A Quest for the One Hundred

BY: CHRISTIE COLUNGA AND JENNIFER HICKS

CHRISTIE COLUNGA

Christie is the early childhood education program director and a residential faculty member at Paradise Valley Community College in Phoenix, Arizona. Her teaching career includes valuable experiences in varied settings from preschool through college. Her college teaching includes studies of the arts, pedagogical documentation, designing environments, and professional learning. During her tenure at the college, she has secured over $5,000,000 in grant funding to design innovative professional development for the local early childhood education community. She is the co-founder of the Valley of the Sun Children's Initiative, a grass roots organization committed to supporting educators interested in studying the Reggio Emilia Approach.

JENNIFER HICKS

Jennifer has been in the field of early childhood education since 2000 and is a guide of a mixed age group of kindergarten and first grade learners at Phoenix Modern in Phoenix, Arizona. Her study of the Reggio Emilia Approach began in 2011 after attending courses at Paradise Valley Community College (PVCC) where she is now an alum and part-time adjunct faculty. She has particular interests in the role of the *pedagogista*, classroom research, and the study of pedagogical documentation. Since 2013, she has been refining her documentation skills through reflecting with colleagues at PVCC.

Listening to Children’s Theories

“Children produce many theories and hypotheses for interpreting the surrounding reality, but these remain unexpressed because they are not listened to. We thus need to be aware of how little we actually know about children’s autonomous learning strategies” (Castagnetti, Mori, Strozzi, Rubizzi, & Vecchi, 1997, p. 94).

Inspired by this quote from *Shoe and Meter: Children and Measurement*, we would like to share a reflection on what has come to be known as a “quest for the one hundred.”

Stasis: The State of Things Before the Story Begins

What does a creative writer have in common with 3-year-old children? We weren’t sure, but Paradise Valley Community College (PVCC) Adjunct Faculty and Early Childhood Education Coordinator Jennifer Hicks wanted to find out. Jennifer organized a 2-year study with her early childhood education co-teachers, PVCC Creative Writing Faculty Ryan Stone and PVCC Early Childhood Education Faculty Ana Stigsson and Christie Colunga. The group met biweekly to study the stories of the 3-year-old children in Jennifer’s early childhood program. This study of story was a good match for Ryan’s teaching interests of fostering creative growth and thinking in the creative writing classroom and writing workshop. The children in the Creative Writing Collaborative Planning Community of Practice (CWCPCP) may be his youngest students.

The Collaborative Planning Community of Practice is a forum for early childhood educators to participate in an ongoing study of children’s interests in a collaborative setting, discern how children’s thinking and learning develop over longer periods of time, experience the benefits of considering a variety of thoughts and insights, and use a collaborative planning protocol as the foundation to reflect on practice and pedagogy. In the CWCPCP, participants study the documentation of children’s work with a gaze on children’s processes in art-based provocations, the intersections of art-based provocations and children’s social and emotional learning, learning how to communicate with others about children’s thinking and learning, and learning how to make decisions to adjust approaches to curriculum development and teaching practices.

Catalyst: What Sparks the Story or Begins the Conflict?

We thought we were listening. The first story we studied was captured in the block area. The children used the large hollow blocks to create a boat. After a study of the photographs of the children and the structures, the children's comments, and the children's comments after reviewing the photographs, we hypothesized that the mermaid princess, knight, boat savers, and other characters might be telling a story of danger and rescue, and we wondered how children became the characters in the story. Stories continued to emanate from the block area. Big scarves become capes. The blocks become trucks, trains, ambulances, and dark houses. Vampires, witches, and skeletons are characters in the story. It was the end of October, and the stories reflect the visual and commercial context of the children's daily lives. We wondered how the narrative shifts. Who pushes the narrative, and who is holding back?

We thought we were listening. There was no shortage of storytelling. When the children made marks with black Sharpies on white paper, they told a story to go along with the marks: "It looks like a hose, so I am drawing a firetruck." When children were offered wire and pieces of wood with holes, they told stories: "Pew, pew, pew, Ninja power. I am a superhero, and I have a cool gun. It's pulling me." Ryan reminds us that objects are anything you need them to be and are connected to storytelling. In stories, there are always objects that represent more than they are.

We thought we were listening. The program year continues, and there are more stories of danger and rescue, capture and release, and transformation. Jennifer and her co-teachers started the program year with the intention of "supporting the group and each child's social-emotional learning and development through inclusive practices that honor the different, creative ways children express themselves." We thought it was time to ask each child to tell a story.

In the afternoon meeting, children were asked how they wanted to tell their story: drawing and illustrating, acting out their own story, or acting out someone else's story about giants. Commitments were made. Jennifer and her co-teacher facilitated the storytelling, observed, and documented. Some stories turned into incredible books. Some stories were filmed. Ryan noted, "We keep seeing this process manifesting over and over again—[children] doing this with a little bit of guidance, but a lot of it is natural. Exciting to see how it relates to the world."

We thought how the children presented their stories, and their work solidified the idea that we were on the right track and definitely not a pre-packaged one. It was different, but we thought we were doing the right thing. We thought of publishing the stories as a way of preserving them. We think the stories are powerful, but are they powerful if they are not shared?

There was an uneasiness. Were we really listening? There were children not interested in illustrating a book or making a video recording. Jennifer asks, "What is my role in their story? Not without permission, how do I uncover with the children even if they don't want to be part of that tangible piece of what they want to share." We consider this a sticky point. We believe each child has a story to share. How do we make them all visible without betraying the child?

Jennifer's personal notes describe this thought process:

> But how do you hear a child's voice if you are not listening to the language in which the child is most fluent? How do you set up opportunities to become attuned with the languages of the child? As we had been captivated by the biggest players, dominant characters, and louder voices, what were we missing? Who were we not hearing from? Where are the other children and what languages are they using? We are not the teaching team who turns to a more introverted personality and insists they take

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> part in play-acting in front of the class. That is not how you build trust or community. To be inclusive, truly inclusive, we must find ways of honoring each person as an individual who helps complete the group. To honor each person as an individual, we must be able to listen to the way they communicate.

Even with our good intentions and assurances to each other that we were listening, one story almost did not happen. After following the children's interest in giants, we decided to ask the children, "How do you want to tell your giant story?" to which we had a very unexpected reaction. Ori, who usually loves telling and illustrating stories, answered, "I don't care." We could have accepted that the child did not want to participate, instead we listened to our instincts. Jennifer asked Ori, "Do you not care about making a story or do you not care about giants?" It was a risky move, and Jennifer did not anticipate his answer. Ori said he wanted to create a story by acting it out first. Jennifer's reflected,

> I did not know what it meant to act out a story before writing it, but I was ready to find out. When it came time for Ori to tell his story, the group gathered in a circle. We had a video camera ready. Ori moved around the carpet and acted without talking. Listening again to my instincts, I began asking questions. His movements and the answers given to my questions became an entry into his story for the group.

Later Jennifer and Ori watched the video of his acting together. Jennifer took notes and asked clarifying questions. Ori dictated the story. The video and dictation later became a book.

This was a practice with which we were familiar already: offer an experience, observe for the child's response, use the knowledge we have of the individual to move the work forward. For this experience with this child, the choice to give a little nudge was easy. We knew the child to be inspired by the use of the languages of verbal storytelling and drawing. He had added pantomime to his repertoire.

This is another example of an easy listen. After Jennifer asked a child to "tell me the story of your drawing," the child insisted that she needed a marker. Jennifer reminded her that we were not making a new drawing and that she had asked her to tell the story of the drawing we were viewing together. She looked confused and exclaimed, "How can I read you the story if I don't write the words?" Jennifer understood and agreed that she get a marker and add marks, as if she were writing, to the drawing. After the child made a few wavy and bumpy lines across blank spots on her illustration, she picked up the page and told the story of the giant in her drawing. From this experience forward, Jennifer did not stop, question, or request a specific method of communication be used by a child.

At the same time, Jennifer takes notice of the use of the term "allow" when speaking about our work with children. We both find this term frequently used, and it concerns us. Do we allow children opportunities to be and share with us who they are—to tell stories in their own language? Do we allow all the languages a child has? What if a child uses vocal sounds rather than words? What if the child uses a vocabulary of dog sounds to communicate throughout the day? As our inspirational quote suggests, "Children produce many theories and hypotheses for interpreting the surrounding reality, but these remain unexpressed because they are not listened to," children do not need to be allowed to produce these theories for interpretation, they do so autonomously. We suggest that the allowance be on the behalf of the adult, to allow self-doubt and shifts in thinking as part of the process of closer listening. As we listened with our instincts, we found it was not only the story living in sound, but also the child.

Change

We began to scrutinize our choices. Did our question, "Would you like to make a book?" (to a child who continually acted out his characters) steer him in a direction we preferred? What happens with the child who builds a structure, tells a story, but doesn't want to draw his story? Perhaps a photographic catalog of his buildings? What about the child who creates sounds and sound effects? How can we listen to him? We wouldn't be doing important work if all of the answers were in front of us. We are starting to listen.

Children exploring sound with keyboard

What if the story lives in sound? Over the weekend, Jennifer wonders if the child's story lives in sound, how do we help him out? She starts to work in a new way, pushing past bookmaking and drama to experiment with telling a story with sound. Keyboards, laptop programs that layer sounds, identifying important sounds, listening to environmental sounds, using the microphone to record sounds needed for parts of their stories are a few of the sensorial encounters with sound. Ryan tells us about writing exercises that require writers and storytellers to tell the story through the senses. We ask: what have we lost through an over emphasis on sight? As we close this collaborative planning meeting, Jennifer suggests that we have to reconnect and remember children are living through their senses. How might we support rather than deny this way of being in the world?

A deeper exploration was needed in order to listen. The new experiences with technology offered more sounds to the children and, in turn, new documentation. This documentation served as an initial place of interview. In the first interview, Jennifer asked the child, "What does it sound like when you see Mommy?" She used a voice recorder to collect the sounds. In the second interview, Jennifer and the child listened to the recorded sounds. Jennifer remembers this as the most memorable interview:

> When the child heard the recording of the previous conversation and heard the sounds he made in the software, his eyes widened, and he drew a hand to his mouth. Interpreting his looks and actions, it was as if he not only recognized his own sounds, he also recognized that I was listening—not just hearing but listening to him.

Children exploring sound with computer software

Had there not been a problematizing of this type of listening and a listening to our instinct, the stories that lived in a child's pantomime, writing, and sounds would not have been discovered.

As the first year of the CWCPCP ends, we organized all of the documentation shared at each collaborative planning meeting into one PowerPoint and printed it out. This gave us an opportunity to relisten to the children and to ourselves. Upon study and reflection, Jennifer concluded that for her, this work had become a quest for the hundred, "I no longer see any of the hundred languages as something that develops with the child's skill set but something already there that is unrecognizable unless it is a shared language or there is a listener." She elaborates,

> Each child brought with them their own communication style to the interview, and it challenged me as a professional to be ready to listen to all the languages a child might use. This is an exciting challenge to me—the idea of opening up to the different possibilities for children's self-expression and different ways of listening. Finding a connection with a child through this co-exploration of children's stories was rewarding. There were times of shared interests and shared pride in the child's accomplishments. I was invited into the secret stories of children and was able to witness processes that I might have missed in a different type of experience.

As we consider listening and the many theories and hypotheses of children that might be unknown because they are not listened to, we found that with all of our good intentions to listen, we were bound by the limitation of physical listening—our literal presence, our undivided attention, and readiness to record. Had there not been a problematizing of this type of listening and a listening to our instinct, the stories that lived in a child's pantomime, writing, and sounds would not have been discovered. To be sure, there is autonomous learning. As our Reggio colleagues wrote, "We thus need to be aware of how little we actually know about children's autonomous learning strategies" (Castagnetti et al., 1997, p. 94). Changing our listening changed our quest for the one hundred and a hundred, hundred, hundred more.

REFERENCES

Castagnetti, M., Mori, M., Strozzi, P., Rubizzi, L., and Vecchi, V. (1997). The adventure of learning. *Shoe and meter: Children and measurement*. Reggio Children.