor do they conscientiously assume a direct formal, expressive, or Romantic relationship between child art and adult art as many art educators in the United States do. Despite this, some educators continue to view Reggio Emilia as an art education program. Johnson (1999) asserts that a focus on children’s art in Reggio Emilia augments the schools’ supernatural aura. He explains,

Exposure to an interaction with a multitude of art experiences is a cornerstone of the Reggio program (Schiller, 1995). Katz (1993) views the use of drawing and other art making in Reggio Emilia as a graphic language (one of the ‘Hundred Languages of Reggio Emilia’) which serves in place of writing (p. 63).

His statement not only places art within the context of the mystical—the feeling realm where whatever happens is not understood or cognitively relevant—but also reveals a hesitancy to place art within the realm of other culturally coded symbol systems. Again, he borrows from educational literature to illustrate how what he believes to be an emphasis on art in Reggio Emilia adds to the fanaticism that he sees surrounding the schools. He continues,

While reflecting on what she observed in her visit to Reggio, Seefeldt (1995) shares: “Stunned with the exquisitely intricate art of children in Reggio Emilia, Italy, educators throughout the world stand in awe and wonder…after all, everywhere you look, splendid works of art are displayed. Perhaps, because of the
abstract quality of the artwork, you are in a museum of modern art. But you are
not in a museum at all. Rather, you are in a city-run child care center of Reggio
Emilia” (p. 39) (p. 64).

Although Seefedlt’s statements are not unproblematic—as I mentioned, I never
heard educators in Reggio refer to children’s work as art—her intent to praise children’s
work seems sincere. Perhaps, Reggio offers a place upon which educators can focus the
infatuation with execution and with charm that has existed since the invention of child
art. Her words, then, reflect Reggio Emilia less than they do contemporary culture’s dual
fascination with and limited understanding of children’s making.

In Reggio Emilia, educators emphasize children’s meaning making in visual or
graphic (and now digital) languages. Educators in Reggio Emilia do not believe that
children are making art—they are making sense and making meaning. They are visibly
constructing knowledge. While children’s visual productions do have an aesthetic value
in Reggio Emilia, their primary value seems to be their use-value for both children’s
communications and adults’ understandings of children. The visual languages, then, are
instrumental. As the catalogue for the exhibition The expressive languages of children,
the artistic language of Alberto Burri, explains:

The works of artists offer food for thought and for the imagination, but in working
with children the primary focus is, and must always remain, the children
themselves, with their own strategies of thought, their knowledge-building

When I visited Reggio Emilia in the summer of 2005, I asked Tiziana Filippini, a
pedagogista (or educational coordinator), if children would further engage with the
town’s “Invio a...” initiative. She explained that although it is necessary for atelieristi and teachers to pay attention to the world of contemporary art, children and art are not in an automatic relationship. Visual languages are a tool, a “bridge,” and a resource for the adult that can help them to push their thinking further.

We know that in educational contexts, “child art” is in the eye of the beholder (Pariser & van der Berg, 1997; Zurmuehlen, 1997). We know that “quality” early childhood and elementary programs advertise arts experiences as one of the markers of quality in their programming. They may propose that “creative” art experiences enrich children’s imaginations or that an appreciation of adult art helps children to live a good life. Both may be quite true. As a result, many arts activities that educators offer to young children waver uncomfortably between teacher-directed or child-centered “expressive” (Rosario & Collazo, 1981; Thompson, 2005). In this way, art is either a “product” or an “experience.” As a product, it is teacher-directed. As an “experience,” it does not necessarily have a product, although sometimes it may be unintentionally beguiling, as Töpffer found.

In early education and in elementary schools, on one end of a malleable spectrum, many of the art activities offered to young children would fulfill most art educators’ definition of the word “craft”: Not a fine craft, like handbuilding with clay, weaving, or blowing glass, but a “crafty-craft” with steps, maybe even teacher or professionally prefabricated parts, that have a predictable end. Teachers often lead children in making these crafts, and children and teachers can and do enjoy them. In their description of such typical making experiences like “making a turkey,” Rosario and Collazo (1981) found that teachers most often designated these types of activities as “art.” In Bresler’s (1995)
narrative of children making Easter bunny hats, both the children and teacher are eagerly engaged and pleased with their productions. Although activities like these remain for children in preschools and elementary schools, even experiences in art classrooms and with art specialist teachers can be teacher-directed. In those cases, art teachers often begin not with an idea of “Jack-O-Lantern” but with an idea of emulating a well-known artwork. A teacher may begin with a reproduction of van Gogh’s *Starry Night* or a Jackson Pollock painting and lead children through imitating the artist’s style according to standards-based criteria. This is a part of the legacy of discipline-based art education (DBAE) programming. Expressive art activities lay near this spectrum’s other pole. They sometimes involve finger painting, easel painting, working with play-doh or clay, and other “open-ended” explorations that are designed so that children can “express” themselves. As Bresler explains,

> And so arts programs include two opposing sets of values: (a) the Lowenfeldian (1939) values promoting self-expression, creativity, and uniqueness, manifested in teachers’ goals and in some of the more open-ended lessons….and (b) the structured activities manifested in the Halloween dittos, outlined turkeys, precut penguins, Valentine hearts and bunny hats (p.33).

Although Bresler refers primarily to the visual art content of programs taught by classroom generalist teachers and not art specialist teachers, the polarities that she proposes accurately characterize most contemporary conceptions of arts programs for children, especially those for young children. In a preschool context, disciplines are generally not so rigidly defined as they are in the elementary context, where the structural necessities of scheduling tend to limit children’s opportunities for multi-modal learning.
Furthermore, it seems that the legacy of art-based art as it was defined in DBAE could now be added to Bressler’s analysis as a third set of opposing values.

It is easy to see, then, when this is what we expect of art in early childhood programs and in some elementary programs, why Reggio stands out so emphatically. Not only do children in Reggio make extraordinary things, but the process through which they make them eloquently navigates the “leisurely expanse” (Thompson, 1995, p. 4) between teacher over- and under-determination. Works in Reggio, like the works that children made in the course of the griffin and Bigfoot projects, are negotiated and carry meaning in a specific historical, cultural, and social context.

Within that space, children in Reggio produce work that belies developmental expectations of what they can do. That may be because teachers in Reggio do not hesitate to pose problems to children that exceed commonly held expectations of what children can accomplish. As New (1998) explains, “Principles of developmentally appropriate practice can no longer rely on knowledge of children’s current developmental status to make curricular decisions. Rather, teachers must remain alert to the child’s ever expanding reach” (p. 273). She continues, “Reggio Emilia teachers place no such preconceived limits on children’s capacities to deal with abstract topics” (p. 273). This attitude of possibility shapes ways in which teachers in Reggio Emilia approach investigating topics dealing with representation in the visual languages with young children. Their approach is dually informed by their situated construction of social constructivist learning theories. The learning that children experience leads their development, and further motivates them to learn.
In an example typical of the representational problems that children and adults undertake in Reggio, four- and five-year-old children endeavor to graphically depict the experience of playing ring around the rosy (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001). At the beginning of the project, the children’s work resembles what we might expect from a developmental perspective: The children have not succeeded in representing the experience of joining hands in a circle accurately. In fact, the children have made “mistakes” that reveal a “knot” within their spatial reasoning. Two of the drawings show children holding hands across a baseline or a diagonal line, while one shows children in a circle but from a bird’s eye view. The children are satisfied with their drawings but cognizant of their inaccuracies. One of the children, Giovanni, suggests, “Why don’t we all stand like the kids in our drawings?” (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001, p. 196). Vea Vecchi (the atelierista who is interpreting this experience) continues, “Giovanni’s idea, which turns around the usual way of approaching interpreting reality through drawing, appears to us to be excellent; in this way, even the trip-ups of the representation can.…advance thinking” (Vecchi, 2001, p. 196, original emphasis).

Subsequently, the teachers engage the children in physically experiencing and re-experiencing both playing the game and representing it on paper, but drawings still resemble children standing in a single-file line holding hands. In the end, Giovanni again offers a solution, “Who are these kids looking at? Who’s this one looking at? You have to put the ones on the other side, otherwise they’re not looking at anything” (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001). The whole while, teachers have been carefully documenting and interpreting the children’s trials and discoveries. Throughout these experiences, the children face significant dilemmas but adults and other children guide them as they untie
the knots in their thinking. As Vecchi emphasizes, “Here we can see quite clearly how, during the process of learning, continuous loans of knowledge, hypotheses, and points of view are being made among the children” (2001, p. 199). In this case, the children were once again one another’s more “capable peers” and protagonists of their own development (New, 1998, p. 274). For art educators, this episode seems to support Kindler’s assertion that “Adult intervention may not only be useful, but essential, to children’s artistic development” (1995, p. 11). In addition, by copying their friends’ works, children “ventured into realms of imagery and organization far more complex than those she explored on her own” (Thompson & Bales, 1991, p. 51).

Of course, within specific contexts, adults and children must work together to determine what the idea of “development” means. Throughout this section, I propose that development leads to children’s fluency in a number of socially relevant languages and communicative contexts.

At the culmination of this project, the children had not only produced sophisticated drawings but also provided their teachers with an assessment of the ways in which they perceive, translate, and represent spatial relationships that are meaningful to them in the school context. Because children and teachers are used to working in this way, they apply the competencies that they both develop within this context to multiple modes of representation and communication. In this way, children’s apparently extraordinary proficiency in the graphic languages in Reggio parallels similar achievements of children in other cultures where visual thinking and visual production are an important and integral part of participation in the culture. In a study that looked at “culturally specific ways of processing information,” Cattey’s (1980) conclusions support
other research that showed that children who live in a certain Navajo community where they learn to weave in early childhood “display above average visual discrimination and fine motor coordination.” This point emphasizes that children’s capacity surpass developmental expectations by revealing that these expectations are socially contingent and constructed. I do not intend to place children’s seemingly too sophisticated making of art-like things in Reggio Emilia within this framework to expose the framework itself as faulty. Rather, I would like to propose an addition to frameworks that accept that they are site-specific and socially constructed. In doing so, I would like to explore the relationship between the binary constructs of process and product to emphasize how each is socially constructed and assessed within context.

**Visual Languages Performing Social Work**

In one of his most famous publications, the poem, *Il Cento*, Malaguzzi wrote: “The child is made of one hundred. The child has a hundred languages…” *The Hundred Languages of Children* became the title that stuck for the 1981 exhibition through which schools in Reggio placed themselves upon the “world” stage. The hundred languages then became a guiding metaphor for those inspired by the Reggio approach. Taken literally, Malaguzzi’s seemingly sentimental words in *Il Cento* could unintentionally reinforce the image of the ideal, universal, child. He cautions that the metaphor of the hundred will not resonate with “those who underestimate children, those who take something away from them in order to reduce and simplify them” (1996, p.28), but his
own poetic way of speaking, doubly-translated, does not fully (as this did not seem to his intention) reveal how languages work.

The metaphor of language figures prominently in Reggio Emilia. However, despite its figurative qualities, language in Reggio Emilia accomplishes real social work. It is philosophically and intimately tied to the social and intellectual life of the schools and of the city. Language is not something that children have; it is something that they use. They, like Malaguzzi in his poem, learn to use and to manipulate language—to “play” with it and to work with it to construct and convey meanings. Visual language, in particular, plays the role of a primary language in Reggio Emilia. As children “grow into the intellectual life” of the school, they become increasingly adept at using visual language in multiple ways. In the following subsection of this chapter, I will consider some possible relationships between development and motivation. I am guided both by Corsaro’s (1992) view that development is not linear, but reproductive and Vygotsky’s idea that learning leads motivation which leads development for social purposes. In these views, language tasks are socially distributed and children increasingly internalize language as they come to participate fully in their social contexts.

**Development and Motivation: Mapping more Intricate Relationships**

When seven-year-old Matthew’s teacher leads his class into the art studio for the first time this year, she slips me a knowing glance and whispers, “Keep an eye on Matthew.” I heed her warning, and I do. Almost as soon as the children take seats at the large tables I’ve covered with bright orange paper (the only large paper I found in the
supply closet), he involves himself in a marker-war with a neighboring child. Matthew protests, “I need the red. I only draw in red,” as he fitfully grabs the red Crayola from Jim’s hand. Quite pleased with his conquest, Matthew engrosses himself completely in drawing a fierce battle scene. To the outsider, it looks like a Rorschach blot, replete with oozing ink blots where Matthew pressed the marker too firmly and for too long into the thin paper. Looking at me, he explains, “I needed the red for the blood”—a justification for his coup of James’ marker. I did not intervene—Jim seemed no worse for the wear. Matthew continued, intent on making the squiggly “designs” that would predominate all of his attention for the first part of the school year. Small for his age and the subject of gentle rousing, Matthew punctuates his drawings with sound effects. He seems to be playing deep within a world of his own fashioning; my first impression is that he is a bit isolated from the group.

After a few art studio meetings, I realized that the furniture arrangement I had inherited from my series of predecessors (I was the children’s third art teacher in a matter of a year and a half) did not work. I separated the four large tables into eight smaller ones to create more intimate groupings and to facilitate the children’s use of the few materials with which we began the school year—markers and large, low-quality newsprint paper. I separated the markers chromatically and divided them in baskets among the eight tables. I reveal this small detail because I will return to the implications in choosing materials further along within this section. From this point on, Matthew worked almost exclusively with three other children, and especially with Sarah. Sarah, unlike Matthew, was stoic in her self-presentation. Elegant and quiet, she was already a refined draftswoman. She possessed a skill that Matthew admired: the ability to draw an immaculate Sponge Bob.
In step with this burgeoning relationship, Matthew’s visual productions developed dramatically. With Sarah as his nearby tutor, he achieved a formidable rendition of Sponge Bob. Furthermore, the two began to not only assist one another with their individual productions, but to collaborate on joint productions (Figure 45).

Matthew’s and Sarah’s collaborative experiences were not unique to our experiences in the art studio. When offered a choice, children often chose to work together and to produce joint productions. Although some questions of ownership did arise, more often than not, the group achieved what individuals could not, and ownership was subservient to making something really cool. Their purposes were not what adults might call aesthetic or artistic but that does not mean that appearance was not an essential and valued aspect of execution.
Balducci school feels like a tree house: an expansive glass box that draws my eyes through twisted foliage and up into the ceiling. Built in 1992 and named for Father Ernesto Balducci, the school is home to one hundred and four children who live in small groups in four classrooms. A miniature circular staircase leads up to the loft area of the atelier. It is a two-floor atelier: the top floor is for the adults to work on documentation. There, large work tables and binders full of the school’s memories line the shelves. Just outside the atelier’s door, there is an installation—it looks like a greenhouse room—where children have mixed their own unfired clay creations with natural materials. On one wall, a documentation panel shares the story of children making three-dimensional forms in clay. Children’s anecdotes like “Bella! Brava!” punctuate photographs that illustrate their constructive strategies (i.e. make a body, then two or four legs to attach). These procedural panels are a familiar site in Reggio schools and in Reggio-inspired schools. They often illustrate clay work or contour drawing work—two of the most visible modes of children’s making in Reggio.

I am disappointed that there will be no children in the atelier today. They have taken a field trip across town and won’t be back to work before our meeting adjourns. I was surprised that there were no questions about the atelier at our meeting. It seems strange to me that educators would travel here from all over the world—their curiosity piqued by documentation of children’s mostly visual work—and not be more curious about what actually happens there. We are even offered the opportunity to purchase additional documentation materials to bring home with us. I do. Again, there is critical
speculation after the meeting. The speculative opacity of the language that the educators have used to describe their approach to working with children with “special rights” has left some in our group feeling unmoored. The language and the look of Reggio Emilia is a special case: Its aura as alienating as it is compelling. It appears relatively simple to emulate, but this mimesis leaves those in its wake feeling somehow incomplete. Visually, Reggio Emilia remains the authentic original.

As I move inch by inch through the atelier, I am left on my own to imagine what happens within this space where everything seems to occupy a carefully composed place. I speculate, as I know from my meetings with a studio educator in a Reggio-inspired school in the United States, that managing materials occupies a tremendous amount of an atelierista’s time.

Despite their differences, schools in Reggio Emilia have a distinctive look; a definitive material and visual culture (Figure 46). These “aesthetic codes” are the culminations of many years of collective investigation, work, and decision making. When we view them from an economic perspective, we can categorize them almost like a brand. They are both familiar—obviously schools for young children—and exotic—obviously not typical schools for young children. Schools that are inspired by or in dialogue with the Reggio approach necessarily share visible markers of affiliation. I do this, too. My use of the overhead projector with children to transform our classroom environment is based not only in my interest in installation but also in seeing how educators in Reggio Emilia have resurrected the overhead from its prosaic educational obscurity. It can be tempting, as Johnson (1999) points out, to buy the approach wholesale based upon a very casual, visual appraisal. When viewed from the perspective of the image of the child in
Reggio Emilia, the aesthetic is both appealing and compelling. It is specific to a particular
groups of sites, and is emblematic of the values of not only these immediate cultural
contexts (the “identities” of the schools) but of the larger local, state, and national
contexts.

On first glance, too, children’s visual productions in Reggio seem to have a
distinctive kind of appearance. From an appraisal of the published accounts of project
work within the schools, we can see that the children seem to draw a great deal, often
with black pen in a contour style. They work with clay, and they produce both individual
and collaborative works. But, to quickly assume that these apparent “styles” result from
either aesthetic influence or reproduction is a too-quick assumption. The Reggio
aesthetic, although stylish, has little to do with style and more to do with the preparation
The first major lesson from Reggio Emilia is the way their young children are encouraged to use what they call *graphic languages* (Rinaldi, 1991) and other media to record and represent their memories, ideas, predictions, hypotheses, observations, feelings, and so forth in their projects (p. 28, original emphasis).

She continues, “The Reggio Emilia children’s work suggests to me that many of us seriously underestimate preschool children’s graphical representation abilities, and the quality of intellectual effort and growth it can engender” (p. 28).

Children’s drawings and sculptures appear frequently on and in publications about the approach: They form an easy association. It would not be fair to not include reference to how children’s drawings look in a discussion of the visual languages in Reggio within the context of art educational discourse. However, it would be unreasonable to do so without framing this discussion within a larger discussion of why children make graphic productions in Reggio Emilia. I will return to that idea in the next subsection.

While children’s productions reveal parts of the Reggio “aesthetic,” the environments and materials in the schools reveal another. In her discussion of “aesthetic codes” in North American preschools, Tarr (2001) describes typical primary and elementary school environments. She explains, “In both Canadian and U.S. programs there is a strong value for preparing children for future life in schools” (p. 34). With this kind of preparation in mind, environments decontextualize knowledge. Teachers may post number or letter lines, but numbers and letters are not connected to experiences or contacts. Tarr describes how the school environment separates itself from the home environment. She continues, “In a visual and operational sense each institution is a
separate entity in relationship to the other: home is home; school is school, relatively impermeable to the outside world” (p. 36) To paraphrase Bruner, typical school environments indicate that school is a preparation for life, not a part of it. Tarr explains how these environments reveal values, in particular, how they make visible a “poor” (Dahlberg et al, 1999) construction of children. She explains,

The image of the child is one who must be protected from the outside world in order to learn. The child is seen as an object to be filled with information distilled and dispensed in regulated doses beginning with simple concepts leading to more abstract concepts (p. 36).

Furthermore, Tarr criticizes the “mass” market “craft-store culture” that prevails in these classrooms: one of “simplification of form and uniformity of style and color” (p. 35). The elementary art-room equivalent of the environments she describes may have reproductions of well-known works by Monet, Frida Kahlo, or Faith Ringgold hung on the walls or bulletin boards describing the elements and principles of design and primary colors. This knowledge, too, is decontextualized and reproduces certain biases in the types of adult art that children consume. It sustains a contrast between “high” or accepted art (much of which has now become popular art) and popular visual culture and supports an idea that art is set apart from life and from other areas of learning. It assumes that works of art stand alone—that the visual “text” can be interpreted or appreciated without contextual information. Finally, it contributes to ideas about childhood innocence: that some art is good for children but that other art is bad for children: it is either offensive or too difficult for children to understand. As a result, engagement with contemporary artists or contemporary art-making practices is often censored from art experiences for children.
In contrast, Tarr explains how schools in Reggio Emilia exist in an in-between space between home and school. There, educators strive to create environments that support and extend not only their image of the child but their interpretations of social-constructivist learning theories. And indeed, the schools are visually persuasive, especially in their design and in the ways in which educators choose and display intriguing materials in curatorial ways. This is not to say that educators in Reggio Emilia isolate the environment from built culture that way that some American educators do. When I visited the atelier in Balducci school, I saw art books about Newman, Burri, Nolde, the Dada movement, Simone Martini, Robert Morris, Vermeer, Calder, Miró, and Velásquez on the shelves within a child’s view. The eclectic assortment was there for reference—for use, not for display. The children were neither learning about Calder nor engaging in a “simulation” (Vecchi, 2004, p. 142) of any adult artist’s work but they were engaged in communicating their ideas through visual languages. The books about artists may have come in handy when the studio educator chose to provoke the children’s thinking further—beginning with the children, not with the art.

These types of environments impress educators who visit Reggio Emilia, and it is tempting to import them (Johnson’s “cargo cult”) without reflecting upon the choices that educators in Reggio have made that support the use of particular materials. Is it possible to develop a site-specific aesthetic inspired by Reggio that does not copy Reggio? This is a difficult question that begs other uncomfortable questions about the Reggio “aesthetic.” Those questions concern class, popular culture, and cultural reproduction.

As I mentioned earlier, citing Wilson, class biases influence not only the ways in which we interpret children’s development (from a bias toward naturalism) but the kinds
of environments we create for children. If the school, as we generally assume in the United States, transmits mainstream or middle class cultural values, then its environment reflects these values: those of craft-store culture and mass production. To suggest that these materials are inappropriate for children treads dangerously on equating aesthetic competence with a moral or economic purpose. We are deciding that some materials are better than others. This is not only a matter of socially-constructed and reproduced taste that is regulated by educational institutions (Bourdieu, 1984), but also a matter of how we construct childhood and children, and therefore, educational spaces. In order to create environments for young children, we must make these kinds of decisions and accept that they are always subjective. In the following subsections, I will discuss how materials are related to the educational and aesthetic aims of a project and how environments can be manipulated or transformed for similar purposes.

**Griffins: Building a Site-Specific Aesthetic**

In the previous chapter, I explained that I would return to the idea of how children made the griffins in our griffin project. I will do that here in order to illustrate several of the many different types of social work that visual languages perform when they are used as a social practice by young children. Within these descriptions, the ways in which the Reggio Emilia approach inspires the ways I work with visual languages in my classroom will be evident.

As I described, we began the project when several children showed an interest in our school mascot, the griffin. We “caught” this “situation of everyday life” (Gambetti as
cited by Rabitti, 1992, p. 38), and from this initial interest, we built several class projects. However, the children were not all engaged with a singular project at once: There was little whole-group instruction but a great amount of whole-group conversation. During the course of the project, children worked in heterogeneous groupings. These groupings, of about three to five children, remained consistent throughout the school year. Within the large group, these smaller groups made both individual and group representations of the griffin. In the case of the life-size griffins, each small group (four groups total) made a life-size griffin. This was a whole group decision: One group made the tallest, one the second tallest, one the third tallest, and one group made the “baby” griffin. Each group used similar materials, and group members offered their expertise in working with materials not only with the members of their group, but with other groups, too. Children often began group conversations with “how did you do that?” or “what do you need?” and lent one another their technical expertise by holding pieces together for one another and sharing particularly novel discoveries. All the while, I talked with each group—helping them to achieve or modify what they had planned with materials.

Although many of the drawings to which I referred in the chapter two description of the griffin project were voluntary, we also made observational drawings of the griffin. I had an idea that children might want to make some kind of a griffin, and when we made these drawings, I helped the children to focus their attention on the parts of the griffin that most intrigued them (Figure 47). These drawings appear to be more visually competent than many of the same children’s voluntary drawings (Figure 48 ). I do not believe this is because the children are jumping developmental stages but because they have made the drawings for different purposes. They are beginning to learn that drawing
is a tool that, like writing, can be used in different ways for different audiences and purposes. A drawing of a griffin that is made with the intent of deciphering how a griffin is made in order to recreate it three dimensionally is necessarily different from a drawing made to emphasize the griffin’s action as he engages a fierce Arimaspi in battle at the base of the Rhipaion Mountains. In the same way, a joke book made for friends differs from an essay written for a teacher. In this way, like Cizek and other art educators before me, my perspective was an important part of process of making the griffin drawings. But, unlike those educators, I did not see my role as assisting the children in making art nor did I dictate the process or the subject matter for their drawings. I knew that we would need the drawings to make griffins—that we could refer to them as we constructed. In this way, I was modeling how drawings might perform a different kind of social work in the third site—the negotiated space. I was concerned with the use-value of the children’s drawings, and thus, so were the children.
Figure 47: Children were especially interested in representing the griffin’s feathered wings and spiked mane accurately. I helped them to reproduce these distinctive features using contour drawings from observation and with a limited color palette (i.e. black felt-tip pen on white paper).

Figure 48: Children’s voluntary drawings of the griffin do not show the same visual accuracy as their contour drawings. This scene shows a griffin and an Arimaspian. These voluntary drawings were often made with the lower quality paper and markers readily available for most children in school.
When the children expressed interest in making clay griffins, I asked them to first work collaboratively with their small groups to figure out how to make a griffin. We had one experience before with clay and the children enjoyed modeling with this media, yet for this project I chose a different clay body—a fine sculpture body—based upon the children’s expressed difficulties in working with groggy pottery clay. I anticipated that they might have problems with the clay: For example, I thought that they might have difficulty making griffins stand, attaching wings, or making the details of the griffin’s feathers, tail, and spiked mane. These were some of the details that I had noticed that children’s talked most about when they were drawing or engaged in griffin play, and so I thought rendering these details accurately would be important to them. As they worked, I made photographs and took notes (I documented, as I will discuss further in Chapter Four) about the strategies that they discovered to form these parts. For example, one child chose to make feathers from individual pieces of clay that she could attach to the griffin’s wings, while other chose to incise the clay. One of those children suggested that we needed “utensils” to make better textures, and so I supplied the children with clay tools and showed them how to use them. Another found that he could pinch the griffin’s head to emulate the spiked mane, while one boy found that if clay was too heavy, it would slump over when he tried to make his griffin stand. Although we did not fire these griffins, we kept them to dry, and when we did so, the children noticed that the very thin parts of the clay crumbled easily or broke apart where they were joined. We referred to these strategies as the children worked on their individual griffins, although not all children adopted them. I introduced new techniques to the children as I saw we needed
them. For example, I showed them how to slip, score, and smooth the seams when they
connected parts of the griffin bodies together.

When we moved on to create life-size griffins some months later, the children
recalled these technical details. In one drawing, they planned to make the bodies from
boxes and from paper tubes (Figure 49). This was another use of drawing—to plan. They
were especially concerned with how to make the large griffins stand because the paper
tubes were difficult to attach to the cardboard bodies. The children first tried masking
tape, which did not hold, and then duct tape (hence the injury I shared). Finally, a group
of four girls surmised that if we were to cut holes in the boxes, the tubes could fit into the
holes instead of on top of them. After first measuring the lengths of the tubes
comparatively, they traced around the tubes onto the boxes, and I cut the holes with an art
knife. This solution worked: all the griffins stood on their own, although they stood
upright and not like the statue. The children decided that detail was no longer important
in the face of the challenge of making the griffins stand (taller than they were, in some
cases).
These details are an important disclosure. By suggesting that visual languages perform social work, I do not suggest that they do so independently of social learning. Nor do I suggest that children are “naturally” creative or expressive. Rather, I suggest that they learn culturally-coded ways of communicating with the support of both peers and adults. While the children learn a great deal from one another while they work in groups, they also learn from my technological interventions. In this way, they learn that different types of graphics (drawings) perform different kinds of social work, depending upon the situation. In this way, the visual languages intersect with and support other languages in the making process. Within the negotiated space of the classroom, children and I share control through a continually negotiated process.

Figure 49: In this drawing, a group of four six-year-old girls plan out how they could make a griffin from a paper box and paper tubes.
Sound-making Machines and Materials

Not surprisingly, we found that all manageable elements of the classroom were under the teacher’s control. The teachers, for example, to a large extent controlled the storage and distribution of supplies. Although the teachers had no control over the type of storage space available, they did make all the decisions as to where the media should be stored, which allowed them to be quite selective. Their decisions were most crucial, for they determined directly the manner in which the media were to be used. Further, the teachers were in the position of defining an outcome of child activity as “art.” This was done by placing or not placing aesthetic value on the objects made with the various media (Rosario & Collazo, 1981, p. 77, original emphasis).

Remember that ancient tape recorder I mentioned? It languished in the studio for some time, until Mia and Laila resurrected it from obscurity for their sound-making machine.

The sound making machine was a collaborative project initiated by the music teacher, three third grade teachers, and me. The third grade students were studying the physics of sound in their science curriculum, and so were curious about how sounds were made.

To initiate the process, we drew sounds to try to figure out how they look (Figure 50). After this, we painted sounds and used paper to sculpt sounds (Figure 51). Finally, we decided (collaboratively) to make sound-making machines. An important distinction here: The machines were not instruments. They were machines—intended to
produce *sounds*, not music. Those sounds were either random or found in nature (galloping horse hooves, for example). The children did not want to recreate instruments that already exist: They wanted to create machines that make new sounds. This does not mean that they did not combine the sounds from their machines in rhythmic ways:

Several groups of children presented and performed with their machines at a family evening.

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Figure 50: In their drawings, children hypothesized about how sound looks. Here, birds are singing and water is dripping into a sink from a faucet.

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Figure 51: Eight-year-old children used paper scraps to sculpt how sounds look.
Throughout the process, materials were a primary concern for the children. In particular, the materials needed to either have or have the potential to be modified to have sonorous qualities. Despite this, we had few materials: Only those that had been donated by families to the studio or those that had been left by previous teachers. Upon a casual assessment, few of these materials seemed ideal. Some of them (a proliferation of toilet paper rolls) were cliché. In order to present them in a way that suggested further possibilities to the children, I separated the materials by type and arranged them in installations at the back of the classroom (Figure 52). Inspired by the ways in which educators in Reggio use recycled or re-use materials, I researched “the possibilities of the material—which things were best for which use” (Gambetti as cited in Rabitti, 1992, p. 25). I intended to alter the environment and to suggest uses that emphasize the sonorous qualities of the materials as well as possibilities for their use in assemblage. Like educators in Reggio, I attempted to choose “intelligent” materials or, more accurately, to emphasize the intelligence concealed in the materials that were available to us. Like the teachers who Rosario and Collazo (1981) describe, I was in control of most of the decisions about the materials that children used in the classroom, at least at the outset of the project. I expected the children to “read” (Gambetti as cited in Rabitti, 1992, p. 23) the environment and to choose materials “according to what they wanted to tell” which meant that “they must know the different materials” (Gambetti as cited in Rabitti, 1992, p. 25, original emphasis). This knowing went beyond the aesthetic qualities of the materials (although they way they looked was important to the children) to the evocative and communicative potentials of the materials. In a way, the process resembled the object
substitutions of Vygotsky’s theory of play where a stick becomes a riding horse (Smolucha, 1989).

In the midst of the project, however, children begin to look for and to discover sonorous qualities or intriguing physical attributes in a variety of materials. They would bring these materials to the school or request them: Sometimes they made machines at home, too. In most cases, I was able to fulfill their requests for additional materials. This is where our tape recorder resurfaced. Mia and Laila decided that if their sound-making machine could mimic certain sounds (for example, they had attached wires to the box to mimic rain and had attached metal electrical outlet covers to clash together and mimic horses’ hooves), then their sound-machine could also play recorded sounds. They recorded a repetitive version of their initials. When they performed with their machine, they played the tape as they made the other sounds. Beyond this, other groups of children

Figure 52: We arranged toilet paper rolls to emphasize both their formal attributes and their sonorous possibilities.
anthropomorphized their machines, making them into either fantastic characters or props for fantasy play.

Although this is necessarily a short overview of the many directions of this project and my many interventions within it, I find it particularly illustrative in four ways. First, it reveals ways in which teachers’ selection and presentation of materials is suggestive. As Wilson (1974) explained, Cizek offered his students thick brushes and juicy paint. Here, I offered my students ordinary objects presented in narrative ways. Although the materials were not “art” materials, they could be assembled in ways that performed visual social work. Second, the project reveals how an emphasis on a defamiliarization of everyday materials helps to make divisions between home and school permeable. Children transformed materials that were a part of their daily lives. Third, these transformations are intimately related to children’s attractions to narratives and fantasy play. Fourth, the project would probably not have been nearly as successful had I suggested to the children that we “make instruments” or had I designated the projects “art.” Even though the objects and performances the children made and choreographed could be considered art, I emphasized their possibilities as emblematic of social and intellectual work.

Environmental Transformations: Altering Spaces and Sites

Environmental transformations are one of the most distinctive features of the Reggio “aesthetic.” Educators in Reggio explain that they view the “environment” as a “third teacher” and emphasize the importance of reading the environment: It reveals
important ideas. Both social constructivist learning theories and aesthetic theories inform their construction of environments as third teachers. As I discussed earlier, educators transform the environment through their curatorial selection and display of “intelligent materials.” Although they may consider these materials “beautiful,” they are chosen not only for their formal properties but for their educational identities. In a sense, the materials are developmentally appropriate: Educators choose them because they know—from their documentation and experience—that children will use them and extend their use in certain ways. Educators both allow ample time for children to become familiar with and confident in using particular materials for communicative and evocative purposes. Beyond the material culture of the schools, educators (working in collaboration with families, architects, and designers) design school environments in a way that supports transformations. The environments are not overly determined but open to multiple and continuous transformations—to support that idea of entropy or of continuous change.

In their study of environments for children in Reggio Emilia, Ceppi and Zinni (1998) emphasize the keywords “overall softness, relation, osmosis, multisensoriality, epigenesis, community, constructiveness, narration” and “rich normality.” As Piazza (2005) explains, “When we speak about a rich normality, we refer to daily encounters with materials that are not necessarily part of a specific project” (p. 134, original emphasis). Educators in Reggio achieve these design aims by focusing on light, sound, texture, smell, and the other sensible qualities of the environment. Furthermore, educators can examine each of these aspects of the environment not only in project contexts but also in children’s daily life in the school. The school is intended to be both a museum and
a laboratory—to support narrative and discriminatory engagements. Its appearance resembles an interactive installation, although it might be too easy to succumb to this kind of superficial assessment and to make a direct connection between installation as an art form and the schools. They are not artistic institutions, but educational ones.

The display of carefully chosen materials—meaningful and appropriate within the Reggio context—transforms the environment of the school and especially of the ateliers and mini-ateleirs. Beyond this, educators in Reggio use materials to transform the space of the school. These transformations form interactive cultural texts that can read in ways that reveal both the schools’ constructions of children and the schools’ values.

The transformations, which may range from projections of transparent materials on the ceiling, wall, and floors of educational spaces to a construction of a kind of living ecosystem within Balducci School, accentuate the emphasis that educators and children working within the schools place upon fantasy and transformation. Natural and man-made traces record children’s, teachers’, and families’ lives within the school. These evolving installations reveal not only the permeability of the curriculum of the school but also the permeability of the school itself as it intentionally transcends spaces between home and school. In this way, both the curricular and the physical space of the schools support positive tensions between dichotomous ideas. The environment is challenging in both senses of that word.
Questions that Linger

I will pack up my clipboard and camera for eight more weeks. Always as unsure as a new teacher, I have no idea what might happen during this abbreviated expanse of time with children. But, I am certain that letting go will be harder than I have imagined it to be. I am only hopeful that the stir of anticipation I feel at the immense luxury of becoming a university-based researcher will propel me while the memories of lives and possible lives in the classroom buoy me. I know that it will be a struggle to remember the nuances of the smells and the sounds of life with young children in the classroom. I will be vigilant against the cliché, as I vow to remember now those questions that linger both at the end of the largest writing project I have yet undertaken and the probable end of my full-time teaching career.

And, so here I am here, writing at school. I would never finish this very study without writing in all the available margins of my day, including some of those that I generally use to plan, prepare for, and document my class. So, I bought a laptop and the freedom that comes with such a justifiable indulgence. Too, how could I share my electronic documentation with children who could not see it? The small screen of the digital camera seems too limiting—as the children crowd around to see the visible record of their play and making they are given to pushing and shouting rather than contemplation and dialogue. Now armed with my portable electronic journal, I feel drawn to immediately record those fleeting thoughts that seem to compose themselves so eloquently while I am too busy doing something else to remember them the way they lilt
through my mind. And now I am sitting in my empty classroom composing into
sentences the snippets that were once destined to reside along with other scribbled three-
word fragments on sticky notes at the bottom of my teacher basket. I would, sometimes,
try to remember just how I had thought them when I returned home late at night to my
bedside stack of sticky notes but more often than not, my memory would fail just as
hunger and exhaustion set in, rendering my once seemingly poignant thoughts
subservient to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

I am, as usual, the first person at school. I like it in the dark and quiet. Preferring
to come early rather than stay late, I drink tea and listen to music on college radio while I
envision the possibilities of the day. Well, at least that is what I would rather think of
myself doing. It is as likely that I’ll be taking out yesterday’s lunchtime garbage, flushing
whatever’s left in the toilet from the after school program, sweeping and mopping the
floor, making copies while the machine is in a good mood, reviewing documentation that
I hope to share, and frantically forcing down a stale-ish granola bar. For me, this before-
school ritual is a kind of romantically suspended time that I know will abruptly end when
the first child arrives (and as their families no doubt pick up on my habits, the children
are usually early, too).

And this makes me think about the power of the imaginary in teaching: the
compulsions of desire, fantasy and possibility. Each unfolding day in the classroom
affords me to an opportunity to construct experiences as I would like them to be, even if I
profess to have no agenda. Having no agenda is an agenda—my decision to be open to
certain possibilities of the day. It is simultaneously both/and: both personal and political.
And if I am arguing that these compulsions of fantasy selves, too, are so motivating for
children, aren’t I assuming they are equally as compelling for adults? If they weren’t, I doubt that places like Reggio would exist beyond themselves, but that is a topic for further along in this epilogue.

And, so here I am, writing at school, already typing out tangents that obscure the real reason I took out the keyboard—the mound of cleaning notwithstanding—I couldn’t bear to think about the cookie-cutter art decorating our room! I am trying not to judge the pastel tissue paper flowers stuck on lopsided pipe cleaner stems displayed in drinking glasses and adored with leaves on which a teacher has obviously written each child’s name. Even as I write, I feel guilty for being such a snob, afraid I might be exposed by the words that support the mask of optimism I surely will wear all day! I am sure the children enjoyed making the collages with yellow flower petals, green leaves, and pink ribbons already cut. They look all the same. And I am sure that the staff teachers who filled in for me were excited that I was gone so that they could do what wanted with the children. Or maybe they didn’t know what to do at all when faced with twenty two energetic and demanding bodies and so did what they thought would be right. Either way, I’m uncomfortable. And, I must admit, I sort of like some of the collages. They are charming in the way that they have been pasted—the colors are joyful. And, I have a tremendous respect for the teachers with whom I work so hard each day! So, too much theory is probably in me for teaching, too much of teaching might be in me for theory. And yet this in-between space is so untenable! The little voice in my head faults me continuously as it reaches for clichés to cover up the immitigable expanse between these spaces described by such abstract affiliations (both/and, teacher/researcher)—am I trying to be someone I’m not in the classroom? I am itching all over and I know that I must
close my laptop right quick before anyone else arrives and asks why I am writing at school…

Three-year-old Bella arrives at 8:15—after sharing her daily at-home drawing with me—a picture of my assistant teacher and me and a clock on which I recognize her mom’s handwriting in the number. Looking to the wall of flower collages she asks with sincerity, “What one did I make?” It’s the first time I’ve ever heard the question in my classroom. My mind suddenly jumps to four-year-old Elise’s hurtful insistence the week before that I had removed her “Chinese writing” from a piece of scratch paper intended just to cover the table surface but upon which the children wrote anyway. I hadn’t recognized the importance of such small marker marks.

And, so the children reassure me that they feel a difference. At the same time, I must admit that I was more than flattered when five-year-old Jean-Michel handed me the tissue-paper flower that he had made and divulged, “I made this one for you.” And, things swung back again when Elise’s mom asked whether or not she should take the flower from her daughter’s cubby home and my assistant teacher replied without hesitation, “Sure! It was just a time-filler!” The burden of meaning was on the children. And so, I am hopeful that this study contributes in some small way to a more nuanced mapping of the rocky terrain in-between poles and the ruptures and sutures that penetrate permeable borders.
The Dark Side of Being Cheesy and Puffy

Recently, I re-presented a portion of the Cheesetopia documentation of this study at a conference panel. Participants in the panel discussed various aspects of aesthetics and documentation in pedagogy—how images affect pre-service teacher’s assumptions about children and teaching in urban schools, how preschoolers re-saw themselves when re-presented with documentation of them in uncomfortable moments of aggressive or gender-crossing play, how difficult it seems to be for advanced practicum students to use documentation to not only make astute visual displays but to also delve into the learning happening between children in their classrooms, and mine—how children initiate, sustain, and undo aesthetic communities they develop around their consumption and production of particular site-specific visual cultures. We were fortunate: our respondent was especially generous in her appraisal of the connections and disconnections between our related, yet wholly different, projects. She wondered aloud if documentation must only concern what seems good, what seems beautiful and right and what might happen if it included children (and adults) in uncomfortable moments—tears, anger; the wrenching process of making oneself and one’s meaning known and meaningful in the context of relationships. On the long walk back to hotel, I was stunned. Here, I thought, I am claiming to be interested in just these uncomfortable moments; these uneasy intersections between the real, historical child and the eternal child and those children who are unacceptable yet I had edited these very moments out of my own documentation. I had not documented the dark side of being cheesy and puffy, though surely it existed and I
remember it quite well. And nowhere to be found was either my discomfort with parts of the project or my uneasy stance as researcher and teacher—I was passing both ways.

I agree with Kant’s controversial idea of the aesthetic community that “forms and undoes” (Erlmann, 1998) itself on the basis of taste. Cheesetopia was a dystopia—like a microcosm of other ill-fated forms of government, it grew too big to be effective. The initial protagonists lost interest, except for a sole fervent proponent, while the newer members fashioned it into something else entirely. It was much like any other subculture that becomes co-opted or reaches its intuitive end. Even with the aid of the camera and clipboard, with the written record of children’s exact words, I had committed a conceit of memory. I didn’t record the arguments. My memory had glossed over the playground negotiations. And so, I was left without visible traces of the dystopia of Cheesetopia. The record I had, while certainly important to me and to the children whom it represented, was incomplete and could not be restored. Which leads me to another question: What does/could it mean to document each part of learning? Is accuracy possible or even advisable? How can multiple truths be shown? Since I have returned from writing and conferences to hunker down with the children in all our uncomfortable moments (of which we have no shortage), I have been documenting more of the difficult times as we wade wholeheartedly through the remaining fragments of the school year. I am curious to know what the children will think if we document the vast space that surrounds what we have sometimes too-narrowly defined as learning. So far (three days into the project), they are more comfortable with it than we adults. When I was reading the unkind words children said back to them at our classroom meeting, I stumbled and faltered. I have yet to share the photographs—I find it difficult to look at them; almost like I have a kind of
visceral response not only to their indiscriminate recording of pain but also to a kind of revulsion that I am doing something that might teeter on the edge of what feelings and actions can be authorized within classroom relationships. Yet, those things did (and do) happen. We hurt one another emotionally (and sometimes the children hurt one another physically). Despite the attempts of society to set-apart the space of school (and within the school, the classroom) as something wholly and temporally other—what Deleuze, following Foucault, calls an “enclosure”\(^1\) (1992) the body bleeds into it.

This was the only time when sharing documentation that I had difficult re-reading words from my notes—“We’re sneaking up on the boys to hit them because they’re being mean to us,” “I hate you and you’re never going to be my friend again,” “Layla said I couldn’t be her momma,” “Leah said there could only be one Sleeping Beauty and so she put her hands on my neck and squeezed,” “Even though we tell the bad guys not to chase us they don’t listen. The bad guys don’t listen. They don’t stop. Even though we tell them they don’t stop,” and “And the boys were going to kill us because they didn’t want to marry us because we wanted princes to marry us and they didn’t.” I was tempted (but we plowed ahead) to censor them as we read, uncertain as to whether or not the children would recognize their hurtful words as readily as they did their contributions to classroom projects. This brings me to the next question:

\(^1\) In his essay “Postscript on the societies of control” (1992), Deleuze explores how the enclosures of disciplinary societies (families, schools, hospitals, prisons) are interiors in crisis in societies of control, where one does not simply pass through an enclosure (from the family to the school to the hospital, etc.) but where enclosures are both simultaneously threatened by new social forms and subject to continuing reforms.
What if All Children are (Can Be) Unacceptable?

And that brings me now to the part of the epilogue that I wrote several months earlier, just after my defense and during Winter Break, when I was trying my best to assert my ideas with greater confidence. One of those ideas was about “unacceptable” children—the words I used to describe those children who are doomed to never resemble an eternal, innocent child. When I first wrote about unacceptable children, I was thinking about the children with whom I’d recently worked at my last elementary position—the school site which is the primary site for this study. Those children were garden-variety uncomplicated Others—children of color and children who experienced poverty—not the sinister and scary Others who exist within and inside us. Here is what I wrote then:

December is one of my favorite teaching months. Generally, the children are in good spirits (even if those moods are helped along by sweets and the fantasy of that ubiquitous red-suited fat man) while winter break looms large with its triumphant promise of a whole week filled by the richness of silence. On the evening before flying back to the East Coast to spend time with family and friends, I curled up in my classroom reading corner to open the gifts that my preschool students had chosen for me. One tiny box was thoughtfully wrapped: It was easy to see that a grown-up hand had been invoked in its presentation. I opened it, always careful to save ribbons, paper, and bows that can be re-used in the mini-studio. Inside were most of the tiny cherished items that had gone missing from our classroom: juicy beads and small, polished wooden disks. Jordan had either thought about what I would like as a gift or had been pressured
into a confession by her mom. Before I left school for the week, I put the relinquished items back in their places. I was eager to see classroom life roll on after the extended break and blossom into the Spring as it usually did. Neither I nor Jordan has ever mentioned what she gave to me.

The next day, an impending winter storm impelled my husband and I to abruptly change our travel plans and make the thirteen-odd-hour trip to Pennsylvania from Iowa by car. Taking full advantage of such a luxury, our conversation turned quickly from the details of household maintenance to our work. He asked about my dissertation. I confessed that I was nervous about the last chapter: the epilogue. In my mind, it had grown to an importance of immense weight: I envisioned it not only as eulogy for the work that had preceded it but also as a promise of what might be to come. Uncertainty about what I still struggled to articulate meaningfully welled up in my voice. An aching fatigue that followed the euphoria of finishing a brutal semester of full-time preschool teaching and full-time dissertation writing stoked my uncertainty. I glimpsed my tired eyes in the passenger side mirror. Giving into what I hoped was a fleeting moment of self-pity, I wondered silently if I had the stamina to continue?

Quick to change the subject, I shared my story of the gift. He kidded me about my euphemism for theft: “borrowed without asking.” I defended it. Children had indeed returned the majority of the items without me impressing it upon them. Even when I had never mentioned that an item had gone missing (in one case, a borderline-school-appropriate *Manga*), a group of concerned children would rise to the occasion and establish a search party. Inevitably, the borrowed
item would emerge, dog-eared and stained with graphite from the sour depths of a
contrite party’s book bag. I was secretly pleased that the children had felt so
connected to the books or objects and so driven to incorporate them into their
fantasy play that they couldn’t resist taking. A question that lingers with me even
as I look to every plausible explanation—psychological, cognitive, social,
psychoanalytic—surrounds the ideas of development and motivation. Why (and
how) is fantasy so pleasurable and so very compelling? For me, too, as a
researcher and teacher, this idea of what is possible—what could become—drives
me compulsively back to the work even when I wonder if I can sustain it. In a
paper that he wrote about fantasy, my husband used a quotation that he later
deleted. We’ve never been able to re-locate the source, yet the thought lingers:
 fantasy supplies what is missing in the social. I think that this might be (at least
partially) true. Through my writing, too, I construct a kind of fantastic
representation of my classroom—that is what was troubling me in the
introduction to this epilogue—that it’s a knowing conceit. And, here, too, this re-
construction relates so intimately to the section in this very chapter on voice,
writing, and the process of “constantly reconstituting” (Corsaro, 1992) both
oneself and knowledge through research.

Cutting me off in a typically masculine academic way, he talked his way
back to his argument that my euphemism was all about framing—that I was
choosing to see the children as less-than-thoughtful borrowers but not as thieves.
Always one for armchair psychotherapy, he offered that in order to believe what I
wanted to about education, I had to frame the children that way. It was my
fantasy. Continuing in this vein, he suggested that I entitle that Epilogue section *Dangerous Minds*. He persisted, “Isn’t that, after all, what you’re talking about? Some kids are dangerous; others aren’t. The kids in *Dangerous Minds* are dangerous because they’re Others. Suburban kids aren’t dangerous unless they’re tainted by some kind of urban force. They’ve got no original sin; they’re whole—innocent until proven guilty.” For a moment, I envisioned children’s brains floating about like errant helium balloons, disconnected from their bodies but abuzz with the threatening hum of the collective kinderculture and its various subcultural permutations that permeated the classroom while a man in a suit tried frenetically to catch and contain them. The threat of a loss of control even despite the herculean efforts of the institutions of education to regulate the bodies within their boundaries is what made these minds dangerous. I realized that the illusion of wholeness was just that—an illusion. Every child could be dangerous—the dangers aren’t only external (violent video games, for example) but internal (that the Other is already inside of us).

I think of Jack, one of the protagonists of the “crossing streams” story in my prologue. Now, as I write, I look down at my hands and smile at the scratches on them: They are his marks on me. Jack is from an upper-middle-class background. He lives with two parents (both academics) and an older brother. Were Jack a student at my previous school, his penchant for the scatological and his tendency to run away from school in the nude would have rendered him unacceptable. Most likely, he would have been targeted for observation, medication, or both. At my new school, this is funny (thank goodness for Jack).
At best, it is precocious and a sign that he is “bored” with curriculum (which I indeed believe to be somewhat true). He’s not bad, he’s a genius! And yes, Jack is extraordinarily intelligent and sensitive, even if all the other teachers are relieved he’s in my class. What he needed from me was not to be pressured into “shape,” but to be supported and cared-for unconditionally. And, yet, I realize even as I write this that I tread on the precipice of the saccharine. It is hard to write about the realities of children without idealizing or demonizing them. I always ask myself: If Jack were an adult, would I feel the same way about him?

Can this relationship be turned inside out—the frail constructed-ness of the binary exposed? Can teacher and students, adult and children, work with one another in the act of research—of constructing knowledge and building theory? I believe that it is possible but that such a constant negotiation requires an attentive balance and a belief that all children can be both acceptable and unacceptable.

The concept of unacceptable children never worked the way that I had hoped it would, but it still haunted me. In trying to describe a dissonance that I could not equilibrate, I was prey to a kind of oppositional thinking so that I could begin to make sense of something that affected me in intense personal and professional ways. So, here I am not only asserting this concept but thinking—through writing—my way through it. The concept only really works if the messy space between the opposition of acceptable and unacceptable children is explored and exposed. It only works if all children can be unacceptable; if they can be more than one thing at more than one time and in more than one space; and if the messiness of the Other inside us all can be allowed into the most
publicly sanctioned spaces of the classroom. This would presuppose that children are never fixed, singular, or whole and that their actions only have meaning in specific contexts.

In his essay “Language and Otherness,” Bruce Fink (1995) discusses (in Lacanian terms) how language is Other. He asks, “How did it [this Other] get inside of us? How did something which seems so extraneous or foreign wind up speaking through our mouths?” (p. 5, original emphasis). So, he is, in a way, asking if what we define as Other isn’t really something outside of us but something inside of us of which we are afraid: an Other that could well up at any time and overtake us without our conscious consent. And so, I think that what Fink is postulating (from the very different perspective of the practicing Lacanian analyst) is that we must render unacceptable children Other in order to sustain the conceit (that everyone who has worked with children must know to be false) that children are innocent and eternal and not the smaller versions of our complicated selves that we wished that they weren’t. So, my concept works only if we accept that what is simmering underneath the surface is the recognition of both ourselves and the Other in children. So, the concept of unacceptable children applies to all children under the right circumstances—all children, like all adults, are both/and.

**Why does Reggio Emilia Exist?**

Throughout my relationship with the Reggio approach, I have struggled to contribute to the conversation about what makes Reggio so appealing and what compels those inspired by Reggio to reproduce it (or aspects of it) within their own contexts. What
persuades throngs of educators to not only recognize themselves in the idea of Reggio but to also feel convinced of its universality? It’s nearly cult-like, quasi-religious in a way that resembles other fervent devotions to early-childhood mantras like Waldorf and Montessori. Those inspired by Reggio must spread the gospel of the light-table in lieu of the pink tower and the beeswax crayon. As I watch the children draw on the pink tower in my classroom with a beeswax crayon (hand-made and organic, of course) and dump the larger pieces of said tower on the light table with a thud, I’m on the outs with at least one at any given moment, yet a fervent fan of selecting their most tantalizing accoutrements. I’m a methodological dilettante, and I am certain not the only one of my kind!

Despite this indulgence, I am curious as to why labels are so compelling to education—why each school with which I have worked has struggled to not identify itself as itself but to align itself with something bigger. At the school at which I collected most of the data for this study, this was an essential conflict among the staff. The school had once been a “Tribes” school and was struggling to reconcile its Tribes identity with its identity as a Boys’ and Girls’ Town School and a Core Essentials school. While no staff member particularly felt that any of these philosophies accurately described the whole school, they agreed that we needed a singular school philosophy/methodology. We needed a common language but didn’t have the time to develop it. We could only move forward with some kind of program in place—it was necessary to begin with a model. If only we could agree on one! We never did, and so the school floated in a kind of nebulous in-between place where people used a lot of belabored phrases to describe simple things and experienced alienation and confusion. A discussion in class was no longer a discussion but a “community circle,” a “community meeting,” or a place to
establish “ground rules.” All of these labels came with arduous sets of instructions that required teachers to follow “research-based” processes with tools like “affinity diagrams,” “lotus diagrams,” “plus/delta,” “nominal group technique,” and “force-field analysis.” These are all scary ways for young children and teachers to say what they like and don’t like at school. I am sure this is a place for a complicated Marxist or post-capitalist analysis, but I am less concerned with the symptoms of the labeling than with the initial impulse for labels (what Laclau (1995) calls “empty signifiers” like quality and excellence), or perhaps they are one and the same. A similar kind of thing has happened at my current school, which was once itself, but in order to seem more authoritative as a school and to work toward accreditation, sought a model to describe its practice. That model was the Basic School, while the preschool decided to become a Montessori school; a process that involves not only re-certification for all the teachers in the preschool but also an assessment of the school as a whole from one of two rival Montessori assessment agencies in the United States. So, beyond deciding to be a Montessori school, the school had to decide whether or not to be an American Montessori Society School or an Association Montessori Internationale school. The board explained that while they did look at the Reggio Emilia model, Montessori seemed to fit better with Basic School. I cringed when I heard the news; I don’t know whether I was more upset that the board called the Reggio Emilia approach a model or by the thought that I might have to endure 300 hours of coursework to become re-certified as a Montessori teacher. And I should reveal, too, that like many early educators, I do have an intense fondness for many of Montessori’s educational materials and ideas. Her work no doubt influences my own, but
the idea of being fully committed to something outside of our own experience in the classroom felt false.

After the sting of these injustices softened, I realized that what really made me angry was that the decision was made that we must label what we do: it does not define itself. The labels, about which the teachers did not decide, added a layer of complication to our in-process work. It seemed as though our self-contained, site-specific meaning was not enough. Did it have meaning outside of our context?

Of course, I thought it could be enough as it was beginning to embed itself within the social structures outside of the school and to sustain its own kind of site-specific meaning. In the end, I decided not to enroll in the Montessori teaching training and to do what I usually (and what I believe many teachers) do—keep the restrictiveness of such models at bay while I did what I thought would work best in my classroom. This is, I believe, a kind of fundamental problem with educational affiliations. There are generally polarized in this way: while some teachers are absolute stalwarts who have experienced a complete, almost religious, conversion (some of those Tribes hold-outs at my old school), most others do what they feel is best, whether it aligns or not with the institutional philosophy. Their decisions are based in a kind of confluence between the official party line and their own socially-constructed intuitions and experiences of teaching and being with children. But, I think, as I know I do (or perhaps the conditions of being in a graduate program has made me more fearless), that the teachers who choose to do things in their own ways always worry a bit that their subversions will be either revealed or reviled. I felt so last month, when after returning to school from an absence on a day in which we were to host our Montessori consultants for a site visit, I found the children’s
artwork taken down and stashed in a corner. When I asked my assistant teacher (who was taking over the class) what happened, she explained that she took the work down because she knew the consultants wouldn’t approve of it. I think that documentation, too, can salve some of the danger of this underground educational practice. By making visible what is hidden (especially when the outcomes are so incredible), it can work toward allowing teachers to function as experts and researchers in their own right in classrooms.

But, I digress. I know this isn’t another dissertation, but an epilogue, and so I’ll force myself to write back to Reggio. Perhaps, then, the Reggio approach is so appealing because it does not boast a methodology but rather a starting point for a philosophy. On top of this, the starting point—the image of the rich and powerful child of which I write in Chapter One—is one upon which most teachers agree. But, then, there is a bit of danger in an approach or a philosophy too vaguely defined, too. A teacher could do whatsoever she pleases, which wouldn’t necessarily always be educationally sound. So, here, too, is a teacher-education issue. And, of course, there is the fact that most of the decisions of educational philosophy (at least from what I have seen in American public schools) are made on a district or administrative level, with little input from the teachers who spend so many hours a day working with children and defining their own instructional philosophies. These are questions that I think will continue to fascinate me as I move forward in my work as both teacher and researcher.

I always have trouble reigning myself in when I write and so I know that I have not yet addressed the portability of the Reggio approach or for that matter, the portability of any educational approach coupled with an analysis of the most unique aspect of the Reggio approach. Although I have attempted to build theory within this study as a whole,
in this section of the epilogue, I do find it useful to go to theory to provide a framework for further understanding the portability of the Reggio approach. I am hopeful, then, that the theory will not be forced or an uncomfortable fit but will rather add to what is missing in most discussions of Reggio—a nuanced understanding of the complications and conditions surrounding its appropriation and a proposal of the idea of a site-specific pedagogy.

Possible confluences between two primary theoretical bodies inform this discussion. Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is the first. In that work, Benjamin describes how reproduction simultaneously augments the aura of an object while diminishing its authority. The object is freed from its geographically, culturally, and historically fixed state—from its authority—yet in its freedom from what Benjamin calls “tradition,” it inspires a kind of new fascination with its authenticity. Building on this idea in their discussion of brand communities, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) explain that a key feature of a brand community is that the brand is liberated from geography—you don’t have to travel to Italy to be a Fiat-enthusiast. Contemporary tourist theory also supports my ideas—in several pieces, authors assert that while a person no longer has to travel to Paris to consume la Tour Eiffel (you can “own” the Eiffel tower in a photograph), doing so augments a person’s cultural capital. It, too, increases the chance that a tourist might be disappointed by what she sees in viewing the real Eiffel tower. For example, a quick

2 In their study, Muniz and O’Guinn investigate the widespread and cult-like following of brands such as Saab, Macintosh, and Broncos. In particular, they looked to how online communities supported individuals’ engagements with and enthusiasm for brands and how members of a brand community defined authentic or more desirable engagement with brands.
Google search of the Pantheon reveals that few tourist photographs include the McDonald’s just across the piazza: I was surprised when I saw it! And, so I empathize with those who felt disappointed on our trip to Reggio—they had not only seen children misbehave, they had seen an adult directly teach a child how to draw a person. This last glimpse of the reality in Reggio was the subject of a fervent lunch-time debate. While one side of the table felt that the cover had been blown, the other was relieved to have confirmation of what they suspected all along—the “real” Reggio became much more comfortably close to home, whether home had a light table or not.

While it might seem strange to apply these theories to my discussion of the portability of an educational approach, I believe that what happens with Reggio has at least as much to do with the imaginary in teaching, with wonderment, with fantasy, and with desire as it does with innovative educational practices. In fact, I don’t think that the pleasure that children experience from pretending to be a superhero or princess in their play is that far removed from the pleasure an adult feels in imagining (or experiencing) Reggio.

To begin with Benjamin, I would like to establish a basis for comparing “Reggio” or the image of a Reggio to a work of art. This is because the portability of the Reggio approach primarily depends on visual means; on style. When educators visit Reggio, as a tourist site (which I will explain further), they are often forced to take it in visually (as site-seeing) because they do not have access to the language—and to a great majority, then, of the documentation that reveals the real work of the schools. They may also have a lack of understanding of the social and political history of the site and a less sophisticated understanding of the culture: In other words, they have limited access to
what makes up the world of Reggio. This is not to say that the educator-as-tourist in Reggio is unsophisticated, as Johnson (1999) has hinted. That is often quite the opposite of the case, as a desire for increased sophistication in education often draws one into the idea of Reggio as a counterpoint to the mainstream of educational practice. In fact, most of the tourists in Reggio resemble those that Craik (1997) describes as well-educated, primarily female, and “culturally inspired to make a once-in-a-lifetime visit to a special site or attraction” (p. 120).

So, in other words, sophisticated outsiders consume Reggio by looking, but by a kind of looking that renders them naïfs. As such, Reggio becomes an authentic, auratic object of site and a repository for desire as it carries a kind of authority about itself as an authentic original. So, while it exists in reality it acquires a kind of “larger-than-life” existence in individual and collective (and particular—early childhood education) cultural memories. In this way, then, the idea of Reggio as much as its physical actuality constitutes Reggio as a tourist site or sight. As Rojek (1997) explains, “A tourist sight may be identified as a spatial location which is distinguished from everyday life by virtue of its natural, historical, or cultural extraordinariness.” He continues, “Urry (1990) argues that tourist sites are predicated in a binary opposition between the ordinary/everyday and the extraordinary (p. 52).” It seems, then, that Reggio neatly fits this assessment. It is in a romantic physical and cultural location. It not only offers the promise of an opposition between the ordinary and everyday in the tourist’s personal life but also the opposition of the everyday in the tourist’s public life. So, when we go to Reggio we reap two benefits of this duality—an experience removed from the everyday realities of both public and private life. Reggio offers the promise of cultural richness and the temptation of doing-
good—of changing what appears to be an ever-more-insidious trajectory of educational and social change. And Reggio appears to converge upon a kind of fulfillment of two dreams of cultural tourism—the having of a wonderful time and of “wonderful ideas” (Duckworth, 1996).

The promise of the duality of these experiences no doubt helps to construct Reggio as a site. For example, as Rojek explains, “The remoteness of the sight […] invites speculation and fantasy about the nature of what one might find […] This refers to our knowledge of the culture of tales, symbols, and fantasies which surround a given sight (p. 53).” Reggio, then, fits Rojek’s idea of an “extraordinary place.” He explains, “As a social category ‘the extraordinary place’ spontaneously invites speculation, reverie, mind-voyaging and a variety of other acts of imagination” (p. 52). While this mind-voyaging helps to reconstitute a site, it does not supplant a visit to the site itself. As Rojek finally concludes, “we must occupy a physical relation with the auratic object before we can genuinely believe in its authenticity” (p. 58).

So, in part, his explanation fits with the idea of why one must make a pilgrimage to Reggio (as I did) in order to make it real, thus further reproducing the site itself. And, indeed, visiting Reggio is an important step in recreating parts of it at home. There is a sense, perhaps unlike that which accompanies visits to more traditional, anchored tourist sites like the Statue of Liberty or so forth, that part of Reggio is not anchored to its site, but that it is portable as an attitude, a set of beliefs and methodologies, or a set of visual practices that can not only be liberated from geography but also liberated from cultural context. But, unlike those educators who champion Montessori or Waldorf, the living educators in Reggio maintain that their approach and its philosophical and visible
consistency is resultant from constant, localized generation of knowledge and negotiation, and that it is not a methodology that can be exported. In this way, Reggio Emilia constitutes what I call a site-specific form of pedagogy—where meaning is not only made in, but intimately tied to, context.

And, yet there would not be such a strong, vocal, and significant subculture of educators nearly religiously devoted to Reggio if there were not a kind of universalistic impulse embedded within its seeming refusal to become orthodoxy. Optimism, a kind of resilient belief in children’s capabilities and the possibilities of schools, fuels interest in Reggio as much as its look and feel. So, the real Reggio must lie somewhere in the confluence between fantasy and optimism—what Loris Malaguzzi accurately calls a kind of nostalgia for the future—the way that it lies in between real children and teachers. I believe that these aspects of Reggio are portable in the traditional sense—they can be recreated off-site—but that they simultaneously mask what is so compelling about Reggio—the idea of a site-specific pedagogy. A site-specific pedagogy, then, is not portable but rather is continuously in motion (as Loris Malaguzzi described the schools in Reggio). It can’t be caught; it’s continuously being made and given meaning by its participants through their participation in particular relationships and discourses. So, in a way, as both McGuire (1999) and Thompson (2008) propose, perhaps the aesthetics of Reggio are the enemy of its meaning.

Because we consume Reggio visually, we often reproduce (at least initially) Reggio visually. How does one make a light table? How did they melt those Fanta bottles? What kind of printer and font do they use? These were questions that I overheard on my first visit to a school in Reggio. In Benjaminian terms, this kind of visual
reproduction releases Reggio from not only its physical locale but also the domain of tradition—of its specific historical and cultural milieu. So, then it has the possibility to become something else entirely, to tie itself or pieces of itself to a new site. And then, that site can simultaneously produce and re-produce itself. This is one of the places where my idea of site-specific pedagogy begins. The process of creating a site-specific pedagogy is not only of reproduction or appropriation but one of embedding. The process of documentation, too, aides in this embedding because through the creation of a visual memory of what happens within and inside a particular site—or space or social world or enclosure—sites and traditions are defined and nested.

What is Gained and Lost in Making?

Throughout this study, I have used the term making to describe children’s multi-modal (visual, written, performative) productions. I have chosen to describe these interrelated productions as making instead of as art because I am not interested in defining what child art is—although if I were pressed for a definition, I would probably acquiesce and label this making art—and I would label all of it as art, not just children’s visual productions. So it would be visual art, performance art, creative writing, etc. I find that in my work with young and with school-age children, the boundaries between play, writing, performance, and drawing/constructing/sculpting/painting are indiscrete. If boundaries exist at all, they are almost always imposed after the making happens and by an outsider (perhaps most often a well-meaning adult).
But, these labels are not necessarily useful for my interest in this study. I am not interested per se in what categories of making are, but what making as a whole does. And making does not just make itself, so children do not just make visual art through their visual productions. Rather, what they make is multiple. They make meaning, they make friendships, they make cultures, they make societies, and they make themselves. The making is constant while the meanings move. In this way, when children make they are making more than what might traditionally be called a product. Making, then, describes not only the ways in which children’s meaning-making in many worlds is multiple but also making describes both the process and the product as it questions the stability of either as a binary category.

I realize, though, that as an art educator, I am taking a risk by not calling what I see child art or what I do teaching art. I have a more holistic view than that—at least in part due to the way in which I became an art educator because of my interest not only in art (and that was strong; especially my experience in art history) but also because of my curiosity about what making means. My intent in using the term making, then, is not to designate children’s productions as less special than art but to rather illustrate how much more intimately they are tied to the social fabric of the kinderculture and the intellectual composition of cognitive and social development than the work of art that stands on its own outside of such richly nested contexts.

In asserting that children’s work is making, too, I am explicitly (as I am in the concept of site-specific pedagogy) referencing contemporary art practices in which an artist does not intend that the work of art stand on its own as a kind of “mute evidence” (Beittel, 1973). In fact, the ways in which I have seen children make in contexts where
their course of making is not directed by an adult perhaps have more in common with the contemporary practices of installation and performance than they do with the traditional practices of drawing and painting. This making, then, has a non-specific meaning. There is no direct, fixed relationship between symbol and meaning, but rather meaning is unanchored and continuously re-created in the motion between maker, making, and other participants in both the historical and contemporary context of the particular dialogue. In this way, then, the word making is a verb that implies a kind of action. In this way, making is directly related to (and helps to constitute) site-specific pedagogy.

One of the directions in which I would like for my future work to move considers the relationships between contemporary art and young children’s artistic practices. I think that the category of making that I am proposing more accurately reflects the artistic and cultural context in which I not only learned about and studied art but also in which I teach. The idea of child art has had a historically intimate relationship with the artistic momentum of the time as it reflected larger societal anxieties and contexts. The present is historical moment, then, is not unique in this right.

**Writing, Voice, Research: Building Theories and Identities**

A great many researchers have examined written products, dividing them into categories and levels. But rarely in the research findings do we catch a glimpse of a youngster, bending over her paper, surrounded by the sounds of pencils being sharpened, of stories begin shared. And nowhere in the research do we find a record of daily changes in a youngster’s writing process. Nowhere do we watch as
a child graduates from a thick red pencil to a thin yellow one, from writing one
draft to shuttling between many. Why haven’t more researchers thought to pull
their chairs alongside youngsters’ desk and watch what the youngsters do during
writing? The method seems so obvious, so logical. It’s hard to imagine why no
one thought of it before (Calkins, 1983, p. 5).

While in this quotation, Calkins talks about researching young children’s writing,
her questions are just as applicable now to research about how children make meaning
through making, with the potential exception that now research has moved beyond its
kind of preoccupation with individual kids to an assessment of what happens in the
collective worlds both between children and between children and adults of child makers.
I might add, as well, that no one that I know has thought to sit down alongside the
researcher-as-writer to record how she makes meaning and creates herself as practitioner,
participant, and theorist through her writing and re-writing. At times, throughout this
writing, I have wished that I did not delete my earlier drafts. I was too eager to erase the
embarrassment of the thoughts I found too naïve to allow permanence in print. But, now,
I think that if I had the opportunity to look back, I might have been able to trace the
provenance of the very ideas that and the researcher who I am defining in this study.

Rinaldi (2006) wrote that teachers become theoretical by quoting someone else.
While she cites Bruner and Dewey as obvious tropes, I think that the cliché is perhaps
even more accessible than those great theorists. I have seen it often in faculty meetings
when one tries to explain a phenomenon of interest in her classroom, “Oh, they are just
expressing themselves.” It is easy to say, eases the lingering questions with a facsimile of
closure, and allows the speaker to segue to the often more pressing issues at hand in any contemporary classroom.

During my first afternoon at a recent conference, I attended a presentation on the “secret” art of boys given by an elementary art teacher. Within the images he showed of young boys making guns, weapons of mass destruction, and war scenes, I saw the experience of many children with whom I have worked. In one particularly long video, a young boy describes vividly (and with continual narrative extension) a mural about a World War Two battle scene. Clearly, his teacher was interested in his work. So interested, in fact, that he both wrote and submitted a proposal to present and share it at a national conference. What struck me during the presentation was the conflict between looking with the eyes of teacher and recognizing what I saw and looking with the eyes of a researcher and seeing that his presentation was not so theoretical. In fact, in each place where I may have inserted a research question, he inserted an answer, usually with a cliché. These clichés, long-stood in art education, like the grand narrative of self-expression, seems to erode the complexity of the landscape of children’s meaning-making and making of selves through making. I suddenly caught myself being too critical. What was I really seeing? When I looked again, what I saw was a teacher, much like me and my colleagues, who was trying to make meaning himself from what he saw within in his classroom. While his documentation was not sophisticated, he was documenting. And through this documentation, he was beginning to build theory. I wondered what would happen if he had a sounding board, a collective of collaborators (as teachers do in Reggio) who would challenge his clichéd explanations and normative assumptions. Then, in reality, he would be building theory from the ground up. The
research process does this, I believe. At its best, when it is dialogical, it provides teachers as researchers an opportunity to develop voices, sometimes contradictory ones, as researchers and as theorists. So, there must be something, some way to scratch at the surface.

And, so I began to think about how I use writing in the research process and about how I write myself into the context of my work through my continual reflection. So, as Rinaldi (2006) says when writing about the documenter

> When you take a picture or you make a document, in reality you don’t document the child but your knowledge, your concept, your idea. So it’s more and more visible—your limits and your vision about the child. You show not who that child is, but your thought. You don’t show the child, but the relationship and the quality of your relationship, and the quality of your looking at him or her. That is why it’s so dramatic because the king is naked! (p. 196, original emphasis)

Throughout this study, then, I am naked! And I feel that way when I re-read, that I want to quickly cover up the things that I have now figured out with the delete button instead of a robe! Instead, I can only focus on what lingers, what continues to bother me as a researcher and teacher as I continually re-create myself through my research and teaching as I go. And the process of writing both supports and defines me as I do this.

One of the thoughts that does linger, then, and perhaps an apt place to end, has to do with my preoccupation with the collective, with the plural, and with the role of the individual within the group. I am struck by the fact that this work is so individual, is so much based on me, that I feel a bit egotistical. In fact, the whole enterprise of teaching—at least in its traditional mode with the pedagogue at the head of the class—is a bit
arrogant. Perhaps, then, this discomfort compels me to press the possibility that teaching can be a collective enterprise that happens in between adults and children and that research can be not only about and for children but with them as well. That is where I plan to go next as I continue to document not only my process but the collective process of making meaning in site-specific contexts.
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Publications


ii This description was posted on a documentation panel outside of the atelier. My translation from the original Italian.