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Our Visible Work:

Community & Collaboration in an Educator Inquiry Group

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

EDUCATION

By

Margaret R. Clark

June 2016

The Dissertation of Margaret Clark
is approved:

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Professor Judith Scott, Chair

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Professor Lucinda Pease-Alvarez

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Professor Chiara Bacigalupa

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Tyrus Miller
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

Our Visible Work:
Community & Collaboration in an Educator Inquiry Group
By Margaret R. Clark

Early childhood education has recently been heralded as the cornerstone of a brighter future for the United States, playing an important role in the healthy development of our youngest children (Perry, 2015; Bornfreund, 2015). However, the teachers of these children face multiple challenges in the profession, including unlivable wages, low morale and high teacher turnover. At the time of this study, it was reported that nearly half of all early childhood educators qualify for some form of public assistance, such as food stamps or Medicaid (Whitebook et al., 2014). In addition, these teachers report feeling isolated in their practice, with few professional development opportunities that encourage collaboration with other educators in their communities.

This dissertation answers the call for research that focuses on collaborative inquiry-based approaches to professional development with early childhood educators. In this study, a group of nine educators met on a monthly basis for one year. The workshops were facilitated by the participant-researcher of this study, who used a design-based approach to explore how this group of educators engaged in collective inquiry, made meaning of educational theory and research, and supported one another in this setting. The data sources included audio recordings of the workshop discussions, written artifacts from the workshop activities, interview recordings with three case study participants, and field notes and memos.

This paper describes how this group of educators engaged in thoughtful deliberations and reflections to think about their own early memories of learning and how these experiences are linked to the kind of teachers they are today. During these conversations, the teachers revealed the kind of progressive social justice work they were doing in their classrooms and communities. This study demonstrates how a group of educators from a diverse range of classroom cultures and pedagogies can come together to form a network of support and collaboration, what Gorodetsky and Barak (2008) define as an "edge community of practice." This dissertation concludes with a set of recommendations for designing situated professional development workshops for early childhood educators.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the participants in this research project, the nine women who welcomed me into their homes and classrooms to share their experiences as students and teachers. I was inspired by their innovative approaches to working with children, their hopeful stories about teaching and learning, and their thoughtful ways of supporting one another in a challenging profession.

I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Chiara Bacigalupa, Dr. Lucinda Pease-Alvarez, and Dr. Judith Scott.

Chiara has mentored, supported and encouraged my career, studies, and research for the past eight years. She is an exemplary advocate for young children, their families, and caregivers. Through her work as a teacher educator and researcher, she continues to show me, and many others, why early childhood education is important for the health and wellbeing of families and communities. Chiara, thank you for all you do for our field and all that you have taught me.

Cindy and I have worked together for the past five years on a collaborative research grant. In our research team, she reminds us to always "go back to the research questions" – to reflect on why and how we do this work, as we are going about it. For the longest time I had this quote, written on a post-it note, tacked to the wall above my desk. Go back to the research questions. Only now, as I finish this dissertation, do I see how this simple but important reminder is more than a note about good research methods – it's a reminder about life. Don't know where you're

going? Or why? Or how? Go back to your questions. Cindy, thank you for all your support and careful guidance.

Throughout my time at UC Santa Cruz, Judy has been my rock of support and motivation. Her work on the language and literacy development of young children continues to inspire me. Over the course of five years, if ever I questioned the value or direction of my work, Judy has been there to thoughtfully help me find the path. Thank you, Judy, for showing me how to work really hard to do good work and still have a smile on my face at the end of the day.

I am also grateful for the love and support of my family. I have never met someone so willing as my husband, Trevor Babb, to discuss Bakhtin and Vygotsky while cooking one of his yummy meals for us. Daily, he shows me how to be patient, how to love, and how to live a happy life.

I dedicate this dissertation to my son, Barrett Clark Babb. Bear came just three weeks after I finished collecting the data for this dissertation. For the past 10 months, he has been attached to me as I write. He is an ever-present reminder that our research and work with young children is important. Bear has also taught me that sometimes we need to close our laptops, get out the blocks, and just play.

Chapter One: A Study of Collaboration & Community

Meristem: An Educator Inquiry Group

At 7:00 on a weeknight in late October in upstate New York, nine female teachers sit around a kitchen table, eating pumpkin curry soup and fresh baked bread. The women share stories of their lives as teachers, mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, and friends. They ask one another questions, then listen carefully, and nod with understanding. At times, they laugh and smile. At other times, they talk in more serious tones. Slowly they turn towards the task at hand, the reason they have come together on this night. At these monthly meetings of *Meristem*, they meet to discuss topics and questions about their everyday lives as teachers of young children. Tonight's topic is the process of self-reflection in their practice as teachers. The group spends time writing and discussing the benefits and challenges to engaging in deep reflective activity in their work. Ella wrote about the importance of reflection:

> *Learning happens in translation: when you take an idea, and you try it out across contexts—when you try to say something aloud that you have been working on in your head—when you try to employ an idea to understand a real situation you encounter. There is a lot about work in the classroom that feels intuitive, and hard-to-articulate: the practice of reflection, in community, is a critically important part of being and becoming ethical teachers, feminist teachers, anti-racist teachers, and activists. I guess maybe I would call it our "homework" as teachers: that doing real, rigorous reflective work is a crucial underpinning to being and becoming people who can support kids in doing the same. – Ella*

This dissertation is a study of how a group of nine women engaged in collective inquiry, explored theory and research, and reflected on their own teaching practices. Specifically, this is a study of inquiry, about my own inquiry as a

participant-researcher in the group, about the teachers engaging in very personal self-inquiries into their memories of schooling, and about our collective inquiries into the communities and classrooms where we teach. This study is about identity, memory, pedagogy, and culture—themes that are often abstract and broadly defined in educational research but that can become very specific and real when written about and shared among a small group of trusted colleagues. In this study, a community of educators came together with a diverse range of pedagogical beliefs and schooling experiences and formed, over time, a thoughtful and caring space for one another, where collaboration and mutual support became sustainable practices.

In addition, this study goes beyond our specific community of teachers, as it references and is embedded in the current cultural and political climate. Early childhood educators in the United States currently face multiple challenges including low teacher morale and isolation, unlivable wages, and high teacher turnover. In an effort to address these challenges, based on the findings from this study, I present a new kind of approach to professional development for teachers of young children, what I call the SITE approach. The SITE approach, as described in the following chapters, focuses on the development of a sustainable and caring community. This approach encourages educators to reflect deeply on their own experiences and to collectively examine the questions that they have about teaching and learning. This approach emphasizes four features for professional development:

- **S**upport & Community: The community of teachers supports one another through a sharing of resources and a network of opportunities. They work together towards a common goal.
- **I**nquiry Cycles: Teachers use the cyclical process of inquiry to explore personal experiences, imagine collaborative work, and research challenging questions about teaching and learning.
- **T**eacher Voice: Teachers' pedagogical knowledge, experiences, and voices are valued and celebrated.
- **E**ngaging Theory: Conceptually interesting and relevant educational theory is used in workshop activities and as topics for discussions.

The story of Meristem, what we learned during our year together, and the SITE approach to professional development may help educators connect with other teachers in their communities, establish their own networks of support, and help one another thrive and flourish in a challenging teaching climate.

Description of the Study and Research Questions

The Meristem group originally formed when a smaller group of teachers, all of whom work with young children, came together, starting in 2013, with a collective interest in connecting with one another on a regular basis, to talk and read about recent research and themes in the broad field of education. In the fall of 2014, I was introduced to this group of teachers and asked them if they would be willing to allow me to spend a year collecting data on their work, including the topics that they were discussing, and the way that they were working together as a group. The group name,

Meristem, came out of a discussion about our common interests as teachers of young children, which included a focus on learning about new and progressive educational theory and research, including a specific interest in social justice education. The group's name is derived from meristem, the tissue in a plant where new growth can take place. The idea of "new growth" in our own learning processes, in our teaching practices, and in our work with families and communities, was something we all, as educators, were interested in exploring together.

During the first few meetings of Meristem, the teachers expressed a desire to build a collaborative support group, a network of teachers from their community. These teachers brought a range of different pedagogical practices and styles to our group. As a participant-researcher for the project, I facilitated monthly workshops, leading the teachers through a series of activities that focused on their writings and discussions. I designed these activities based on the teachers' own questions about teaching and learning. To help ground these discussions in both theory and practice, I presented readings to the teachers that focused on two main topics: the theory of *critical literacy* as a pedagogical practice and the process of *collaborative inquiry* as a way to do research on one's own practice. At the beginning of the year, I asked the teachers to write about and reflect on their own histories of teaching and learning, what I call a self-inquiry, and in the second half of the year we turned our focus towards the educational experiences of their students in their classrooms and communities, what I call a collaborative inquiry. Over the course of the year, I collected multiple forms of data including audio transcriptions of our workshop

discussions, written artifacts from our writing exercises, interview transcriptions from three case study participants, and my own written reflections on the group's work and my role in it.

Research Questions

This study was driven by the following research questions:

1. On Critical Literacy: How do these early childhood educators understand the concepts and practices of critical literacy? How are these teachers living critically literate lives?
2. On Memory: How did the teachers engage and interrogate their own stories and memories of schooling? What themes or patterns emerged from this work over the course of one year? And how did the process of documenting and sharing one's memories help us both reflect on our current teaching pedagogies and support one another as teachers?
3. On a Sustainable Approach of Support & Collaboration: How did we, as a group, work together to support one another in the context of this professional development experience? What elements of our collective work helped us to create a sustainable approach to professional development?

Framing the Study: Situated, Dynamic, and Collaborative Learning

This dissertation is conceptually grounded in a sociocultural perspective on learning and research. This perspective rejects the premise that knowledge is located in the individual and instead conceives of learning and understanding as a social practice. As individuals, we use cultural activities and tools, such as symbol systems,

artifacts, and language to help us learn and understand new concepts (Palincsar, 1998). Our personal cognitive processes are deeply influenced by our social contexts and shared activities. This theory of learning is often identified with Lev Vygotsky, whose work describes how knowledge is co-constructed and negotiated in specific social settings (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is not development itself, wrote Vygotsky, but is a necessary process in our development as social creatures:

> *Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and with his peers…. [L]earning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90 as cited in Palincsar, 1998).*

Learning is awakened during the social interactions between and among humans. The Russian theorist and philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, described learning as a dialogic process, based on "the various ways in which two or more voices come into contact" (Wertsch and Smolka, 1993, p. 73). Learning happens in a dialogue, or a back and forth between the self and an other (or what Bakhtin referred to as the center and the non-center). Isaacs (1993) provided a working definition of dialogue as "*a sustained collective inquiry in the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience*…yet this is experience of a special kind – the experience of the meaning embodied in a community of people" (p. 25). Isaacs went on to describe how dialogue works in such a community to "unveil the ways in which collective patterns of thinking and feeling unfold –

both as conditioned, mechanistic reflexes, and potentially as fluid, dynamically creative exchanges" (p.26). For this study, I examined how these creative exchanges occurred among the Meristem educators as they worked together in a *community of practice.*

Communities of Practice

Lave & Wenger (1991) use the concept of situated learning in their theory of communities of practice or groups of individuals who come together with a shared interest or craft with a common interest in improving their practice through the sharing of knowledge, insights, and observations (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Sheridan et al., 2009). Lave & Wenger (1991) created the term to define the kind of dynamic learning that takes place in the social relationship of an apprenticeship, where knowledge is shared and passed between experts and novices.

Wenger (1998) further described the three necessary elements or characteristics of a community of practice. The first is one of *mutual engagement,* or the collaborative relationships and established norms that members of a community of practice establish through their participation. The second is a *joint enterprise*, a shared understanding of their common goal or purpose, which is created through their interactions. The joint enterprise is negotiated and often re-negotiated by the members and is also referred to as the "domain" of the community. And lastly, Wenger described the *shared repertoire* of the community, or the set of communal resources, which is produced by the members. The shared repertoire is used as the community

pursues their joint enterprise. Wenger posited that it is the interactions among humans, our shared endeavors and experiences, which formulate both our communities of practice and our learning environments. We can simultaneously learn about both the world and the self through our collective participation in meaningful activities. Wenger (1998) described how communities of practice must engage in a multitude of "ways of being in the world that can encompass multiple, conflicting perspectives in the course of addressing significant issues" (Wenger, 1998, p. 275; Silvers et al., 2010, p. 382-383).

Aligning Theory with Research Design

Throughout the study, as the facilitator and researcher, I aimed to align the organizational structure of our group with the theoretical underpinnings of the project. I believe that professional development opportunities should focus on providing space for the dialogic nature of learning and teaching, and time for the participants in this community of practice to engage in deep reflections and discussions. I believed that this kind of sharing should and can happen between and among all participants, not just uni-directionally between teacher and learner. By using a design-based approach to this study, as I will describe in Chapter Two, I was able to continually alter the workshop structure and activities in order to allow for such space and time.

At the beginning of the study, I served as the main facilitator, creating agendas, providing resources and leading the workshop activities. As the project continued, I decreased my leadership role, inviting other participants to take on facilitation roles. This shift was purposeful with the end goal of creating a community

of practice that was sustainable beyond the scope of this project and involved shared responsibility for the facilitation of the group and our workshop time.

In addition, I aligned the workshop content and activities with the participants own interests and questions. I collected the participants' responses from the workshops activities to, in part, help focus and direct the future structure and content of our meetings and discussions. For example, our discussions of critical literacy in this study were connected to the teachers' initials questions about social justice education and their current teaching practices and classrooms. The theory of critical literacy went on to serve as a catalyst for our discussions and our collaborative inquiries.

Making professional development opportunities relevant to the participants is an important theoretical and methodological foundation when working with, researching and supporting early childhood educators. This is especially true when we look at the challenging political and teaching climate in which these teachers find themselves.

The Current Teaching Context for Early Childhood Educators

This study occurred during an interesting time for the field of early childhood education, which is defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as the education of children from birth to age eight years (http://www.naeyc.org/). The field that includes family childcare settings, private preschools, homeschooling practices, independent caregivers and publicly funded schools such as Head Start. It often is placed outside of the conversation of education

policy and research with its own body of pedagogical definitions and funding sources. Even most of the physical spaces of early childhood learning settings are located outside of the campuses and structures of public schools. However, in 2015, we saw a change in this trend. With bipartisan support, Congress heralded early childhood education as the cornerstone to a brighter future for the country, playing an important role in the way that we raise children. children. In an opinion piece in *The Hechinger Report*, Kris Perry (2015), from The First Five Years Fund (http://ffyf.org/) wrote about "Why 2015 was a benchmark year for early childhood education." Perry wrote:

> *2015 marks a true turning point for child development in the United States: a moment in troubled times when a Congress came together and acted on overwhelming research from experts, demand from voters, and actions taken by state and local leaders across the country to support the development of children (Perry, 2015)*

During 2015, early childhood education became part of the new federal education law, called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This new bill supports a greater alignment between early childhood education and public school, provides funding for teacher training and professional development that is focused on early childhood development, and calls on states to evaluate their local needs and embed the field of early learning into the state education plans and budgets (Bornfreund, 2015). Some believe that this new attention on the field holds "great promise" as it brings awareness to the development of our youngest citizens (Perry, 2015).

Unlivable Wages & Low Morale

Meanwhile, other reports on the teaching profession in the field paint a very different, much dimmer picture. In their report on the state of childcare employment,

Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes (2014) described this dire state, including the "unlivable" wages that teachers of young children receive. Citing statistics from the US Department of Labor, Whitebook et al. reported that in 2013, childcare workers were paid $21,490, while preschool teachers earned $31,420 and kindergarten teachers made $52,840. These wages place childcare workers barely above the poverty level for a family of three. Preschool teachers were, on average, only making six dollars more an hour than workers in fast-food restaurants. Examining data from both 1997 to 2014, Whitebook et al. (2014) discovered that childcare workers' wages grew by just one percent over this time period, "indicating that their wages during this period barely kept pace with the increasing cost of living" (p. 16). Whitebook et al. (2014) reported that nearly half of all childcare workers' wages are so low that they qualify for public assistance like food stamps, Medicaid, and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

In the state of New York, where this study took place, the labor market and pay for early childhood educators is even more desperate. When Mayor Bill de Blasio raised the minimum wage for fast food workers in New York City to $15 an hour, early childhood advocates spoke out, raising attention to the continued low wages for preschool teachers. Salary data from the Day Care Council of New York, reported that an assistant preschool teacher without a college degree earns $12.41 an hour, while a teacher's aide earns just $11.72. An assistant teacher with a bachelor's degree doesn't fare much better, earning just $13.94 an hour (Zimmer, 2015a). A letter to the mayor in December of 2015, from a coalition of early childhood providers, stated:

> *The low pay scale prevents us from attracting the best teachers, increases staff turnover, creates low employee morale, and as a consequence harms the children we are all dedicated to serve (Zimmer, 2015b).*

This current political context for the field of early childhood education and care is a complex one, offering some reasons for celebration and other major reasons for concern. While the federal law calls for more alignment between early childhood education and elementary education, the teachers of these young children continue to be unsupported professionally and financially. It is the professional support and development of this group of teachers that is the focus of this study.

Scarce and Inadequate Professional Development Opportunities

Recent reviews of research describe an overall lack of professional development opportunities and support being offered to teachers of young children. In a policy brief from 2010, researchers at the National Governor's Association (NGA) for Best Practices, described the multiple challenges that must be met in order to better support early childhood educators, including a lack of consistent professional development policies, a lack of research-based professional development standards, a need for increased access to professional development, and a lack of consistently collected and analyzed data (p. 3). The lack of professional development is often linked to the lack of access to such support, particularly within higher education institutes. According the 2010 NGA report, these teachers face barriers that stem from limited financial support for training, a shortage of transportation to far away colleges and universities, and a lack of English language proficiency to navigate the institute's requirements. For teachers who live in communities with few higher education

institutes, like the educators in this study, accessing professional development training becomes even more challenging.

There is not only a lack of available opportunities for these teachers; there is also a lack of research on the professional development offered to them. The available information often focuses on measuring specific teacher and student outcomes using quantitative measures. In their US Department of Education literature review titled "Toward the Identification of Features of Effective Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators," Zaslow, Tout, Halle, Whittaker, and Lavelle (2010) described an overall "body of research on professional development of early childhood educators [as] growing though as yet quite limited" (p. 2). Zaslow et al. (2010) found that a majority of the research was overwhelmingly quantitative in design, with most studies using experimental design with random assignment to treatment and control groups. Zaslow et al. (2010) noted a limited scope of research that used descriptive qualitative designs.

There is also a lack of variety in the types or approaches of professional development available to early childhood educators. Recent reviews describe how a majority of professional development opportunities tend to take a top-down approach to delivering specific content to teachers, compared with the bottom-up approach to inquiry and reflection as proposed in this study. In their review of the available research on this topic, Zaslow et al. (2010) found a variety of approaches to professional development that included workshops, course work, and on-site work. However, the majority of these approaches focused on teacher educators *delivering* or

giving materials, content, interventions, and strategies to educators, a uni-directional mode of teaching. Only a few of the studies described more open-ended bi-directional approaches. Just three out of thirty-seven studies that focused on teaching educators about language and literacy development of children were described "as encouraging discussion between educator colleagues regarding their experiences in the classroom, or collaboratively designing lesson plans based on their new knowledge" (p. 33). Just two of those studies described "an innovative approach" that included a "cohort of early childhood educators within a single institution" which allowed for "mutual support" among the participants (p. 33). Zaslow et al. (2010) concluded their report with multiple recommendations for the field, including a call for research on the process of professional development: "the literature base needs to be expanded to include more process-focused research that can inform effective professional development" (p. 85).

Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche (2009) presented a similar review of literature on the current context of professional development for early childhood educators, focusing on the specific types of training that were available, including: (1) formal education; (2) credentialing; (3) specialized, on-the-job in-service training; (4) coaching and/or consultative interactions; and (5) communities of practice or collegial study groups. For the purposes of their review, the authors focused on the latter three forms of professional development, which they believed were most commonly associated with employed practitioners. The following chart outlines how Sheridan et al. (2009) described and compared the three forms of professional development:

	Specialized Training	**Coaching/Consultation**	**Communities of Practice**
Description of Form	Specific skill instruction in the form of workshops, conferences, presentations, or lectures.	Voluntary, nonjudgmental collaborative partnerships between professionals (a coach with a trainee). One-on-one consultations that may include observations, reflections, feedback, and evaluations.	A group of individuals that meet regularly to focus on issues, problems, and successes that emerges from authentic situations in their work.
Goal	To affect practitioner's professional practice.	To improve trainee's learning and/or application of interventions of strategies for the classroom. To improve the trainee's behavior, attitude, or disposition.	To reduce the research to practice gap and create a self-sustaining network of stakeholders. To address issues and brainstorm solutions that are highly relevant and applicable to their practice.
Duration & Scope	Short & intense meetings. Often a single contact with instructor with limited follow-up opportunities.	Frequent interactions over a short time with coach, which are then lessened with need. Follow-up is based on the needs of the trainee.	Ongoing meetings, over an extended time period with group that includes practitioners and facilitator(s).
Perspective/Role of Participants	Instructors are the experts, passing on knowledge (uni-directionally) to novice trainees.	The coach/consultant is the authority who plays a supportive and collaborative role. Trainees receive the support, guidance, and coaching from this authority. Information is adapted to fit the needs of the trainee and/or context.	The teachers are the experts. The facilitator is a guide to structure meetings and helps the group ask questions, provides resources, and stays on task.

Figure 1 Three Forms of Professional Development (Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 381-383)

Like Zaslow et al. (2010), Sheridan et al. (2009) noted a lack of research on the *processes* of professional development in the field and described how "much

more is known about what professional development is (i.e., it's structure or form) than how it operates to promote new knowledge and skills (i.e., the process)." Sheridan et al. (2009) proposed an agenda that focuses on the process: "*how* professionals move from awareness (knowledge) to action (practice) and to adoption of particular dispositions" (p. 7). They proposed:

> *We need to know more about the dynamic and transactional teaching and learning processes underlying these effects as they function in real-world early childhood settings. For example, we need findings documenting personal theories of change, supportive relationships among participants, and practitioner acceptance/resistance to change (Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 2).*

A Call for Sustainable Support

Sheridan et al. (2009) described a lack of sustainable or continual approaches to support early childhood educators. The authors wrote that "training alone is insufficient" and that "ongoing support efforts are necessary to transfer knowledge and skill to practice." However, "little is known about how various forms of professional development operate" (p. 394). New research, they argued, must include "descriptions of professional development models utilized in interventions" (p.396). These descriptions must include details on how a facilitator or professional development coach transitioned "responsibilities for continued study and/or support to individuals" (p.395).

Sheridan et al. (2009) argued that the development of a model designed to bring together a group of early childhood educators to form a community of practice to engage in collaborative inquiry may answer such research calls. However, bringing together such a group, what the authors called a "CoP," is not sufficient in creating

such sustainable growth, and such research must also address a “host of empirical issues” which include the relationship between specific strategies (e.g., inquiry and problem-solving methods); structures (e.g., timing, membership); and skills (e.g., facilitator leadership behaviors) (p.395). The way that the members interact with one another in their attainment of goals and objectives for a CoP is also “in need of empirical investigation” (p. 395).

In addition to these issues, Sheridan et al. (2009) wrote that the basic “organizational mechanisms” of a community of practice as a model for professional development are still unknown (p. 395). Research is needed to clearly explore, identify, and describe these multiple factors in order to better understand how such a model could continue to be sustainable and supportive for early childhood educators.

Missing in Action: A Lack of Teacher Voice

Ryan and Goffin (2008) argued that the lack of information and research on the process of professional development may have to do with an overall silencing of teacher voice throughout much of early childhood education research and policy:

> *The silence of teachers in much of research and policy…has meant that their collective wisdom and expertise has not been employed in any intentional way to inform the improvement of early education, resulting not only in loud silence from a critical constituency but also in lost efficacy (Ryan and Goffin, 2008, p. 390).*

In their article titled, “Missing in Action: Teaching in early care and education,” Ryan and Goffin (2008) described how “what [teachers] do, how and why they do it as they do, and what is required for them to do their work better has not been at the core of our thinking about quality early childhood education” (Ryan and Goffin, 2008,

p.385). Ryan and Goffin described how a focus on child development theory or "child-centeredness" in both curriculum and pedagogy by the field of early childhood education has led to an absence of teacher voice and knowledge. When teachers are included in research, they are often reduced to "a finite number of characteristics such as education, years of experience, and training" (p. 387). Teachers are also generally perceived as lacking the skills and training to work with young children. Ryan and Goffin (2008) argued that for a field that has teachers who work in a range of settings (Head Start, child care, nursery schools, and public schools), with different expectations and regulations for each setting, there is, in turn, different perceptions about educators:

> *As a consequence of these differing regulations and expectations, teachers who work in settings perceived as having more of a care/developmental focus are often viewed as lacking or missing appropriate skills and training to work with young children. At the same time, teachers mandated to "educate" young children in pre-kindergarten and above are often viewed by others in the field as lacking an understanding of child development and the broader education goals of early education…this schism in practice and expectations for teachers reinforces the false dichotomy between the care and education of young children (Ryan and Goffin, 2008, p.388-389).*

The current social, political, economic and cultural context of this study is a complex one for teachers and a challenging one for the broader field of early childhood education. As noted, the field is simultaneously celebrated and critiqued, heralded and attacked. There is little research on how to support educators with sustainable in-service approaches to professional development that focus on their

specific needs and interests, that document and describe the processes in which they learn and collaborate, and that respect their previous knowledge and teacher voice.

As described in the second chapter of this dissertation, the educators in the Meristem group faced similar challenges and barriers to support as described above. The purpose of this study was to investigate how a group of teachers could come together and through a process of reading, writing, and reflection overcome some of the challenges that they are faced with. During this one-year study, I aimed to create and investigate a space for this group of teachers that focused on respecting their voice, promoted collaboration, and created a community that lasted beyond the scope of this study. In creating such a space, I hoped to establish a situated approach to professional development that addresses the current challenging political climate that early childhood educators face.

Overview of the Dissertation

In the following chapter, I present a detailed description of the study that includes information about the setting, the participants, and the methods used in both the design of the workshop and the data collection and analysis.

In Chapters Three, Four and Five, I discuss three themes based on my findings. First, I describe the critically literate lives of these teachers. I show how the members of Meristem engaged in thoughtful and engaged critical literacy practices, both inside their classroom and out in their communities as well. When I asked these teachers to define critical literacy, they often focused on the reflective part of the practice, examining and interrogating texts, leaving out the part of the practice that

promotes social justice action and advocacy. However, when describing their everyday practices and work, they clearly engaged in such social justice work. I propose that one of the reasons that the teachers did not always focus on this action component when defining critical literacy is because it is a challenging process, both for themselves as educators and for their students, as well.

In addition, this study revealed that the teachers engaged in important memory work, the theme of chapter four. During the process of sharing their early memories of school, the teachers were able to both explore their personal histories of learning more deeply and also support one another through those explorations. Their memories became sites for multiple examinations, texts that the teachers could return to and reflect on with different lenses and questions each time. I found that in the beginning of the study, the teachers shared negative memories of their own schooling, but by the end of the year, they went on to focus on positive memories, moments of learning from family and friends.

In Chapter Five, I outline how this group came together from a diverse range of pedagogical practices, settings, and styles. At the end of the study, the Meristem group had become a close-knit network of support for one another, with plans to continue meeting beyond this project timeline, and are currently co-writing a book on alternative documentation practices. Meristem had become what is known as an "edge community of practice," bringing together a multitude of perspectives and cultures to form a new common culture of understanding and collaboration.

I will conclude this paper with a discussion of potential implications that the design, methods, and findings have for the individual educator, the field and research on professional development for early childhood educators, and the current context and policy for young children.

Chapter Two: Research Design and Methods

Description of the Project

This qualitative study focused on the experiences of nine teachers working together in a professional development workshop over the course of one year. As a participant-researcher in this study, I facilitated monthly workshops, leading the teachers through multiple writing activities and discussions. My approach to this research evolved throughout the year, adjusting to continually focus on how the teachers were making meaning of the workshop content and working together. With multiple sources of data from the workshops and three case studies, including my own reflective thinking and writing, I aimed to capture what Creswell (2009) called the "complex picture" in qualitative studies.

This study was driven by the following research questions:

1. On Critical Literacy: How do these early childhood educators understand the concepts and practices of critical literacy? How are these teachers living critically literate lives?
2. On Memory: How did the teachers engage and interrogate their own stories and memories of schooling? What themes or patterns emerged from this work over the course of one year? And how did the process of documenting and sharing one's memories help us both reflect on our current teaching pedagogies and support one another as teachers?
3. On a Sustainable Approach of Support & Collaboration: How did we, as a group, work together to support one another in the context of this

professional development experience? What elements of our collective work helped us to create a sustainable approach for professional development?

As a researcher, I wanted to better understand how a group of educators could work together to form a new and sustainable network of support. I formed this set of questions based on my own research interests combined with the educators' initial questions about teaching and learning, and their collective desire to work together and support one another in practice. I was interested in exploring which elements of our work could be applied to an approach that offers support to teachers who are looking for a caring community of colleagues to connect and work with. At the onset of the project, I aimed to create a space that valued the teachers' pedagogical knowledge and experiences and took a democratic approach to the leadership structure of the group. As the initial facilitator for the group, I wanted to introduce new theory that connected to their interests and promote a collaborative inquiry approach to research and reflection. As the year went on, I transitioned my role as facilitator to different teachers in the group, observing as a multitude of voices and styles took on different leadership roles. Throughout the year, I wanted to understand how this overall approach to professional development, what I have named the SITE approach, would support this group of teachers.

As the study progressed and the teachers spent more time together, the workshop content, activities, and discussion turned to multiple different topics including social justice in education, documentation of student and teacher learning,

and action research in the classroom. As I will describe in the findings chapters of this study, these topics emerged from our workshop discussions, the teachers' own reflective writing, and my interviews with three case study participants. Throughout the study, I used a collection of qualitative research methods to help answer my research questions.

Qualitative research, quite broadly, is grounded in the idea that our understanding of the world and the meanings that we as humans make of it emerges from our social interactions (Merriam, 2002). The world, or our reality, is not a single fixed phenomenon but instead is fluid, changing over time with multiple interpretations. As a qualitative researcher, I was interested in examining and understanding how the Meristem group of educators supported and interacted with one another and made meaning of the theory and topics of our discussion. Creswell (1994) described the assumptions of the qualitative researcher as one who is 1) concerned with the process of learning (compared with the outcome); 2) interested in meaning and how people make meaning; and is 3) the primary instrument for both the data collection and discussion (p. 145). In addition to these assumptions, I also took on the role of participant-researcher, taking part in the discussions and activities, alongside the participants. As a participant, I wanted to better understand how it felt to think about, explore, and engage in such inquiry with a group of teachers in order to better understand their experiences in this setting. And as the facilitator of our monthly meetings, I was interested in what elements of our group, including the

content and processes of our engagement together, contributed to creating a sustainable and supportive community.

The following is a description of the setting and participants in this study, my approach to design of this research, and my data collection processes and analysis. All names and places are represented with pseudonyms.

The Setting

This dissertation research project was located in two adjacent geographical areas in New York state, the city of Emporia and the town of Hays, both about 100 miles north of New York City. The following is a description of these two locations, including the history and demographics.

Introduction to Emporia, New York. Settled by Dutch whalers and merchants in the late 17th century, Emporia quickly grew to become a major port city on the Emporia River. In the first half of the 20th century, Emporia was known as a city of vice, with more than 50 bars and 15 brothels in its two square miles of land. It was notorious for its acts of gambling, prostitution, and government corruption (Hall, 1994). In 1951, an infamous raid of the city by New York state troopers closed many of the brothels and bars. After an economic decline in the 1970s, Emporia saw a demographic shift in the 1980s, when a group of business owners opened up a set of antique shops on the main street of Emporia. This shift increased business and tourism in the city, attracting visitors from New York City on the weekends. There are now more than 70 antique stores in the city, and many restaurants, art galleries, and music venues.

According to the 2010 census, 6,713 people with 1,368 families live in Emporia, New York. (http://www.census.gov/2010census/popmap/ipmtext.php). As part of this population, approximately 360 people reside in the Emporia Correctional Facility. More recent estimates show a decline in both the population and in the number of families in Emporia. These downward trends may be linked to the increased cost of living and real estate prices in the city, combined with the growing number of retirees, young and/or childless couples, single residents, and weekend residents, many of whom spend part of their time in New York City. Residents of Emporia, including the teachers from this project, describe multiple apartment buildings and multi-family homes being bought, renovated, and converted into single-family homes, a trend of gentrification.

Emporia is a very dense city, (3,111 people per square mile) with most of its residents located in the two square miles of the downtown area. The racial makeup of Emporia is mostly White (60%), then African American (25%), Hispanic or Latino (8%), and Asian (7%) (percentages are approximate). The households in Emporia (n=2,766) represent a range of families with children under the age of 18 (25%), married couples with no children (25%), and non-family groups (50%). Forty percent of all of the households in Emporia were made up of individuals.

Males living in Emporia have a median income of $26,274 and females $22,598. The median income for a household was $35,117 and for a family was $37,400. A comparison of these amounts to national poverty levels shows that about 24% of families and 23% of the residents in Emporia are below the poverty line.

In their own written descriptions of Emporia, the teachers in this study focused on the growing gentrification trends, the driving economic forces, and the population density of the city. Asked to describe Emporia in writing, the teachers wrote:

> *It is based in a small dense urban area within a larger rural region. There are some spaces for children—small parks, a youth center, a small library, and numerous nonprofit organizations. The driving economic forces include several prisons, a hospital, multiple rehabilitation centers, special needs facilities, agricultural work, and government (city and county) jobs. There is a major focus of gentrification with a booming arts and antiques "scene." –Bree*
>
> *Emporia is a tiny urban pocket in a mostly rural county. I call it a city because it has urban complexity—diversity, neighborhoods of public housing/poverty concentration—but it is only 2 square miles. It used to have a significant amount of industry, but the factories have closed. The city faces severe inequality, as it is also connected to NYC's economy, and a popular spot for weekenders. The city faces racial segregation, high unemployment, and has a failing school district. Economic drivers: Local prison, hospital, and big box/chain stores in the neighboring town. –Ella*

During the year that I spent working with the teachers from Emporia, I noted high racial tensions in the city, increased attention on national racial inequity issues, and a growing local "Black Lives Matter" movement. This group of citizens actively campaigned for more awareness around racial and social justice. They were vocal in the local elections, marched in the city parades, and participated in community events. During the summer of this project, a burglary at a local bar occurred one Friday night. The next Saturday afternoon, the local police conducted a raid/search for a burglary suspect in the largest low-income housing complex in the city. The police arrived at 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon, equipped with the city's new tactical

armor and gear, which included full-body protective suits and automatic weaponry. Video footage from the scene show over a dozen armed police entering the building, adjacent to a playground full of children. This event sparked outrage in the community and became a reference for the kind of irresponsible police tactics used in the community. In this study, many of the teachers often discussed these types of tensions and events during our workshops, feeling challenged by how to discuss such topics with their students.

Introduction to Hays, New York. The village of Hays was settled around the same time as Emporia, in 1678, but has experienced and still is experiencing a much slower growth. The town of Hays is at the foot of a large mountain range which is a protected 700,000-acre forest preserve. In the mid-twentieth century, the towns and villages near this mountain range became known as a vacation destination and home to resorts that catered to tourists from New York City. The area is also known as a hub for artists, musicians, and writers. Like Emporia, the village of Hays has a well-defined main street of small businesses but is much smaller in scale. Over the past 15 years, many of the businesses on the main street have struggled to remain open with the construction of multiple large-scale chain businesses just outside of the village, including Walmart, Lowe’s, and Home Depot. Hays does not have the kind of attractions, such as restaurants or shopping, that Emporia boasts.

According to the 2010 census, the village of Hays’ population was 4,081 with 1,026 families. The population density of Hays is dramatically less dense than Emporia, with just 1,962 people per square mile. The racial makeup of Hays is

similar to Emporia, as mostly White (60%), then African American (31%), Hispanic or Latino (7%), Asian (1%), and Native American (1%) (percentages are approximate). The households in Hays (n= 1,565) represent a range of families with children under the age of 18 (30%), married couples (40%), and non-family groups (38%). Thirty-one percent of all of the households in Hays were made up of individuals.

There is currently greater gender income disparity in Hays than there is in Emporia. For males living in Hays, they had a median income of $32,857, while females earned $21,578. The median income for a household was $28,075, and the median income for a family was $34,635. While the median income for residents in Hays is lower than in Emporia, fewer percentage of them are living below the poverty line, with 17% of families and 19% of the residents (compared with 24% of families and 23% of residents in Emporia). A comparison between Hays and Emporia shows that Hays has fewer people, is less dense, and less impoverished (http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml).

	Hays NY	**Emporia NY**
Total Population	4,081	6,713
Number of Families	1,026	1,368
Population Density (per sq. mi.)	1,962	3,111
Male income (median)	$32,857	$26,274
Female income (median)	$21,578	$22,598
Household income (median)	$28,075	$35,117
Family income (median)	$34,635	$37,400
Families living below poverty line	17%	24%
Residents living below poverty line	19%	23%

Figure 2 Demographics of Hays, NY and Emporia, NY

Education in the Community

The public schools in Hays and Emporia are quite similar, although it is important to note that students in the Hays School district, unlike those in Emporia, hail from a greater geographic area than just the village of Hays. The major difference between the two districts is that Emporia has a greater percentage of English Language Learners (http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/).

	Hays NY	**Emporia NY**
School Information		
Total Schools	3	3
Total Students	1602	1896
Classroom Teachers (FTE)	135	160
Student Teacher/Ratio	12	12
ELL Students	1%	6.5%
Students with IEPs	20%	20%

Figure 3 School Demographics in Hays, NY and Emporia, NY

Early care & education in the community. A publicly funded childcare resource and referral agency, the main resource for parents and early childhood educators in the community, started in 1984 and currently serves the three local counties that include Hays and Emporia. This agency focuses on the recruitment and training of child care providers, provides parent education opportunities, inspects family day care and school-age child care programs, maintains a list of child care centers and resources, sponsors the local food program, and provides referrals for licensed child care. The agency has two offices in the region, one of which is located in Emporia. Five of the nine educators in the study who work in state-licensed facilities reported that they receive most, if not all, of their professional development from this one agency.

A recent state-funded report on early childhood education in the communities of Emporia and Hays revealed a dire picture of early childhood education. This report described an overall lack of care in the area:

> *The conclusion of this Needs Assessment is there is not enough: not enough child care slots; not enough quality child care; not enough day care subsidy; and not enough funding to support a declining early child care system. The governments are trying to rapidly fill the gaps with funding that attempts to address specific issues, but does not address the real need, which is providing services for all children between birth and 5 to prepare them to enter school. It should be noted that our society acknowledges its responsibility to educate all of our children once they reach the age of Kindergarten, but has not fully accepted that responsibility for younger children, a conclusion which is dictated by our increasing knowledge of the importance of the early years to child development. (Retrieved from the Resource and Referral Agency website)*

This report also described the lack of both professional development opportunities and formal teacher training for local educators. The New York State childcare license requires that all child care providers must receive a minimum of 30 hours of training every 2 years. The training that is available includes topics such as the main principles of child development, nutrition and health, program development, child abuse identification and prevention, program safety and security, and business record maintenance and management. The report made no mention of professional development which employs more learner-centered pedagogies, which include approaches and topics such as teacher inquiry, self-reflection, or the authentic assessment of one's own professional practices. When asked what type of training they preferred, the majority of licensed child care providers in the area responded that they preferred face-to-face training to online or distant learning. However, 85% of

them reported that their training was either online or through the video conferences available on the state-wide Office of Children and Families Services website.

There are few formal education opportunities for these educators as well. Just three colleges in the area provided coursework towards an early childhood degree, two state universities offered four-year bachelor programs, and one community college had limited coursework available in early childhood studies. The local report also noted that there is "little or no training offered for parents of young children" (p.16).

Learning spaces for children in the community. When asked to describe the community setting in which their classroom or school is based (including if there were public spaces for children in the area), the educators in this study described Emporia as providing multiple opportunities and spaces for children:

> *We have lots of resources (parks, library, shops and cafes) . . . community and art centers with programs we can participate in . . . . We use the car to access parks, libraries, museums, skating facilities, nature centers, etc. –Mara*
>
> *There are parks, a youth center, an afterschool program the teens can work at through school, a program for teens offered by Sparrows. –Tracy*

Meanwhile, the educators described Hays as offering fewer spaces but cited the natural landscape as an important resource for children:

> *[It is] a rural small town. There are two parks. Access to the river, a child friendly library and a community center. –Renee*
>
> *It is a rural setting. Spaces for young children are limited to a park and community center. There is also great natural beauty and resources in the county that can be used as friendly spaces for children. –Samara*

The Participants

For this study, I worked with nine early childhood educators, who taught in a variety of school settings and hailed from different pedagogical backgrounds and styles. In this group of nine teachers, one of them was Montessori-trained, two were Reggio-Emilia-trained, and one was earning her masters in ECE through an online program that focuses on "culture-centered" early childhood education. The remaining five teachers cited a mix of pedagogical styles that influenced their teaching, including project-based learning and emergent curriculum. Project-based learning is an open-ended pedagogy that focuses on students working to investigate and respond to a question, problem, or challenge (http://bie.org/about/what_pbl). An emergent curriculum is child-initiated— a way of teaching and planning curriculum based on the children's interests, observations, and questions about their world. Reggio-Emilia, a pedagogy first formulated in Italy, uses aspects of both project-based learning and an emergent curriculum to focus on children's interests and learning processes.

By opening up the workshop to multiple types of educators, I was able to explore how a diverse body of teachers might come together to learn about new theories and support one another in their teaching practice, which in turn could provide important insights into how to approach professional development with other early childhood educators.

Of the nine participants, seven of them came from privately funded programs and two of them worked in publicly funded programs. I started off the project by limiting the group to 12 participants in order to allow for easier discussion and

sharing opportunities. By the end of the project, the group was made up of nine active participants, with three participants (two males and one female) citing time constraints and family obligations as the reason that they could not attend the meetings. These three did not attend any of the workshops.

Educator Participant Demographics	# of Participants
Total Participants	9
White	7
Black or African American	1
Hispanic or Latino	1
Sex	
Female	9
Male	0
Classroom Setting	
Privately Funded Program	7
Publicly Funded Program	2
Classroom Place	
Hays NY	3
Emporia NY	6

Figure 4 Participant Demographics

Social justice perspectives. It is important to note that early on in the project, I discovered that this group of educators was interested in social justice education and described their practice and classrooms using such words as "progressive" and "transformative." The majority of the educators, seven out of nine, described some interest in how teaching and classrooms could be altered, evolve and change for the better. The group had initially come together to read about and discuss new and interesting educational theory. This perspective on pedagogy and desire for new theory and research provided me with a great affordance in this research study, as I was able to introduce research and theory that I found relevant to their interests, such as critical literacy and collaborative inquiry. The teachers welcomed this new research and appeared very willing to read about and discuss these topics during our

time together. The Meristem educators were also willing to meet every month on a weeknight, for two hours, without compensation for their time. These interests and perspectives are unique to this group and this setting and may be challenging to replicate or find in other communities and settings.

Introduction to the case study participants. In an attempt to get an in-depth look at the teachers' experiences in the group, I chose to focus on three case study participants throughout the year. Case studies are a way to examine the individual's experiences and, according to Patton (2002), by studying these information-rich cases, we are able to gather "in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations" (p.230). I chose these three individual participants because they all initially appeared highly engaged with the project, had attended both of the first two meetings, and demonstrated a willingness to discuss and share their ideas both with other educators and myself.

Mara. Mara is a 51-year-old independent childcare provider. She works closely with families, caring for one or two children at a time in the homes of the children. A long-time resident and homeowner in downtown Emporia, Mara knows many people in the community. Mara also knows many of the educators, visits their classrooms, and attends the public school board meetings. Throughout her life, Mara has been a caregiver. In a written questionnaire, she fondly described how she started out providing care for families at an early age:

> *I began working as a mother's helper at age 13, which quickly transformed into babysitting, consistently for a small group of families. That work was a very creative time for me. –Mara*

During the project, Mara also worked as a substitute for a preschool at a nearby private liberal arts college. Throughout the study, Mara described her study of the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching young children, a pedagogy developed in Italy after World War II. Reggio Emilia promotes the idea of a child-directed curriculum, following and documenting a child's explorations. This approach focuses on the use of the arts and media, such as painting, sculpture, photography, and drawing. When I asked her about her favorite professional development experience, Mara described a workshop from her time spent in Italy, studying this pedagogical approach:

> *[During] my study intensive at Reggio Emilia we were engaged with the studio teachers in the way young students would be, with materials and a small project doing both individual and group work, being documented and documenting and then discussing experiences, discoveries about the work and ourselves, dynamics, imagine. We then saw how this work looked with children, through video and slide imagery. –Mara*

While she refers to her studies at Reggio Emilia as important to her teacher experience, she doesn't solely subscribe to that approach:

> *Until recently, I didn't align intentionally or knowingly, with a defined pedagogy. I have taken on Reggio Emilia–studying and learning to incorporate some of the elements of that approach that speak to inspire me. I would say that my teaching style was mostly project-based and experiential-modes of learning that were particularly effective and interesting to me as a child and not so available to children in their public schools.–Mara*

Mara attended all of the meetings and was an enthusiastic participant in our discussions. She maintained close connections to all of the participants, often chatting with different teachers for extended periods of time after each of the workshops, connecting with them on a professional and personal level. Mara and I often

connected outside of the group as well, as I wanted to check in with her to get her perspective on the content that we were working on. When I asked Mara to write about what her hopes for this project were, she focused on aspects of community:

> *That shared ideas will influence all of our work. That we will feel like more of a community/alliance of educators - maybe being able to present ourselves as such. Develop a document of core/shared values in education and clear, varied ways that those are attained made visible, supported by educators, parents and community. –Mara*

By the end of the project, Mara had emerged as one of the leaders in the group, offering to facilitate future workshop meetings, share her chapter writing, and took the role of calling meetings and setting agendas and dates for our workshops.

Samara. Samara is a 33-year-old single mother of two young children. Eight years ago, she moved to the United States from Havana, Cuba. She cites her elementary school experience in Cuba in the 1980s as a defining moment in her early memories of school, describing rigid and strict classrooms and teachers. Samara has been working in early childcare settings for the past five years. During this project, she was working in an infant/toddler classroom (birth to three years) in a publicly funded early childhood center. Samara received her teaching credential from a city college in Southern California and is currently working on her master's in early childhood education through an online university. While Samara hasn't been teaching as long as some of the other participants in this project, she had the most formal professional development experience and teacher education credits in early childhood education. In our discussions, Samara brought up topics that she was reading and studying in her own coursework, making recommendations to other participants about

possible resources. When asked about her own pedagogy, Samara wrote the following:

> *I believe in teaching and learning environments that take into account children's voices, dispositions, stage of development and interests. An environment that takes and gives serious time for play. I am familiar with the Reggio Emilia approach and I identify with many aspects of it, including the concept of community of learning and that of making learning visible through emergent curriculum practices of observation, analysis and reflection. I also believe in teacher collaboration as one of the cornerstones for effective learning environments. In sum my pedagogy includes: developmentally appropriate emergent curriculum practices based on children's play, teacher collaboration and enrichment of environment that motivates exploration from the people in it. – Samara*

When asked about her favorite professional development experience, Samara cited a hands-on approach to teaching, one that connects reflection with the practical application:

> *One of my favorite professional development experiences was being a field practice student at Costa Del Mar City College Child Development Center, where I got to learn from experienced teachers and mentors, and reflect on my own teaching as well in my interactions with children. –Samara*

When asked what her hopes for the project were, Samara made a very simple and broad statement for why she joined the group:

> *I hope we learn from each other's work and I hope we collaborate when possible to make our lives and work better. –Samara*

Like Mara, Samara wanted to explore topics of community and collaboration during our time together. When asked what topics she wanted our group to examine together, she described it in this way:

> *Teaching and learning effectively. Collaboration between the different projects that are part of the group. How can we become a community*

of educators that can work together for the children and families we serve. How can we make team teaching happen at our own schools? – Samara

Samara attended all but two of the workshop meetings. She seemed an eager participant in our conversations and often took notes on our discussions.

Renee. Renee is a 38-year-old local teacher who grew up in a town about 25 miles from Hays and attended college at the local state university. She is now raising her seven-year-old daughter with her husband in Hays. Renee is a veteran teacher, having taught for the past 17 years, almost 10 of them as a public school art teacher, 2 years as a long-term substitute, and 2 years as a continuing education teacher. When Renee had her daughter, she retired from the public school arena and started her own home-based childcare center. This program has grown dramatically, and Renee now runs a licensed preschool for 32 children in Hays, located in a Catholic church. Renee is very committed to the Reggio-Emilia approach to teaching:

We are an art and Reggio-inspired preschool. Our curriculum is largely emergent and experimental. My background prior to the preschool was art and multicultural education. –Renee

Renee calls on her faith and spirituality in much of her caregiving work, describing retreats focused on mindfulness, meditation, and nurturing. When asked what her hopes for this project were, Renee wrote “to be inspired. To share. To connect.” At the beginning of the project, Renee attended all of the meetings and participated in many of the discussions. However, about half way through the project, she told me that it would be hard to keep attending all of the meetings because of her husband’s

work schedule and a lack of child care for her daughter. Renee attended about half of the year's workshops.

Case study participants and the workshop design. Throughout the project, I often referenced my more frequent interactions and communication with these three women when I was making decisions about our workshop content and activities. For example, I interviewed Renee when I was in the middle of creating the agenda for our fourth workshop. Based on her feedback, I incorporated more time for personal check-ins at the beginning of the meeting. While the case studies influenced the overall design of the workshop, I found that I didn't reference them as much when I was analyzing all of my data according to my research questions. I found myself spending much more time pulling data, excerpts, and written textual productions from the entire group. The interactions between and among the whole group of participants revealed, for me, a greater amount of insight into how this group was working together, their collective learning processes. The one-on-one interviews with the case study participants helped me understand the individual experience but provided me little information into how the group was collaborating and supporting one another. The one exception to this, as I describe in Chapter Five, is the role of memory work in Mara's experience in the project. As I noted, Mara was especially influenced by this memory work throughout the year. In my analysis of Mara's interviews, I was able to better understand why and how our work with memories had influenced her.

In this project, I believed that with their experiences, histories, and memories, all of the teachers in the group brought a collective body of knowledge that was

greater than a syllabus or curriculum that I could create as the participant-researcher. I aimed to access this body of knowledge through writing and sharing activities. For example, during the opening activity of our first workshop, I asked the teachers to brainstorm and establish a list of commitments that we could all agree to—concepts and reminders that would drive our participation. These commitments were written on a poster and then shared on a printed sheet.

> *As an educator inquiry group, we commit to:*
>
> - *Carefully and thoughtfully step up and step back when participating.*
> - *Exhibit a care of listening.*
> - *See through the process and allowing it to be elastic/flexible.*
> - *Respect one another's thoughts, perspectives, and time.*
> - *Communicate about where we're at: Remember that life comes in.*
> - *Talk real talk: sweet & gritty (like sand in your donut)*
> - *Let each other make mistakes: Our words don't represent our whole perspective or person.*
> - *Balance the damage and desire.*
> - *Bring an open-mind, a beginner's mind, and bring space to assumptions. (Poster created by Meristem during the first workshop).*

With each new writing and sharing activity that we engaged in, the content of the workshop grew—emerging and adjusting based on the teachers' interests. This approach, which drew on a design-based approach to research, allowed me, the researcher and facilitator, to explore not only how the educators in the project were engaging with the content of the workshops, but also how they were collaborating and supporting one another. This collaboration and support shaped the kind of processes the teachers experienced, rather than the workshop outcomes.

The Methodological Framework: Design-based Research

First described as "design experiments" by Brown (1992) and Collins (1992), the design-based research framework emerged from researchers who recognized that attempting to combine controllable laboratory-like experiments within the real world of classroom environments is challenging (Reinking and Bradley, 2008, p. 2). These researchers outlined the multiple critiques of educational research as being detached from practice and attempted to answer The National Research Council's (2002) call for "new research approaches that speak directly to problems of practice" (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003, p. 5.).

Design-based research is a methodological approach to examine how interventions are conceptualized and then implemented iteratively in authentic settings to test or generate new theories and frameworks for understanding learning processes (Brown, 1992; Reinking and Bradley, 2008; The Design-based Research Collective, 2003). Design-based research is a "high-level methodological orientation" with the intent of "producing new theories, artifacts, and practices that account for and potentially impact learning and teaching" (Barab & Squire, 2004, p. 2). While educational researchers continue to use multiple terms for this approach ("design experiments," "design research," "design studies," and "design science"), I chose to use the term "design-based research" because I align my work and research goals most closely with a group known as The Design-Based Research Collective. According to this group, design-based research, has five characteristics:

1. *The central goals of designing learning environments and developing theories or "prototheories" of learning are intertwined.*
2. *Development and research take place through continuous cycles of design, enactment, analysis, and redesign (Cobb, 2001; Collins, 1992).*
3. *Research on designs must lead to sharable theories that help communicate relevant implications to practitioners and other educational designers.*
4. *Research must account for how designs function in authentic settings. It must not only document success or failure but also focus on interactions that refine our understanding of the learning issues involved.*
5. *The development of such accounts relies on methods that can document and connect processes of enactment to outcomes of interest. (The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003, p. 5)*

Drawing from multiple theorists, Reinking and Bradley (2008) described this orientation, what they called "formative and design experiments" as being intervention-centered, occurring in authentic contexts, guided by theory, goal-oriented, adaptive and iterative, transformative, methodologically inclusive and flexible, and pragmatic. They wrote that "researchers who gravitate toward this approach focus on creating conditions that allow promising interventions to work, and they seek theory that can be directly useful to practitioners" (Reinking and Bradley, 2008, p. 17-22). However, these interventions, according to Reinking and Bradley (2008), are not imposed upon participants in a controlled environment (like much of experimental research) but instead focus on the collaborative meaning-making that occur during an intervention. Design-based research is different from naturalistic ethnographic work in that it goes beyond the contextual interpretations and the collection of rich descriptions of a cultural landscape and applies that new knowledge to an intervention aimed at collectively accomplishing specific goals, which in this study was to create a sustainable community of teachers that supported one another,

reflected on their own experiences, and engaged in inquiry on their current teaching practices. Bradley and Reinking cited Harste's (1993) conception of collaborative research as aligning with this approach. The following chart outlines the differences between collaborative focus of design-based research with experimental and naturalistic approaches (Bradley and Reinking, 2003, p. 25, From Harste, 1993, p. 357).

Research Perspectives	***Experimental***	***Naturalistic***	***Collaborative***
Focus	Comprehension	Interpretation	Learning
Vehicle	Prediction	Description	Collaboration
Intent	Add credence	Uncover theories of meaning	Interrogating assumptions and beliefs
Researcher's Stance	*I* prioritized	*I-you* visible	*We* vulnerable
Stance on knowledge	Fixed	Contextual	Relational
Procedure	Test hypotheses	Multiple perspectives	Tensions and anomalies
Methodological Stance	Innocent	Relative	Democratic
Path to Understanding	Simplicity	Complexity	Reflexivity
Role of research relative to schooling in our society	Cultural literacy	Cultural diversity	Morality
How significance is determined	Individual	Cooperative	Collaborative
Results	Better or cleaner arguments	More complex explanations	Learning and new invitations to inquiry
Presentational form	Report	Story	Invitation
Product	Study	Thick description	Journey

Figure 5 A Comparison of Research Perspectives

I chose this orientation for my work because I recognize that the creation of this educator inquiry group was an intervention for this group of teachers. The intervention was cyclical, iterative, and flexible in its design and nature, and addressed the specific challenges and needs that were raised by the participants. For

example, during the very first workshop of the study, I asked the teachers to write down their "great questions" about teaching and learning. This activity was not only used for introductions but was also informative in the design of the workshop content. Throughout the year, we continued to return to the list of questions that the teachers had initially asked. My aim in using this orientation was to create a learning space for these educators, which introduced new theories, and offered them opportunities to learn together, share, and support one another in their learning and their pedagogical practices. My data collection focused on capturing the stories and experiences of these teachers, how they understood new theory that we were reading about and discussing, and how they were interacting and collaborating as a group. I wanted to better understand how our group could represent an approach to professional development for early childhood educators that offered support, community, and care.

The Design of the Meristem Workshops

The design of the Meristem workshops was modeled on the practice of collaborative inquiry, a cyclical and reflective inquiry process involving multiple members of a community. Collaborative inquiry in education, similar to collaborative action research, is when educators work together to identify challenges, analyze relevant data, and test new approaches in the classroom (Borko, 2004; David, 2008; Gearheart & Osmundson, 2008).

Collaborative inquiry as a professional development practice. Recent research suggests that when teachers successfully engage in collaborative inquiry, their knowledge grows and their practice changes (David, 2008; Borko, 2004;

Gearheart & Osmundson, 2008). In her research on a team of teachers that met regularly to examine their students' work, Borko (2004) found that the teachers gained a better understanding of the students' reasoning and use of strategies, which they then used to alter their pedagogical practices. In their research on grade-level teams of teachers, Gearheart and Osmundson (2008) found that, after sharing and discussing student portfolios, the teachers not only deepened their knowledge about formative assessment practices but also used the results to inform their teaching practices.

In her review of research on collaborative inquiry research, David (2008) identified the following factors associated with effective inquiry teams: (1) leadership and norms that support collaboration and data use; (2) sufficient time to meet; (3) training in inquiry skills; (4) protocols to guide data collection and discussion; and (5) a facilitator keeping the ground focused. A growing body of research has examined teacher inquiry as a solo act (Hill, Stremmel, & Fu, 2004; Hubbard & Power, 2003; Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001; Fosnot, 1989), but very few studies have examined inquiry as a collaborative act (Moran, 2002; 2007; Tegano & Moran, 2005; Helterbran & Fennimore; 2004). Those that have examined inquiry groups found similar successful results as the studies listed above. Mary Jane Moran's work (2007; & Tegano, 2005) highlights how pre-service early childhood teachers showed multiple changes when working in collaborative inquiry groups: an increase in awareness of the value of collaborating with colleagues, reflective practices that demonstrated more attempts at self-regulation when teaching, and an appreciation and

increased use of documentation of both student and teacher learning. Tegano and Moran (2005) outlined the essential characteristics of collaborative inquiry models, which served as the main components for this study:

- *Recursive cycles of inquiry. Teachers engage in cycles of inquiry that include observing and documenting, analyzing and reflecting, planning, extending, and revising classroom experiences, in relation with other teachers.*
- *Reflective Practice. Reflection is an ability to think critically, intentionally, and systematically about one's own actions, practices, and the context of those actions. When shared with others, these reflections can generate multiple perspectives from which new understandings emerge.*
- *Discourse and Documentation (making visible children's and teachers' thinking). Teacher work to purposefully gather, organize, and share multiple perspectives of children and teachers' construction of knowledge. Documentation is a dynamic, integral tool of inquiry for both planning and teaching. (From Tegano and Moran, 2005, p. 291-294)*

Tegano and Moran (2005) emphasized how "collaborative, systematic, intentional inquiry . . . is a way of thinking, a disposition, a habit of mind" (2005, p. 292). While their work served as a model for this dissertation project, it is important to note that their work focused on pre-service teachers in an undergraduate program of study. This dissertation project instead focused on educators already in the classroom.

Two cycles of inquiry. As the facilitator of the workshop, I organized the project in two cycles. In the first cycle, the group used inquiry that focused on inward reflection. This self-inquiry allowed time for us to learn about one another and learn about the process of collaborative inquiry. During the second cycle, the group turned their focus outward, to learn about their classrooms and communities.

The cycle of inquiry, as proposed by Tegano and Moran (2005) (shown below), is comprised of a five-step process for examining a topic of your choice: 1) observation, 2) documentation 3) analysis and reflection, 4) the planning and extending of experiences, 5) revisiting and revising your understanding.

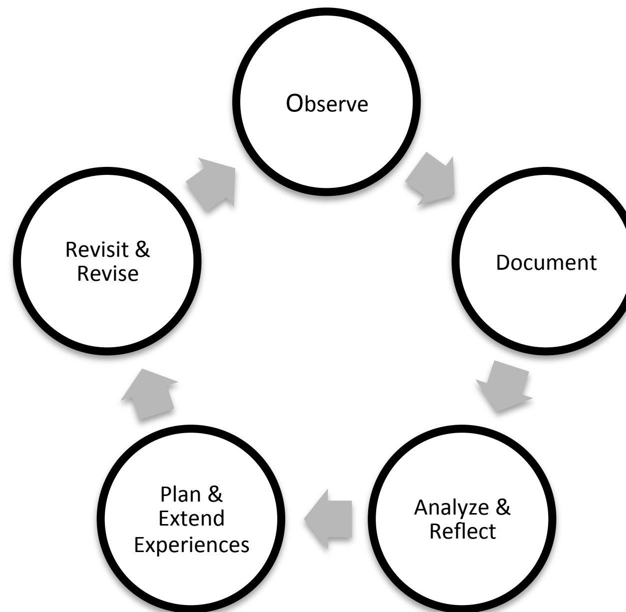

Figure 6 Cycle of Inquiry (Tegano & Moran, 2005)

Cycle of inquiry #1: Selves, theories, and inquiries. In the first cycle of inquiry, the group learned more about themselves as educators and each other as collaborators. The aim of this cycle was to build trust among the group as we shared our own educational experiences and histories, teaching experiences, and classroom and community contexts. We discussed our everyday challenges, successes, and opportunities. Throughout this period, our group read and discussed theoretical literature on theories of two topics: (1) critical literacies and (2) collaborative inquiry.

A discussion of our experiences learning about critical literacy, as both a theory and practice, is found in Chapter Three of this study.

During this cycle, I documented the educators' learning processes by collecting their written reflections and recording the audio of their discussions. I jotted field notes throughout our workshop meetings and wrote reflective memos to record their reactions and thoughts on the theory that we read about, the process of getting to know one another as a group, and the challenges they voiced when discussing how to bridge theory and practice. Towards the end of this cycle, we examined our documentation of the cycle, reflected on what we learned, and planned and extended our learning experiences.

Cycle of inquiry #2: Classrooms and communities. In this cycle of inquiry, we took what we had learned during the first phase and applied it to our classrooms and communities. As I describe in Chapter Three of this dissertation, the educators turned their focus toward the practice of documentation of student and teacher learning as a focus for their collective inquiry. During our workshop meetings, I asked the educators to bring in any data that they had collected from their classrooms and communities. This data was shared throughout our discussions. I also asked the teachers to reflect on the process of collecting these stories, and together we offered suggestions and ideas to one another for further data collection that expanded beyond the scope of anecdotal stories. During this time, I also raised discussion topics that I believed could help us think about how we could continue to support one another during these inquiry projects.

My Role as Facilitator and Participant-Researcher

My role as facilitator of this educator inquiry group was grounded in my belief that I was a collaborator, a co-constructor of knowledge, and that ultimately I aimed to do research *with* these educators, not *on* them (Moran, 2007; Ryan and Goffin, 2008). I recognize that, initially in the first cycle of inquiry in the project, my role as facilitator assumed a leadership role, as I set most of the structure and organization of the workshop, providing an agenda, helping establish meeting times, and providing resources. Much like Sheridan et al. (2009), I aimed to "help the group ask questions, connect and build ideas, expand key points, provide history and useful resources, and stay on task" (p.5). My goal during this beginning stage of the project was to provide a structure that was stable and focused while also providing activities that asked for participation, reflection and discussion from the educators. In the activities and questionnaires, I asked the educators to share their own experiences, their own stories, and their own body of pedagogical knowledge. In addition to facilitating the meetings, I also played the role of participant as I also took part in all of the writing activities, sharing my own experiences during our discussions. I wanted the relationship between the group and myself to be bidirectional and collaborative, not facilitator-centered. Many of my reflective memos discussed my own engagement and role during the project, acting as a check and description of my own involvement and participation. I also transcribed the workshop audio recordings shortly after each workshop, closely listening to the language that I was using with the group.

At times, my role was a challenging one, as I worked to balance the power that I held as the researcher and facilitator with that of a participant. During the workshop activities that involved sharing our own personal memories and experiences, I made sure to share my own reflections last, after everyone else had a chance to share out. At times, the discussion among the group took turns that I hadn't anticipated or expected. This was especially true when discussing our early memories of schooling. While I had wanted to encourage more broad reflection on how our memories influenced our current teaching practices and greater themes and patterns among our memories, the teachers took a different approach as they spent almost the entire discussion sharing very personal memories of their schooling experience, both negative and positive ones. Their sharing led to more sharing by others, as if their memories helped one another remember deeper and further, memory became a situated practice. This became one of my main findings and the topic of Chapter Four of this study. As the facilitator, had I not allowed this discussion to take place, we might not have been able to collectively experience and share in the way that we did.

As the group moved into the second cycle of inquiry, I stepped back and invited the educators to lead certain activities an set certain agenda items and themes. I found that, as the group grew to learn more about one another and work together as educators and collaborators, the more comfortable they were in taking on these roles, and the less mediation and facilitation was needed on my part. Often our conversations during the workshops took much longer than scheduled or veered off topic, but these times were especially powerful because they contributed to my own

understanding of the educators' experiences and perspectives—both as individuals and a group. The educators' show of support for one another emerged during this time. One example of this was when Anya described her interests in starting a new program, which was focused on outdoor exploration and play for young children. She and her husband were looking for land and space outside of the city of Emporia to create such a program. As she described her vision and ideas, the group began to brainstorm different places and resources that could help her. Bree suggested a piece of land outside of Emporia. Alison shared her experience starting a program that was in part focused on outdoor exploration. These were the kind of topics that the teachers wanted to share, dive into and support one another during our time together.

While these kind of topics and discussions emerged, I also made the point to never let our meeting times go completely unstructured, always establishing the agendas, themes, and topics in advance. I thought this was important, as many of the teachers had mentioned "time management" as an aspect of good professional development in their introductory questionnaires. They didn't want their time to be wasted. By structuring these first workshops, I wanted to value their time, especially because we were meeting mid-week for two hours in the evening, a precious time to many.

During the second cycle of inquiry, the direction of the project took on a life of it's own. I had originally believed that this time would be what Nelson et al. (2008) call "murky, unstructured territory." However, the use of a collaborative inquiry model helped focus our interactions, engagements, and learning processes that

happened during these “murky” times. As a qualitative researcher, I believe that it is in these unstructured moments when the learning processes are most interesting, when people’s choices and thoughts and interactions revealed something about their philosophical and pedagogical frameworks. Using the data that I collected from the workshops, combined with my continued reflections on our work and my own role and choices as a participant-researcher, I analyzed the ways that this group of educators made sense of new theories and supported one another in their inquiries. As I describe in the findings chapters of this paper, the teachers turned their collective focus towards co-writing a book. The topic of the book is the process of the documentation of learning processes, with each chapter written from the perspective of one teacher, examining the multiple ways to both assess and communicate how and what students and teachers learn. The book topic and writing became a major focus and driving force for many of our workshop activities and interactions.

I also experienced some tensions in my role as facilitator of the workshop activities and structure, especially when the group transitioned from my facilitation to a more collaborative space, which occurred after I completed my data collection. Not all of the educators seemed comfortable with the new, more open-ended structure of the workshop. However, as I will describe in Chapters Five and Six, the group continues to work on how they will collectively facilitate, structure their time, and work on the book project.

Data Collection and Analytical Methods

Over the course of the year, I collected the following types of data:

- Textual productions from the monthly workshops (written narratives and artifacts, questionnaire responses, journal entries, and interviews).
- Audio recordings of the workshops and case study interviews.
- Text and images created for the book co-written by the educators in the group.

Data Collected from Our Monthly Workshops

During the monthly workshops, I wrote field notes based on my observations, audio recorded our discussions, and collected the written or drawn artifacts that resulted from the workshop activities. After each workshop, I wrote reflective memos that focused on any noteworthy moments from our time together. These memos focused on how the participants responded in certain ways to the discussions or activities, any major questions that they had, any confusions or tensions that were brought up during the discussion, and moments of excitement about the work we were each doing. Over the course of the project I asked participants to respond to questionnaires, which included: (1) an introductory questionnaire, (2) a reflections questionnaire on the first cycle of inquiry, (3) a questionnaire on critical literacy, and lastly, (4) a conclusive final questionnaire on the workshop experience as a whole. Copies of the questionnaires can be found in Appendix A of this paper.

Case Study Data Collection

As mentioned earlier, I also followed three case study participants during the project. I collected additional data on these three teachers using purposeful sampling strategies (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling, according to Patton, involves closely

examining a small sample that is chosen for specific reasons, including cases which are “information rich” and “illuminative” (p. 231-232). I recognize that by following the highly-engaged case study participants in this study that I captured only one aspect of the experience of the project. However, I think this perspective is an important one. By purposefully capturing these samples, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of why these women became educators, how their memories and experiences as students influence their current teaching practices, and why they had decided to join this project.

During the one-on-one interviews with the case study participants, these women shared their stories of childhood, their family histories, their early teaching experiences, and much more with me. While our workshop activities touched on some of these topics, I was able to learn more about these three women and their life experiences during our one-on-one time. During these interviews, my understanding of the teachers’ influences and motivations became clearer to me, giving me greater insight into their participation in the group. Throughout the project, I paid particular attention to their engagement in the workshops, their participation in discussions, their interactions with their colleagues, their written reflections, and responses to the questionnaires. As a result of time together during the interviews, I communicated more frequently with these participants than with the other educators in the group. Our communication and discussions expanded beyond the scope of the group topics and often delved into topics around personal professional development, career steps, and the role of early childhood education in the community.

I think it is important to note that as facilitator of the group, I made decisions on resources, structure, and planning for the group that were not solely based on the experiences of these highly engaged case study participants but incorporated the reactions and reflections of all participants. I made these decisions based on my analysis of the entire group's written reflections, discussions, and personal and informal check-ins that I did with all members.

Analytical Methods

I analyzed the data from this study using inductive analysis with an open-coding approach to identify the major patterns and themes that emerged from the narratives from the individual case study participants and the group as a whole (Patton, 2002). Over the course of the year, I employed multiple analytical methods, including the processes of memoing, inductive coding and writing. My analysis was ongoing and cyclical as I took multiple passes through the data, revisiting and re-examining the different sources. The following describes these processes.

Memos and reflexivity. Throughout the project, I aimed to increase my self-awareness by writing and reflecting on my potential biases and familiarity with both the setting and the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). I recognize that my own teaching experience played an important role in my interpretations of the interactions that I had with the teachers in the group. Instead of considering this to be a limitation of my methods, I believe that, through our shared language and intentions, I was able to gain greater insight into how these teachers were experiencing the group and engaging with the content. In order to better understand

the influence of these personal interpretations, I engaged in what Kleinsasser (2000) called “writing to learn” which “makes thinking visible” (p.158). This process involves not only examining the theoretical groundings of data but also requires the researcher to examine the “intentions, mistakes, and learnings” that emerge from the data collection and analysis processes (p. 158). I examined my own learning and mistakes by writing memos throughout the year, which helped me track and map the choices that both the group and I made throughout the design, data collection, and the analysis stages. These memos were especially important when I wanted to better understand and map the major themes and topics that continued to arise during our discussions and how these topics could inform the next stages and direction of the workshop activities. One example of this came early on in the project, when multiple teachers called on their early memories of schooling to describe why they had become teachers. After this discussion, I wrote a memo that focused on the broader concept of memory and wanting to dig deeper into this concept with the teachers. Using that concept and the examples that the teachers had described, I designed an activity during which I asked the teachers to map their own memories of learning. This memo provided me the space to write and think about a topic that I saw emerging from the teachers’ responses and compare the teacher’s interests with my own. The concept of memory went on to become a focus of the study.

Coding major themes and patterns. After each workshop and interview, I transcribed the audio recordings, aiming to finish each transcription before the next workshop. When transcribing, I jotted notes of major topics that I discovered

emerging during these conversations and discussions. After completing each workshop transcription, I pulled out the teachers' individual responses to specific prompts that I had asked during these workshops. I placed these individual responses into separate files for each teacher. By examining the teachers' responses during the workshop discussions over the course of the entire year, I was able to examine how they were individually making meaning of the content, describing their inquiries, and sharing their personal memories and experiences.

At the conclusion to the project, I began to code all of the data. For both the audio recordings of the workshop discussions and case study interviews, I coded and analyzed the conversational turns, noting when and how the topic shifted in the discussion, comparing these shifts and themes with my field notes from the discussions. I began this process with a first pass through my data, identifying the major topics that were being discussed or described in the transcripts. For example, when I coded the teacher's discussion of their early memories of teaching and learning, I created codes such as "memories of teachers" and "memories of classroom" and "memories of family member." Each of these main codes received a number and were compiled into a codebook. During my second pass through the data, I more specifically defined these themes. Examples of this second pass of codes include "negative memory of teacher" or "positive memory of family member." These additional codes were added to my codebook. After passing through my data multiple times, I then began to write memos on the main themes, which were the most frequent codes that had emerged from the data. These themes and written

memos helped me continue to think about and reformulate my main areas of study and research questions, which in turn helped me further analyze the data that I had collected.

Constructivist grounded theory. In the process of comparing and reflecting on the main themes within the data, I aimed to employ what Kathy Charmaz called a constructivist grounded theory (2000). Charmaz has furthered the concept of grounded theory, originally conceived of by Glaser & Strauss (1967), to imagine this method as a methodological continuum—ranging from the objectivist approach to the constructivist approach. Charmaz described constructivist grounded theory as one that is aligned with the constructivist paradigm, which "celebrates first hand knowledge of empirical worlds, takes a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism, and offers accessible methods for taking qualitative research into the 21st century" (p. 510). Charmaz offered multiple suggestions for "seeking meanings—both respondents' meanings and researchers' meanings" (p. 525). The first suggestion is to go deeper—to look beyond surface meanings for the values, views, beliefs, ideologies, situations and structures that are at play in speaker language. An example of this in my own analysis is when I examined the teachers' early memories of teaching and learning. With each pass through the transcript of this one discussion, I aimed to examine not only the topic of their memory, but the broader influencing factors that made up that memory. I attempted to understand if a specific memory was negative because of specific teacher that the Meristem educator had encountered, a specific moment when they were disciplined or chastised, or was it a broader feeling

about school as an institution in general? I aimed to dig deeper into the memory, reflecting on that memory in light of what I knew about the teacher, what pedagogical stance she took when working with young children, and what interests and questions she had about teaching. This process of digging deeper helped me better understand each teacher's experience in the group.

Charmaz also suggested limiting the jargon or conceptual mapping that may "obscure experience" and instead, as the researcher, she makes codes and categories which are active in tense which, she argued, lends to the preserving and highlighting of subject experience. These active categories can then lead to more questions for both data collection and analysis. However, rather than narrowing the topics, the questions should broaden and abstract the ideas to "get at a meaning, not a truth" in order to "remain at a more intuitive, impressionistic level than an objectivist approach" (p. 526).

Triangulation of data. When designing my data collection and analysis strategies, I wanted to create a plan to check my own research and analysis techniques. Golafshani (2003) described how such a qualifying check can lead to increased rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research. Johnson and Christensen (2004) outlined the many ways to maximize this trustworthiness, including but not limited to; extended fieldwork, triangulation, participant feedback, peer review, external audit, and reflexivity (p. 250). By collecting four different sources of data during the workshop sessions, I was able to triangulate multiple data sources that could help highlight common themes and responses that might have been missed by

one source alone. This type of strategy is what Eisner (1998) called "structural corroboration," when the researcher looks for recurring events, themes, behaviors that are characteristic of the setting and participants across the multiple data sources (p. 110).

Peer review. Throughout the year, I shared some of the topics of my memos with the group, as a method for peer review. One example of this was when I shared a section of my Chapter Four, on teacher memories, with the group during a meeting held three months after I had stopped collecting data from our workshops. I asked the teachers to read and reflect on my analysis. I wanted to know if they saw the same kind patterns and themes that I had discovered.

I also conducted more informal check-ins with the Meristem educators, as I came to know each of the participants and understand their needs and desires for the group. I would often see the teachers walking down the streets of Hays and Emporia, in the grocery stores and coffee shops. I used these run-ins as a time to more personally connect with these women, trying to gauge how they were feeling about the whole workshop experience.

Limitations of the Study

As with any research, there were limitations to this study. The Meristem group was made up of nine educators, and while this small number of participants was helpful in creating trust, collaboration and support among the group members, perhaps a larger group would have provided more insight into the challenges and processes that early childhood educators face in a professional development group

setting. This was especially true considering that just two of the nine educators worked in publicly funded early childhood programs. A greater range of teaching environments and experiences might have benefitted both the research and the groups' recognition of different educational styles and practices.

There was also limited racial and gender diversity among the group members, as the majority of the group, seven out of nine participants, were white and all of the participants were female. In addition, I think the study would have benefitted from an even longer data collection time period, as the group continued to meet and develop their book project beyond the scope of this one-year project. By collecting data from these later meetings, I would have been able to better understand and establish which aspects of our work and group dynamics fostered the sustainability of this community. I also think that because we only met on a monthly basis, some of the tensions and challenges that faced our collective work became diminished over the month that we spent away from one another. Because some of these teachers only saw one another during that monthly meeting, they may have been less likely to criticize one another or my facilitation. Perhaps had we met more regularly, we could have dug in deeper into our group processes, memories, and inquiry work.

And lastly, I think it is important to recognize that this group was made up of participants who self-identified as progressive educators, meaning that they were already interested in new and innovative approaches to teaching and learning, prior to this project. This became quite evident during our first meeting when four of the nine teachers discussed their interests in social justice education and new approaches to

assessing student learning. These interests made it very easy, for me as the facilitator and researcher in the project, to introduce theory that was based on these interests.

Summary

In sum, the qualitative design of this project and the methods used to both collect and analyze the data were chosen in order to best capture the experiences, memories, and discussions that were shared by nine teachers during a series of workshops over the course of one year. By implementing a design-based approach to this study, I was able to use my analysis and reflections to help inform the structure and content of our workshop meetings. As both a facilitator and a participant in the research, my goal in the collection and analysis of this data was to understand how these educators were making sense of the theory that they were reading, the discussions that they were having, how they were sharing their own memories of learning, and how they were coming together to support one another. I also wanted to understand which features of this situated professional development approach both contributed and hindered the creation of a supportive and collaborative space for these teachers. And lastly, I hope to provide the field of professional development of early childhood educators with a set of features of a situated approach to teacher education which may potentially foster support and community for in-service teachers, one that honors their knowledge of teaching and processes of learning.

Chapter Three: Our Critically Literate Lives

Critical literacy is reading the world by noticing both what is present and what is not, and asking why. –Alison, Meristem Educator

When the educators of Meristem first met, they all showed an interest in reading about educational theory and research. In our very first workshop, I asked the teachers to brainstorm and write down a list of their "great questions" about teaching, learning, or education in general. The teachers wrote about a range of topics, themes, and questions, including an interest in social justice in education. Based on my own recent research on the theoretical foundations of critical literacy, described below, I immediately recognized that critical literacy and the research on its practice in classrooms could serve as an initial body of work that we, as a group, could read about and discuss during our time together. By asking the teachers to share their interests, I was able glean insight into the most pressing topics and interests raised by this group of teachers, an important step in creating an environment that promoted inquiry as a focus for our collective work.

After spending a year facilitating workshops with this group of educators and documenting their experiences and perspectives, I found that these teachers were living critically literate lives, both inside and outside of their classrooms and our workshop. After four workshop discussions on the topic of critical literacy, each of the teachers shared their own definitions of the concept. I found that seven out of nine of the teachers defined critical literacy as the reflective interrogation of texts and circumstances. Their definitions left out one aspect of critical literacy, that which

called for taking action and promoting social justice. However, when I asked them how they engaged in critical literacy practice outside of our group, they described actions they were taking in their classrooms and communities. In the following sections, I will introduce the foundations of critical literacy, share the teachers' definitions of critical literacy, and show how these teachers were engaging in critical literacy practices, both within our group setting and also outside of our group, in their own classrooms and communities.

In the conclusion to this chapter, I will describe how the Meristem educators, mostly white and female, faced challenges and tensions when they engaged in critical literacy practices. These teachers reported their difficulties and then went on to describe how the support of the Meristem community helped them raise their own awareness and navigate these obstacles.

The Anthropological Foundations of Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is often traced back to the theoretical work of Paulo Freire. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire described a foundation for a critical pedagogy by critiquing the "banking" model of education, where "education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p.72). This act of depositing or "filling" the students as if they were "receptacles" leads to classrooms where students are unable to develop the critical consciousness and "creative power" necessary to examine the oppression that they face within such a system (p.73). To combat this problem, Freire posed a dialogic solution where all classroom participants became active investigators of "the

word," which Freire saw as "more than just an instrument that makes dialogue possible" but notes that the word contains two elements: "reflection and action" that is, "there is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis . . . thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world" (p. 87). Freire described how "human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work in action-reflection" which must happen from the onset (p. 88). This dialogue became the foundation for critical literacy practice in the classroom, which Freire further described in his work with Donaldo Macedo (1987). They described literacy as both "reading the word, and the world" and the act of reading was understood as a dynamic social process:

> *Reading the word implies continually reading the world . . . this movement from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world. In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35).*

In the introduction to the book by Freire & Macedo (1987), Henry Giroux described and reiterated the twofold process of critical literacy: "it means developing the theoretical and practical conditions through which human beings can locate themselves in their own histories and in doing so make themselves present as agents in the struggle to expand the possibilities of human life and freedom" (p.11). "To be literate," Giroux wrote "is to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one's voice, history, and future" (p.11). Both parts of this process, the reflection and the action, are essential to the process of making change.

In their work, Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002) further defined critical literacy by outlining four key dimensions to the practice:

1. ***Disrupting a common situation or understanding:*** *Seeking to understand the text or situation in more or less detail to gain perspective.*
2. ***Interrogating multiple viewpoints:*** *Standing in the shoes of others or thinking about texts from perspectives of different characters or from perspectives not represented in the texts.*
3. ***Focusing on sociopolitical issues:*** *Thinking about power in relationships between and among people and exploring how power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions.*
4. ***Taking action and promoting social justice:*** *Reflecting and acting to change an inappropriate, unequal power relationship between people.*

Since Freire's initial conception of critical literacy, multiple theorists, researchers, and practitioners have explored how critical literacy can be applied to school settings, a body of research that Freebody (2008) called "critical literacy education" (p. 109). According to Freebody, this work can be clustered into headings of anthropological, sociological, linguistic, and pedagogical traditions. He further stated that, while these headings are at times blurred, they each came from a "distinct view of what constitutes the critical aspects of critical literacy education, and each deploys different forms of data, analysis, and argument to support that view" (p.109). Citing work from anthropologists Brian Street and Shirley Brice Heath, Freebody described how the anthropological orientation of critical literacy used "observational, cross-cultural, and documentary methods to expand on two key ideas about literacy": (1) a theoretical focus on understanding literacy as coordinated and shared sets of practices and events and (2) a motivation to document literacy activities in homes, schools and workplaces (Freebody, 2008, p. 109-110). With a focus on literacy events, practices, and interactions, the anthropological orientation to critical literacy

education centered on the diversity and hybridity of the cultures, languages, and ways of making meaning by both teachers and students. By highlighting this diversity, telling the stories, and documenting the details of the lives and literacy practices of students and teachers, this approach focused on how the "everyday empirics of how people do things with texts, day in, day out" and on "how much of this remains unrecognized or misrecognized in the settings of modern public institutions" (Freebody, p. 111).

The Role of Critical Literacy in Professional Development

Few studies from the theoretical field of critical literacy addressed how critical literacy can be used for the professional development of teachers. However, one book, *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Teachers* by Vasquez, Tate, and Harste (2013), provided a framework for how critical literacy can be incorporated into teacher education. These authors defined critical literacy as "a way of being rather than as a set of activities" (p. 4). According to the authors, this way of being was what defined a "critically literate life." In their book, Vasquez et al. described their efforts to make spaces for teachers to examine and enact critically literate lives. The authors offered teacher educators the foundations and resources to "help adult learners to not only learn about and frame their teaching from a critical literacy perspective but to help them live through or embody critical literacies that have importance in their own lives" (p. 3). While Vasquez et al. presented a comprehensive book of resources for teachers and teacher educators, they did not go into detail about the struggles, challenges, successes, and stories that emerged from the teachers when these "spaces"

were actually created. They also did not go into detail about the bridge between living and teaching critical literacy.

As a participant-researcher in this project, I wanted to further examine that connection between living and teaching critical literacy, including the processes that the teachers experienced when engaging with such theory in a collaborative space. By understanding these processes, we, as a research field, can begin to better understand the challenges and affordances such theory offers teachers of young children. Only then can we start to learn how to assist, guide, and provide support to such educators in the field of teacher education and professional development,

Critical Literacy in the Meristem Workshops

Much of the content of our Meristem workshops was, in part, focused on the anthropological foundations of critical literacy—meaning that not only did the group read and learn about critical literacy as a pedagogical practice for their classrooms and students, but we also engaged in critical literacy practices during our own group meetings. For example, we created texts through writing and used methods of inquiry to explore those texts and the underlying messages and themes that were present. By framing both the content and the practice of the group in this way, I allowed space and time for the group to explore multiple topics, questions, and educational themes of their own choosing.

Prior to our meetings, just two of the nine teachers described knowing about critical literacy as a concept. During our monthly workshops, I provided the teachers with resources and reading on the theory and practice known as critical literacy.

During one of our first meetings, I shared an excerpt of writing from Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) on critical literacy, and we discussed what this could look like when working in classrooms with young children. During the next workshop, based on our discussions on asking questions and interrogating texts as teachers, I created a one-page document on critical literacy practice and shared it with the teachers. This document focused on the kind of questions that one might ask of texts in order to examine the role of power, fairness, and equity. In this handout, I included the four dimensions of critical literacy identified by Lewison, Flint and Sluys (2002) (see Appendix C for full handout). Halfway through the project, I provided the teachers with another handout, which I found on a website created by EduGains out of Ontario, Canada (EduGains, 2009). Using this handout as a reference, we discussed how critical literacy has been presented in a multitude of different ways, many of them very broad. For example, the EduGains website defined critical literacy as "a stance, a mental posture, or emotional and intellectual attitude." I pointed out that the field of critical literacy also has a broad definition of a "text." The same handout described a text as something that is more than simply "written material" but may also include media texts, oral text, and graphic text. "In this sense" the author wrote, "text is not synonymous with textbook."

In addition to these handouts on critical literacy, I simultaneously provided the teachers with descriptions and resources on the model of collaborative inquiry and the cyclical process of engaging in research in the classroom (as described in the methodology section of this paper). We discussed how collaborative inquiry projects

could align with critical literacy practices and projects with our students. One discussion in particular compared the concept of critical literacy with the letter written by Eve Tuck called “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities” which called for a moratorium on research that only “documents peoples’ pain and brokenness” or what she referred to as damage-based research. Tuck recommended acknowledging the complexity of experience, seeing not just the pain and damage, but also the successes – the desire-based experiences. As a group, we discussed how conducting research and engaging in critical literacy practices with our students is hard, especially when we examined and interrogated texts that uncovered the same kind of inequity that caused the kind of pain that Tuck described.

I chose these readings and resources for the teachers based on their own initial interests and questions about education, teaching, and learning. In addition, I selected material based on my own understanding of the anthropological foundations of critical literacy and considered how these resources would connect to the teachers’ expressed interests in social justice education, the process of documentation of student learning, and the methods of conducting research in their own classrooms. I saw this body of work as aligning with their pedagogical stances and felt that given the space to consider, write, and discuss these readings, the Meristem group would have an opportunity to reflect on topics that mattered to all of us. As a researcher, I wanted to better understand how these teachers understood this theory and on how critical perspectives were part of their “everyday lives” (Vasquez, 2004, p.1).

Our Definitions of Critical Literacy

Throughout the year, the teachers studied, discussed, and provided their own understanding and definitions of critical literacy —both formally in questionnaires and informally in our workshop discussions about critical literacy. During the fourth workshop, I found that when I directly asked the teachers to define critical literacy, the majority described critical literacy as a process of reflection, inquiry, and interrogation of texts. These definitions aligned with the first three dimensions of critical literacy as outlined by Lewison, Flint, and Sluys (2002):

1. ***Disrupting a common situation or understanding**: Seeking to understand the text or situation in more or less detail to gain perspective.*
2. ***Interrogating multiple viewpoints:** Standing in the shoes of others or thinking about texts from perspectives of different characters or from perspectives not represented in the texts.*
3. ***Focusing on sociopolitical issues:** Thinking about power in relationships between and among people and exploring how power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions.*

For example, in her definition of critical literacy, Bree focused on the process of examining or reading a text deeply to uncover power relationships and influences:

> *I define critical literacy as having the skills and capacity to inquire deeply into media, literature, art, social dynamics, and social structures, societal norms, institutions and research through a critical lens—doing so by questioning the root causes, influences and sources. To be critically literate, one does not receive information without processing it through inquiry, asking questions so as to see the meaning behind or within the context of culture, race, class, gender, time period, etc. –Bree*

Renee focused on the process of being an "interactive researcher" who posed questions of a text, and like Bree, looked to uncover "hidden" issues and assumptions:

I view critical literacy as interactive research. Posing questions as I take in the text and then asking more questions as answers to my original questions became more focused. In this way, assumptions can be challenged, hidden issues may come to light, and cause and effects are evident. In this way, I try to be an active participant rather than passive. A peeling away of an onion. –Renee

Samara also focused on the process of reflection. Here she described being a reader who is both alert and aware:

Critical literacy seems to describe a state of alertness and awareness of how we process and gain new information. [Critical literacy] demands an examination of beliefs. . . . and connections between new and old information. –Samara

In this questionnaire, seven of the nine teachers focused on the first three dimensions of critical literacy as outlined by Lewison et al. (2002), describing processes of reading and interrogating texts, looking for multiple perspectives, and dissecting power relationships in those texts. When reading their written definitions, which were collected two months *after* we had read about critical literacy and discussed the definitions as posed by Lewison et al. (2002), I realized that the teachers were leaving out the fourth dimension of critical literacy, as defined by Lewison et al. (2002):

4. Taking action and promoting social justice: *Reflecting and acting to change an inappropriate, unequal power relationship between people.*

Just two of the teachers, Mara and Ella, hinted at this last dimension of promoting social justice. Mara aligned critical literacy with the process of both reflection and action, specifically thinking about how she "comes to a setting" and how she can "better contribute to . . . society at large":

I think about the resources available to me as an educator as I think simultaneously to the children and families I am working with and the particular communities and culture they/we are living in. I think of

> *myself as an observer and listener, seeking more understanding of varying views and understandings/stories of human experience. I look to be challenged to expand, shift, grow my understanding of humanity, those I live and work with, to support what I can offer as an educator; How do I come to a setting, what do I offer, what can I receive, how can my understandings shift and grow and how can I better contribute to myself, those I work with, and society at large. –Mara*

Ella defined critical literacy in the following way:

> *I define critical literacy as being able to read the world with a critical lens. I think this breaks down to these parts:*
>
> - *to read the texts of our surroundings (could be literal texts, or not)*
> - *to situate them within a broader context and web of power*
> - *to ask questions about what lies beneath, within, and around a "text", to unpack its messaging, where it comes from (i.e. its social construction) and also to reflect on our own positionality as readers*
> - *and to use these questions to re-imagine how else our surroundings might be, and how we might be a part of getting there. –Ella*

Ella's description aligns with Lewison et al's (2002) very closely, however she, too, only hints at a specific action in this work, what she refers to as a re-imagining of "how else our surroundings might be, and how we might be a part of getting there." I began to question: Why were the teachers leaving out (or narrowly hinting at) this dimension of taking action and promoting social justice? Why was there instead a focus on reading and interrogating texts? Was it because these teachers were focusing on the concept of "literacy" when defining critical literacy, narrowing in on the processes of reading and writing? Or was it because the actual act of "promoting social justice" is a challenging one to take as an educator?

In my reflective memos, I wrote about this absence as very puzzling, especially considering that three of the teachers had expressed an interest in social

justice in education from the very beginning of the project. Then I wondered, were these teachers actually engaging in "taking action" or promoting social justice in their lives, either in or outside of the classrooms?

When I examined how the teachers discussed their classrooms projects, curricula, and work in the communities, I quickly discovered that, while these educators were not necessarily highlighting the action piece of critical literacy in their written definitions, they certainly engaged in social justice activities, taking action in multiple ways.

Throughout the project, the teachers demonstrated how they were actively promoting social justice, in their classrooms, in their own lives, and even on a societal level, as well. As I describe below, the teachers were exploring new ways to introduce social justice-oriented activities and content in their teaching practices. The design of their courses, the focus of their classroom projects, and the ways that they described their students' work all demonstrate how they were taking action on a pedagogical level. Outside of the classroom, the teachers were examining their own role in activism and community organizing. They were advocating for human rights and equitable treatment for the students and families in their communities, while also considering the role that they were personally playing in the struggle for fair and equal treatment of their community members. And lastly, in the process of writing a book, the teachers are seen taking action on a broader, societal level – asking questions that examine how early childhood educators, students, and families are either "visible" or "invisible" in the field of education and society as a whole.

Critical Literacy Inside the Classroom

Throughout our year together, multiple Meristem educators described how they actively promoted social justice in their classrooms with their students. For example, Laurel co-taught a class (with an educator outside of the group) called "Hidden Histories." While this class was for children ages 8 to 15 years of age, Laurel described this work as representative of what she was doing in all of her programming. When the "Hidden Histories" class ended, the teachers and students wrote a description of their class and posted it to their program website. They described their work together in the following way:

> *In this ten-week class, we explored our relationship to history, and the relationship between history and power. Who writes history? What stories get told and retold, and what stories fade from memory? Which histories get canonized, and which histories are silenced? We looked at geography, technology, food, agriculture and worldview, as examples of the forces that influence this process. We helped each other record our own oral histories. We asked, what is a worldview, and how does it influence choice, perspective, and the trajectory of history? Through independent/collaborative research and deep inquiry, we looked at important historical moments and whole histories of existence.*
>
> *Or as the students described it:*
> *"This class tries to ask the questions we don't usually think about."*
> *"A hidden history is a history that is under the surface that people might not think about. A history of the underdogs."*
> *"It is not about something told from the dominant side that everyone knows, thinks is true, and never questions. All histories connect with the hidden ones, but you wouldn't discover that if you didn't uncover the whole story."*
> *"We looked at how history is created and how it connects to our lives today . . . Studying hidden histories means taking your time to question what you are learning about the past, to dig deeper, and not just to look at one side of the story."*
> *"Hidden history is history that is not always obvious but is there if you look close enough." (Retrieved from Program website)*

In a discussion during our seventh workshop, the teachers discussed the importance and practice of asking questions when engaging in critical literacy. During this conversation, Laurel described how our process of asking questions in Meristem mirrored the process of question-asking of her students in the Hidden Histories class:

> *Bree:. . . maybe one of the things about critical literacy is like this idea that there isn't always a neat answer or solution to a lot of questions that we have to ask. Some of those are just like in process and questions just continue to be things we ask over and over again, some of them we can research and find answers to and others . . . don't have answers. There's a thing in academia that's sort of like yeah they're questions and then answers….things get wrapped up in neat packages.*
>
> *Laurel: I'm kind of cracking up a little bit because I feel like our — what we [the educators in Meristem] are all proposing right now is what the kids are doing for their end of class. They're just listing questions . . . they're all coming up with questions that have their topics engaged with the public too and so that they can ask the public what they think about their questions.*

Laurel saw this process of asking questions by her students as a valuable component to her teaching and her classroom environment. Her students were engaging in both the process of asking questions and of bringing those questions out to their communities. Laurel, along with her co-teachers, Bree and Ella, also promoted social justice in their summer programming. Ella had recently returned to graduate school to study urban geography and oral history. She was working on a master's thesis that explored the role of education and race in the city of Emporia. One year prior to our workshop, Laurel, Bree, and Ella helped create and lead the Social Justice Leadership Academy, a summer program for youth in Emporia that focused on issues of social justice in their community. During the summer of our

workshop, the academy concentrated on the role of food and “food justice” in their neighborhoods. With Laurel, a former chef, the youth started a local community garden in their neighborhood and worked closely with a local nonprofit that provided farm-fresh food to families of prisoners and promoted the concept of “farms not prisons,” During this same summer academy, Ella worked with youth to research and record a 45-minute radio show on the role of food in the community of Emporia, which is characterized as a “food desert” for many of its citizens. With Ella, young people interviewed people on the street, local politicians, grocery storeowners, and farmers for the show. This show has since aired on a local radio station numerous times.

These literacy practices were just a sample of the kind of action and social justice work that the teachers implemented inside their classrooms. In addition to the critical literacy practices that these teachers described inside their classrooms, I discovered that the teachers described a similar kind of action in their work outside of the classroom, in the communities and neighborhoods in which they taught.

Outside of the Classroom: Local Action and Imagination

In my research, I found multiple examples of the teachers engaging in community social justice activities outside of their classrooms. During our project, Bree started a local chapter for the group called Showing Up for Racial Justice or SURJ (http://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/). Aligned with the recently developed Black Lives Matter movement, SURJ is: “a national network of groups and individuals organizing White people for racial justice.” As one of the leaders of the

new local chapter, Bree gathered a group of like-minded social justice advocates to organize local efforts and educate themselves on the topics of racial justice in Emporia. Bree held these SURJ meetings on a monthly basis in her classroom.

Mara also played an active role in her community. While Mara is a private childcare provider who worked in people's homes, she believed that it was important to be an active voice in the community around topics of education. Mara attended local school board meetings, was a member of the new chapter of SURJ, and knew many of the local policymakers in the area. During our personal conversations, Mara often updated me on the local issues of education in the area. Mara described providing resources to many families throughout the area, including connecting families with options for childcare and other schools in the area. During one of my interviews with Mara, we sat at a local coffee shop, and a woman came up to us. Mara introduced her to me and told her about my project and our group. The woman immediately shared how Mara had helped her find a preschool for her child, introduced her to other parents in the community, and was a "thought partner" for her in her role as a mother.

Samara, a single mother of two children, described the act of parenting as an example of critical literacy in her life outside of the classroom. When we discussed what it means to live a critically literate life, Samara talked about examining her own role and the power dynamics of raising children. She also reflected on the "questioning perspective" that one may make as a mother:

> *To live a critically literate life means to be open to learning, questioning, awareness and to examine actions, reactions, and*

provocation . . . taking action to try answering a certain question. . . . As a mother I also have a questioning perspective about what is working and what is not working for my children. –Samara

Much of the work that the teachers described, especially that of parenting, was voluntary and unpaid. When I asked the teachers why they engaged in such work and what drove them to do it, they described it as a "necessary" part of teaching and being part of the community. I found this to be in exact alignment with how Barbara Comber described in her research: "critical literacy involves local action and imagination, interrogation of the ways things are, and design of how things might be otherwise" (Comber et al, 2001b, p. 463). The teachers might have adopted this approach to social and local action and imagination to align with their perception of their teaching practice. For instance, at multiple times in the group, members such as Alison and Mara, described our work as "transformative" or called our group a collection of "transformative educators." This perspective—one of transformation, growth and change— on the purpose of both our teaching and our collective work, seemed to be an integral part of identities and roles in the community.

Meristem & Critical Literacy: Co-Writing a Book

When the teachers described the kind of critical literacy action that they were practicing in their classrooms and communities, they also referenced their work in our Meristem workshops. On a questionnaire, I asked the teachers what they do to practice critical literacy (if at all), and five of the nine teachers cited our collective work. In the process of writing this book, the Meristem educators broadened the

scope of their work, and began to think about how students, families and early childhood educators are both viewed and treated by society.

During our third workshop, the teachers discussed how the value of inquiry and research was not necessarily just in the answers and results that you discover during your inquiry but also in the actual act of asking questions itself. The teachers discussed this topic when they talked about their list of “great questions” and how those questions would inform the topics that they each chose for the second cycle of inquiry. Ella brought up the idea of turning these inquiries into chapters of a book, and the rest of the group became excited about producing a final product and co-writing together. Renee and Mara described the kind of books that were being written and published by the Reggio Emilia teachers from the founding school in Italy. These books focused on different teaching and learning projects and used photographs, running records, transcripts, and drawings to depict the kind of learning that the children demonstrated in the classroom. We particularly concentrated on a book by Guidici, Rinaldi, and Krechevsky (2001) titled *Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners,* which was based on a joint research project between Reggio Emilia teachers in Italy and Project Zero, a Harvard Graduate School of Education research project focused on arts and education. Mara suggested that our book could be a teacher version of this approach that would document what we learned. When Anya asked the group how we would choose topics, Ella suggested that we look to our “great questions” and think about which topics would interest us. In each chapter, we would document our process of discovery when attempting to

answer those questions. Alison brought up the fact that we may not actually find answers to our questions, but instead we might develop even more questions, and everyone agreed that this would be okay, even helpful for other teachers, the target audience for our book. Bree suggested that we should have a final chapter of the book that listed our newly developed questions, showing how much we value inquiry as a cyclical and continual process in learning.

Once the group had decided to write a book together based on their inquiries, they agreed that each teacher would be responsible for writing one chapter. We would also collectively map out and design the book, while continually giving one another feedback on our topics. I agreed to initiate the outline of the first draft and incorporate time in our future workshop agendas to discuss our research, writings, and the overall design and outline of the book. Much of this initial planning occurred during the fourth workshop, after the group had shared some very personal memories and stories with one another during the self-inquiry process. During this time, I observed the group growing more comfortable with one another. Teachers stayed after our workshop time in order to more individually connect and check in with each other. At times, after a two-hour workshop on a weeknight, some teachers would stay for a whole extra hour to chat and be together. Based on my observations, group members appeared to develop more trust in each other. I saw this trust as an important component to the work of our group and the longevity and sustainability of the community of practice. By creating trust, I hoped that this group would be able to dig deeper into their teaching perspectives and practices and be willing to share them

openly and honestly in a safe and caring space. As the participant-researcher, I wanted to create a space where the teachers could dissect their own and one another's perspectives and privileges. By creating such a space and building that trust, I hoped that we could do such critical work safely, without injuring or degrading one another's experiences or perspectives. Trust continued to play an important part throughout our year together.

Developing our chapter topics. During the following month, in our fifth workshop, the teachers spent some time discussing possible topics that they each wanted to explore. At the beginning of this fifth workshop, I asked the teachers to spend ten minutes writing down the questions that they wanted to examine in their respective chapters and then share them aloud. Based on our previous conversations about the Reggio Emilia-style publications, many of the teachers focused on the documentation methods that they each used and the questions that they had around those methods. In the following excerpt, the teachers shared their respective chapter topics. Here, Bree, Alison, and Mara described their interests in documentation and the role of families in that process. Bree referenced the moment earlier described; when Laurel was helping her son, Forrest, learn more about the Zapatistas, at home, after their class:

> *Bree: I have a couple [of topics]: "How can families participate in the documentation process?"*
>
> *Alison: I have the same one. Or "How can parents make home learning visible in the classroom?" is how I phrased it.*
>
> *Bree: Yeah, It's so fascinating to me to even hear like the conversation you [Laurel] had with Forrest. There must be all these amazing*

conversations that people are having at home and that is so important to me to know that kids are thinking about something over the week. Or there's that the kids who like seem like they're totally disengaged or like "we're not paying attention" and then you somehow happen to find out later that they actually totally heard that or heard it or absorbed it in some other way that they did not show me. So my assessment or my documentation did not capture their learning, whatever method I was using, so: what are the other methods or who are the other players who could capture that? Which does get actually at the relationship with schools, 'cause there's a little bit of both directions going on there too. There's learning that's happening for them in the public school that might come out in alternative spaces and vice versa. You know, where they're carrying that knowledge back into the public spaces, that cross-learning.

Maggie: How did you [Alison] phrase yours?

Alison: So mine was going the other direction [than what] you're talking about. So the learning that's happening in the home, making that visible in the classroom. So going both ways and then you can start to see the overlap.

Maggie: So how to make visible the learning at home in the classroom?

Mara: Mine was similar in that it was about home and the person who is with the children–if its in the classroom or school, or in my case, just being with someone's child - that my documentation and sharing and engaging with the parent and how trying to inspire dialog where they are sharing, too. How might they use documentation and have that conversation about not only their child but the bigger picture of how are we learners so that it can become a community conversation, so that it doesn't just stay in your house or between you and the school that you are affiliated with but it actually is a bigger understanding, a bigger conversation.

Maggie: Would it be like how to broaden the conversation beyond the single learner?

Mara: It would be moving the conversation, sort of bringing adults in to understanding learning, through understanding the child. And the value of documentation in that process, on all sides, supports a bigger understanding and visibility of a child in a community. So again it sort of starts intimately. It's happening at Sparrows, and it's happening in

Hays. It's happening in your school, and, you know, then all the sudden we have a lot more people, a lot more parents and families and educators are having these conversations and crossing paths. Maybe it just becomes like how can it support us, how we begin thinking about learning and the young child through their lifetime of learning, as they get older in a community. But I–so in thinking about what can I do– is become someone who takes not just the documentation, but then sits down and creates like a page to share and a willingness, an invitation, to have a conversation with a parent and ask them if they would be interested in doing something similar or something different but that would support dialog around learning.

Maggie: Great. And your documentation of that process becomes the data to answer these questions?

Mara: Right, right.

In this discussion, Bree first described her interest in the kind of learning that happens at home. Then Alison described how she was interested in the kind of learning that goes "the other direction" – from the home to the school. Mara builds off of Alison's topic and describes her interest in how the caregiver can work with the parent. All three of these educators described their interests in learning and documenting learning in - both the classroom and at home. They all showed an interest in broadening that process to become a "conversation" which involves the greater community. They talked about the overlap of learning in these spaces, the "cross-learning" and "crossing paths." As the conversation continued, I confirmed what I was hearing these educators describing, and then Ella went on to describe her focus on the community at large. In this description, she, like Mara, brought up the concept of visibility:

Maggie: Great. So lots right here about families, parents, and then broadening it into the community.

Ella: Mine was also kind of on the community scale, thinking about a slightly different direction, but thinking about the scale of how we work with young people, can and do work with young people, of different ages, to frame their own visibility in a place. So how they are seen or encountered or, um, both their learning processes and relationship to learning but also their dreams and their frustrations and their . . .

Laurel: Their image of themselves.

Ella: Yeah, like how can they, you know, there's a lot of adult conversations that happen in a place about what's happening and what should be happening and so how do we support young people in not necessarily just participating in those conversations at the adult-level discourse, but how do we support young people in kind of being visible to a place and kind of intervening in some of those processes. Some of those places are also for young people and often it's sort of through the lens, you know, there's like the advocates for young people who are like at the meetings or something. I think that's really important, but I'm also interested in like what does that visibility mean? How can they also participate in their own framing of who they are and what their needs are?

In the above excerpt, Ella described how youth participate in the public conversations and public spaces available in their community. Laurel confirmed what she was hearing Ella describe. Ella went on to ask another question that she had about documentation, which was much more focused on the practice of documenting learning in the classroom.

Ella: I also had one other question . . . on a very practical level something that I've been thinking about at Sparrows is: how do we document what happens inside the classroom over the course of like a day or a ten-week quarter? How specific do you get, in a way that is sustainable for educators, so like how to create a system around that, but also what do you choose? What does get shared and why and how?

In this topic, Ella brings up the role of the teacher in documentation and the challenges that a teacher faces in creating a sustainable system for this work. After

Ella brought up the practice of documenting student learning in the classroom, Laurel went on to describe her own assessment system for her students. Confirming Ella's questions, Laurel described the process of assessment as one that is both challenging and how she often felt isolated when doing it.

> *Laurel: Well, I'll just jump on that one because mine's very much like that. . . . So I guess I'm interested in a project focusing on a clear framework for assessments and with a focus on alternative learning environment that would be not seen as wishy washy . . . I've been writing assessments that are narrative-based and based on notes that have been taken over an entire quarter for kids by different teachers, for kids in different classes and trying to think about that. I started recently writing Maggie and trying to think through that. I don't know sometimes I can research, and then asking questions, and then showing Ella what I am working on, but it's like a little bit like I am doing that on my own, a little bit. It's hard.*
>
> *Alison: I don't know if this ties into what we are talking about, but it would be so interesting to look, without names, to look at how you are writing those.*
>
> *Laurel: Yeah, I would love to share. I mean I have them [right here], I could share. I could just share a document [online], too.*

In this excerpt, Laurel described how "doing it on her own" was hard. Alison suggested that she could share her notes and process with the group and Laurel agreed that sharing would be helpful.

The group then discussed the challenges to this kind of documentation and assessment of children, specifically how the adults may "get in the way" of a child's learning by focusing too much on documenting their learning. In this excerpt, Anya, like Ella, also brought up the topic of *visibility*. The group became interested in visibility through their previous discussions of the

Reggio Emilia and Project Zero book, which described documentation as the process of making learning visible.

> *Anya: I wrote: How can we support children's inner wildness? How can we be visible yet un-obstructive in their lives?. . . .So that idea of being a facilitator and being—*
>
> *Mara: Sort of the adult being visible but not obstructive…*
>
> *Anya: Yeah, not getting in the way.*
>
> *Bree: I also had a question with that: "How can documentation, or certain forms of it, sometimes be a hindrance or an interruption to learning?" [general sounds of agreement] Sometimes I'm "I'll capture this all!" But then, I'm "Who is this about? Is this about this child's learning or mine?" Or is it about like something else entirely, proving something? Yeah.*
>
> *Laurel: I've got like this creeper-stalk thing that I'm like, all the sudden, "quick!"[makes a sign with her hand that mimics a camera taking a photograph] The other day I came around the corner in my house and Forrest thought I was going to take a picture of him. I was like, oh yeah . . . He's like, "What? Don't take a picture!" I was like, "We are home right now. I am not at Sparrows."*
>
> *Bree: Like the paparazzi are coming . . . Yeah, there are a lot of photographs in your face.*
>
> *Alison: You made me think that it would be interesting to invite children to document our learning as teachers.*

In the above excerpts, the teachers discussed the challenges of documenting student learning and the role that teachers and adults play in the process. These excerpts are an example of how the Meristem teachers engaged in a critical literacy practice in their workshop discussions. The first step in their process was their own descriptions of the challenges of the documentation process and their questions about the act of documenting and assessing student learning. These questions then became the "texts"

which they interrogated as the second step of their process. In their discussions, they provided examples from their own teaching experiences, to think more deeply about the power dynamics behind the process of documentation. They went on to consider how the students might feel when being documented by an adult, and then discussed the multiple reasons for why documentation is a helpful process in teaching. In this discussion, we can see the group sharing different kinds of examples from their teaching experience, building a collection of varied perspectives which the other participants could learn from. For example, when Alison suggested inviting the children to document our learning as teachers, she offered a method to disrupt and flip that power dynamic. The other teachers in the group were given an example of how this kind of pedagogical move could occur, providing them with tools for their own teaching practice. During these conversations, the teachers collectively engaged in all four dimensions of Lewison et al.'s (2002) definition of critical literacy.

At the end of the fifth workshop, I suggested that the teachers write down their main research questions and topics and that I would compile them all into a draft outline of our book. Laurel thought that the first chapter of the book should introduce who we are as a group, including what kind of commitments we share as educators. Everyone agreed and, based on our conversations over the course of the previous five months, I wrote the following list of commitments and shared them with the group during the sixth workshop:

Our group is committed to
- *Researching our own lives and experiences.*
- *Examining our own educational terrain and memories.*
- *Raising questions and opening of spaces for discussion.*

- *Exploring learning at every age, from birth to adulthood.*
- *Our continual growth and evolution as educators of children.*

This book is about:

- *Documentation: a learning process for both students and educators.*
- *Visibility: making our learning process be seen by those outside of our educational environments.*
- *Care: an ethic of education grounded in social and emotional wellbeing. (Excerpt from Introductory Chapter of Meristem's Book)*

In addition to the topics of documentation and visibility, I included two more topics on *care* and *memory*, as I noticed those two themes emerging from the teachers' interests and topics in our discussions. Based on our topics and research questions, we developed an outline for the book:

Mara: a child's day

- *What are the important moments in the course of a day/week over the span of sometimes years (1, 2, 3) I as a caretaker observe, take note of, photograph, and feel are valuable for the parent to have have/know and as part/to support the ongoing conversation focused on the child that we share?*

Anya: observations and sharings: opening the door to real conversations with parents.

- *How can I share a view into the child's life without judgment for the sake of opening up the conversation?*
- *How can our time with parents be best spent? (best utilization of our time together as parents and teachers)*

Laurel: documentations & assessments

- *How can documentation and visibility process be part of/play a role in the development of a self-directed portfolio created for students' use?*
- *How do performance and expectations play into children's behavior and participation when being documented (interference)?*
- *How can documentation and visibility support learners as well as parents and educators?*

Samara: learning at home and at school

- *How to make learning visible at home from school?*
- *How to make learning visible from home to school?*
- *Can we encourage memory sharing from parents in order to see connections?*

- *Who will that be for?*
- *How to put this at the service of the child's growth?*

Renee: child-centered documentation and authenticity in conversations

- *How do we make visible the child at the center of the documentation process?*
- *How do we make visible emotional education?*
- *How does a teacher validate intuitive thought in a situation to better focus in on a moment with a child?*

Maggie: mapping our memories of learning and teaching

- *How can educators remember, document, and reflect on their memories of learning and teaching?*
- *What themes emerge from these memories?*
- *What are the benefits of sharing out these memories with other educators?*

Bree: pathways of learning outside of classrooms

- *How do children engage with curriculum content outside of the classroom? How do they continue to process information in informal, social, and familial settings?*
- *Where do they find its relevance?*
- *How does it shape their perceptions, their worldview?*

Ella: (in)visible youth

- *Where do we encounter young people in Emporia, and where don't we?*
- *How are children and teenagers seen in our society and in this city?*
- *How else could young people growing up in Emporia be seen and encountered as the thinkers/dreamers/problem-solvers/learners/leaders/PEOPLE that they are?*
- *How can we educators support our kids in telling themselves, not just being told? And in being participants in shaping this city?*

Alison: (in)visibility of care

- *Specifically in the realm of early childhood, how can we help each other to understand our work with young children as generating knowledge of great social value?*
- *How can we make visible, to each other and to the public, the wisdom we carry as parents/guardians and teachers?*
- *How can we transform public spaces into sites of solidarity and struggle for a society based on care?*

When I shared this outline with the teachers, all nine of them agreed that this was a helpful place to start, and they liked the commitments I had written and outlined. This outline served as a text that we could continually refer back to in our group

discussion. The questions that we had each written became the grounding and driving force for the work that we wanted to do in our classrooms and community. In a sense, this outline became a roadmap for our collective critical literacy practice.

Once the group had decided on the topics and questions that they each wanted to explore, the book project became the driving force and content of the rest of our time together in the year, including our workshop activities and discussions. We spent the next three workshops sharing aloud our writing about these topics. At the time of my writing this dissertation, the group continued to meet and share pieces of writing from their chapters of the book.

Taking action through writing. In addition to witnessing examples of critical literacy practices in our conversations, I also noted that the broader act of co-writing this book was in strong alignment with Lewison et al.'s (2002) fourth dimension of critical literacy practices—that of taking action and promoting social justice. The book, designed around each of our personal reflections, questions, and inquiries, came to represent our collective act and became the medium for sharing these reflections with the public. Other teachers, parents, researchers, and policymakers will be able to read our documented process of sharing questions, observations, and collective work. In our book, we will tell the story of one group's learning processes and findings when they ask questions about the communities and classrooms in which they teach. By writing and the sharing those processes to a greater audience, our group engaged in a social justice act on a societal level. We

broadened our focus to imagine how all students, families and teachers are treated and defined as visible or invisible across the country.

The Challenges to Living a Critically Literate (white) Life

While the Meristem teachers described vibrant and active critical literacy practices in their classrooms and communities and even in our workshops, I was still left with the question: Why weren't they acknowledging or including this social justice activism in their written definitions of critical literacy? Why was it being left out? I looked to our workshop discussions to examine how we talked about doing this kind of work and what kind of challenges arose when we did.

In our group, the teachers continually brought up the topic of one's own racial identity as a teacher as a major challenge to critical literacy. We discussed how it may be difficult for a white female teacher, which most of our group was, to acknowledge her own privilege and work with young people of different races. During our first workshop, the group brainstormed their main questions around teaching and learning. These questions could fall into any area of education—assessment, classroom environment, working with families, etc. I asked them to write down as many questions as they could in fifteen minutes and then choose their top three concerns to share with the group and place on our collective list. The teachers shared and established a list of 38 different questions. Individuals contributed up to four questions for the list. Of these 38 questions, three of them, coming from three different teachers in the group, were about the role of the white teacher:

- *How can we as white people, change the realities, perspectives, associations of progressive education as a white space?*

- *I am a white female— how can I acknowledge my own positionality in the classroom?*
- *In what ways can I, as a white teacher coming from privilege, work with young people who don't come from privilege (and bring experiences that I can't understand) in ways that are empowering?*

Race continued to play a role in our group discussions throughout the year with the deaths of two young black men, Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York. We discussed the role of police in these deaths and in our own communities and how much our young students knew about these topics from the national news. Much of this discussion was about how we, as teachers, talked about race and social justice with our students.

In this example, Ella, who often discussed her identities as white, female, and a teacher, discussed what role her identity played in her teaching pedagogy and the power that she holds as a teacher:

> *I think a lot about power. I think the most about my own positionality, as a white woman coming from class privilege, and how I engage with the world to actively DISRUPT rather that perpetuate systems of power of which I was born as a beneficiary. I think about this all the time, and I think my actions are in constant dialogue with this set of questions I carry: it is never simple. But I find the idea of critical literacy useful because I do think our actions and impact on the world have a lot to do with our LENSES – how we read and understand and question and re-imagine the world around us. A teacher of mine used to have us read articles/books and watch movies/commercials and ask: WHAT WORK DOES IT DO? Not whether or not we "liked" it or the intention behind it, but what work it does in the world. As a teacher, I think a lot about what "work we are doing"—what ways of thinking and being we are modeling and supporting— in everything that we teach. We do a lot of social justice oriented curriculum, but it's really interesting to think how we are critically literate teachers across all kinds of content— so that no matter what we are learning about, we always learning to question, and always learning that the world—as it is— could be radically different. So, I think I'm a critically literate*

teacher and person in that I try very hard to be! BUT, I am really interested in going deeper into think about what shapes my LENS, paradigm, what I am modeling or creating or perpetuating in the classroom in more subtle ways, the way I have grown to accept certain things without question, the limits to my imagination. There is always unlearning to do. –Ella

When describing our workshop discussions about our own histories of learning and teaching, Ella went on to note how these memories are situated in a greater set of power dynamics:

> *These conversations about teaching, learning and education are so wrapped up in our histories and ideas of identity, consciousness, politics, sense of self and place. This shit was deep! Our insecurities, our confidences, our fears are all tangled up in these histories. –Ella*

When reflecting on her own memories of schooling. Mara shared a similar experience:

> *I have found it important to continue to understand my own relationship/history to education as I wrestle with, discover and try to understand and find a place for the work I do and try to see and understand where it can/might go. It helps me to think about/identify my bigger questions and be able to speak to these ideas/interests with others. It has helped me to begin creating a map of this thing called education, to dissect it, find/make connections I hadn't seen or understood. It has helped me really ask and begin to answer how my own experiences might be shared experiences and the value that is there in addressing both the negative and positive in a creative way . . . . Well, why does it have to be this way? How could things be changed - or change happen? Or yes, it should be this way and what are the points of entry. I have found myself being led to more question—asking through self-reflection and hearing others reflections shared. It allows conversation to happen.–Mara*

In just this one excerpt, Mara described her own practice of critical literacy –—the processes of wrestling, dissecting, questioning, discovering, mapping, and answering. She aimed to "try to understand" and "find a place" for her work. She acknowledged

that this would be her lifelong journey, where she needed to continually engage in a process of questioning and reflection. In addition, Mara described how the process of reflecting on her teaching is part of her everyday practice of being with children and working with families:

> *More and more, I ask myself WHY. Why do I hold that view? Where does my understanding come from? What are my perceptions based on? And then I ask myself similar questions about the people I work with, the people I share a community with, the people I encounter. I'm really reviewing my life a lot— the influences and asking is there a need/desire to shift my perspective…yes! How? Read, talk, listen . . . .etc. In teaching I try to be very aware of the "other" places my students come from. I use conversations to elicit stories, to paint pictures, convey experiences of other lives lived, values, etc. With very young children, it is essential for me to understand the parents, the household, to honor their ways and to trust and value my input and impacts. With the young child the world is all-new, and I try to follow and introduce, as well. To get a reciprocal dialogue going and focus on the building of a trusting relationship. We are both on new ground together, entering territories with new eyes. We share our learning. I do struggle (mindfully) with certain ideas that are less flexible, a little authoritarian, a little old fashion – things I somehow believe are important to convey (and maybe shape) to a young child that pertain to social morays— it is a balance, a juggle, a question– always shifting, growing and being redefined. I'm not sure if I'm addressing social literacy, but I think I am. In the context of one day, the children and I encounter many kinds of people. We are curious. We meet them, we talk to them, and ask questions. We seem to be interested in expanding our world and our understanding of others that helps us understand ourselves and the world in a bigger, yet more personal and richer way. – Mara*

Mara saw this process as not only important to her own growth but as something that could potentially be important to other teachers outside of our group. Six months after this cycle of inquiry, Mara began leading workshops at her school site, leading her other teachers in similar writing activities that we had engaged in during our workshops. In our group, she was proud to report that she found this to be a very

successful tactic in helping those educators share and learn about and trust one another.

In another written response on the topic of one's power, Alison discussed how the act of questioning and taking action for social justice played a role in her everyday life:

> *Interpersonally I feel very aware of power. Hyper aware, over-aware sometimes. I feel confident in my ability to affect this in my personal relationships with other adults. So, I am a critically literate person in some spheres of my life. In others, it's challenging. I don't have an active teaching practice right now but I am a mother and spend time with groups of children in informal settings. In these settings, I do feel fairly capable of critical literacy when engaging with books and simple ideas. With bigger social concepts that might come up, I struggle with understanding what a young child is capable of understanding. For example, I took my 3 year old to a march/vigil for a young man shot by a cop. I didn't tell her the whole story. I told her we were going to a street party that was about keeping people safe by being together. Could she understand more? I also often feel challenged trying to figure out how to act on some of the bigger social inequalities I can so clearly feel. I can hold my co-parent accountable for not doing his share of the dishes but how do I act on the system of patriarchy that doesn't expect men to take care the way women do. – Alison*

Another Meristem teacher, Bree, described the challenges that she faced when doing such work. Bree was the teacher who had formed the local chapter of the social justice advocacy group and had helped create the summer programming for teens that also focused on social justice. However, Bree recognized that she held a great amount of power when she was teaching young students about issues around social justice and discussed how teaching with a "social justice perspective" brought about challenges for both the teacher and the students. During our seventh workshop, Bree discussed two specific challenges to being a critically literate teacher:

Bree: I do feel like a critically literate person and I am developing my skills as a critically literate teacher—or at least my goal is to be that . . . but there are a couple challenges with it . . .There's two challenges that come up or me and one is the distinguishing between supporting kids to develop critical literacy, to become critically literate, through developing their skills for analysis and then imposing my perspective or opinions on them or putting out any kind of dogma. And they're very influenced by the things that we say and feel and think. Sometimes they'll say something and I'm like [in my mind] "that's exactly what I wanted you to say". And I think that's because I said that the point and you're saying that because you . . . I don't know, sometimes I'm concerned about whether I'm teaching a skill for them to develop that analysis, or they just kind of like picked up or sense that's our opinion, or that is like the "correct" opinion - that's one challenge.

In the above excerpt, Bree described the challenges in acknowledging one's own power as a teacher when engaging in critically literate practices with young students. She worried about teaching from this perspective and imposing her own views and opinions on to her students, realizing that what they may observe about a situation or text may simply be their response to her own teaching of it. She recognized that she held power in this situation. Bree went on to describe a second challenge to doing this kind of work, which focused on the student response to discovering injustices:

Bree: And then the other challenge—and this specifically relates to the class I am teaching this quarter— when doing some work around developing critical literacy, I worry that sometimes I end up teaching sympathy rather than developing and understanding of mutual interest, or dismantling power or overcoming oppression, or collective liberation. There is a sort of "we need to help them" thing that comes very quickly to most kids [in my class]. Like "oh my gosh, terrible things are happening, we need to help those people!" and that's a totally understandable response, but how do you take than initial reaction and move through the sympathy and past sympathy into mutual interest, compassion, the expression of humanity or even like dealing with their anger and despair and trying to move towards solidarity, or deeper forms of that.

Maggie: Or even action, right?

Bree: Yeah, action for sure. But even . . . actually, I feel like sometimes action can come from the need to help them and that kind of action can be really problematic, because even with their class projects, they will say "I want to do this thing to help these other people." . . . but we have to work through that. Acknowledging that injustice exists—that seems to be no problem for most of the kids that I have interacted with—but then how to respond to injustice . . . that seems to be a bigger leap, it's much more challenging.

In this excerpt, Bree discussed the challenges to students' initial reactions to discovering injustices in their culture, community, and society, which is an immediate sympathetic response with the need to help. When I asked her if taking "action" is difficult, she corrected me and described how often action is what is easy when students are working from a sympathetic place, but how this kind of action can be problematic because the students are still not yet fully understanding what she referred to as the "deeper forms" of solidarity and compassion with communities who are struggling. Later in the conversation, Bree described her own thinking about the difference between developing sympathy vs. empathy:

Bree: I think there's something in the difference between sympathy and empathy, where sympathy is more fulfilling. Like "you are an other than me and I want to help you" versus the concept of—or some of the elements empathy are—"we are connected as human beings and I feel what you feel, and I feel like I need to take action not just to help you but stand with you."

At the beginning of our very last workshop, Bree described her own challenges with developing this perspective. She shared that she had wanted to attend a local community meeting that was protesting the use of aggressive police tactics in the nearby housing complex. Bree said that she had wanted to attend but when speaking with the organizers beforehand she realized that perhaps her "white" presence at the

protest would undermine their local “black” efforts. The organizers had thanked her for her interest and energy but wanted the protest to be a united front from the people who lived in the complex, without outsiders (even though the outsiders were people like Bree, who lived and worked in the same neighborhood). Bree understood their request but was also unsure about how else to support this very important social justice issue. After Bree had shared this with the group, we discussed what it meant to help these kind of local efforts, as community members, as neighbors, and as teachers of the children in the community. Our discussion, much like others we had, brought up more questions than solutions, as we continued to raise issues that we all felt as educators who are interested in social justice education.

In the final questionnaire, which Bree filled out immediately after that conversation, she described feeling grounded in her approach to teaching from this perspective. When I asked her if the workshop had helped or altered her teaching practice in any way, she replied:

> *Yes, I especially noticed my teaching this past quarter feeling very different. I felt far more grounded in my experiences, confident at planning classes/activities and deeply interested in my students' experiences both inside and outside the classroom. I felt comfortable being more explicit with my own social justice perspective, while supporting students to develop theirs. –Bree*

Throughout our work together, Bree recognized the power dynamics and relationships that this kind of work raised, but in the process of sharing and reflecting on those power dynamics, described feeling more grounded and comfortable in engaging in such work.

Summary

In 2002, Nieto, Gordon, and Yearwood wrote about the importance of designing professional development settings based on the interests and questions of the participant teachers, how “inquiry is a crucial element of teachers’ work” (p.345). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001) also promoted this idea of educators taking an “inquiry stance” in their teaching practice and reflection. By designing a professional development approach focused on using inquiry as a practice for our collective work, I was able to create a responsive learning environment, one which aimed to be relevant to the very questions and interests of the teachers. This environment helped me, as the participant-researcher, better understand how the Meristem educators understood and demonstrated their conception of the educational theory known as critical literacy.

Over the course of the year, the Meristem educators read about and reflected on the theoretical foundations of critical literacy and even engaged in our own critical literacy practices, taking time to write and interrogate texts, looking for the underlying sociopolitical issues in such texts, and thinking about texts from different perspectives than our own. After the group had read multiple texts that defined critical literacy and provided examples of such practices, I asked the teachers to write their own definitions of critical literacy, in order to understand how they conceived the practice and theory. Using Lewison et al.’s (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy as a framework for analysis, I discovered that the Meristem educators defined critical literacy in ways that aligned with the reflective processes that Lewison et al.

(2002) described which focused on the first three dimensions. However, the teachers either left out or only slightly hinted at the fourth dimension, which included taking action and promoting social justice. While the teachers did not describe these acts in their definitions, they were indeed taking action in both their classroom practices and their communities. Their social justice activism took place on a pedagogical level in their classrooms, on a personal level in their communities, and on a societal level in the process of co-writing a book. In our discussions, the teachers also raised the multiple challenges of teaching from a social justice perspective, including the role one's own racial and cultural identity played in instructing students from this perspective, the power that a teacher had when engaging in this kind of practice, and recognizing the difference between fostering empathy and solidarity in students versus feeling sympathy towards others.

Engaging in critical literacy, both as a teacher inside the classroom and a citizen in the world, can be difficult. It requires a deep reflection on one's own perspectives, privileges and prejudices, followed by the active promotion of social justice in our classrooms and communities. Over the course of this study, the Meristem teachers demonstrated that they were capable of doing both, reflection and action and while they faced challenges when doing such work, they also showed or engaged in new and creative ways to support their students, their communities and even one another.

Chapter Four: Our Memories of Schooling

For centuries, the concept of memory has been a topic of exploration for a wide range of professionals, including philosophers, cognitive scientists, novelists, psychologists, anthropologists, and playwrights. We use stories and metaphors to help us explain the complexities of the mind and its power to recall past events. In this way, people have referred to memories as murals, collections, stonewalls, and buildings. Both Plato and Aristotle described a memory as the impression of a seal ring into a block of moldable wax. Freud described memory as a house, with specific memories as the objects in that house (Roediger, 1980). Virginia Woolf (1928) called memory a "seamstress" who "runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after."

Multiple researchers and theorists have explored the role that memory plays in our relationship to school as teachers. In her research on the autobiographical stories that parents and teachers bring to the classroom, Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot (2004) described memories as ghosts that follow us as we move through life. In addition, Julia Johnson Rothenberg depicted our memories of school as landscapes:

> *In the case of memories about schooling, things are very thick indeed, and richly informative as well. Being in "the thick of things" encapsulates the inescapability of the presence of memory in everyday life, as something we are always stirring up and moving through. This must surely be the case for teachers in their classrooms, with a background of thousands of hours of memories, and a multitude of classrooms, teachers, and peers from which to draw. Such memories are a vast and varied landscape of personal knowledge, beliefs, and understandings, replete with all the potential riches and problems of a complicated area. (Rothenberg, 1994, p. 369)*

The concept of memory—specifically our memories of our early experiences of schooling—emerged as an important theme from this yearlong study. During our first group workshop, I asked the teachers to spend 15 minutes writing about why they teach. All nine of the participants wrote about the memories from their past—either of inspirational teachers that they had, teaching experiences that encouraged them to continue in the profession, or innate desires to become a teacher. I was intrigued that they immediately accessed their memories to answer this question rather than describe their desires or efforts from the present time and context. This tendency to look to one's history inspired me to ask the teachers to dig deeper into their pasts and to examine their own stories of learning. I wanted to further explore how accessing and reflecting on one's memories could be a tool for the teachers, both personally and collaboratively, to reflect on their pasts and on their current teaching practices. I began to examine my collected data to address my second set of research questions about memory:

> On Memory: How did the teachers engage and interrogate their own stories and memories of schooling? What themes or patterns emerged from this work over the course of one year? And how did the process of documenting and sharing one's memories help us both reflect on our current teaching pedagogies and support one another as teachers?

For this chapter, I used memories, stories, and recollections as interchangeable terms. I used the concept of reflection to describe when the teachers are investigating, discussing, or working with those memories.

In my analysis, I found that the teachers were engaged in important memory work that was influenced by the social context of our group. The process of sharing out memories with one another, our collective memory work, enabled some of the teachers to dig deeper and further into their experiences of teaching and learning, further than they had in their individual memory work. In this process of sharing, I found that the teachers showed support for one another, creating a space for sharing that all of the teachers acknowledged as safe and helpful. As I describe here, some of the teachers showed a strong interest in returning to their memories multiple times during our workshop discussions, to examine them in new and different ways over the course of the year. For them, memories became accessible stories that one can return to, wander through, and interrogate.

I also discovered a pattern in the kind of memories that the teachers shared with one another. Initially, the majority of the group, seven out of nine of the teachers, shared quite negative memories of their early learning experiences, which included restrictive learning environments and unkind or controlling teachers. As we continued on in the project, I saw a shift in the kind of memories that were shared. All but one of the teachers began to share more positive memories of their early learning. These memories were often early learning experiences outside of school, with family, friends and mentors.

Throughout the project, the Meristem educators used both the negative and the positive memories to reflect on their current teaching practices. However, while the reflections on the negative memories produced reflections on what kind of teachers

they didn't want to be, the reflections on the positive memories focused on the qualities and characteristics of the teacher they did hope to be, that they yearned to be. Some of the teachers described how this collective memory work with their positive memories had begun to influence the way that they spoke and acted with their students and how they created their learning environments.

I argue here that the process of collective memory work is an important one for teachers of young children, and perhaps for teachers of any aged students. By opening up space for this kind of reflection, and creating communities for teachers to listen and support one another in those reflections, we can begin to move beyond – or even heal – the emotional pain that educators may have faced in their early schooling experiences, and begin to reflect and learn from the emotionally encouraging, affirmative and liberating moments of learning that helped them in their youth. And in that caring space, using those thoughtful reflections, teachers may more easily identify the kind supportive learning opportunities and environments that we hope to create for our youngest students.

Research on Teacher Memories

When I first discovered the teachers' willingness to reflect on and share their memories as both students and teachers, I looked to the literature on the use of memories in educational research and teacher education to see what kind of work had already been done in the field. Over the past twenty years, I found that multiple researchers have asked teachers to reflect on their early memories of schooling and learning.

Rothenberg's (1994) "Memories of Schooling" study was one of the first large scale studies in the field. In this study, Rothenberg asked over 400 undergraduate and graduate students to write descriptive essays on their worst and best schooling experiences. Rothenberg then established a list of common themes and patterns that emerged from these essays, including academic challenges and successes, failures and humiliation, competition and fairness, and assessment and transitions. At the conclusion of the study, Rothenberg (1994) stated that, while it is interesting to look at this large body of experiential data from individuals, both educational researchers and teachers could also benefit if memories were to "be examined on a finer-grain level" in a group setting:

> *These approaches could be more intensive, personal, and collaborative in helping to develop teacher knowledge and insight. They could be analyzed with a small group of people remembering and then adding to memories (Rothenberg, 1994, p. 377).*

Rothenberg then listed just a few other pieces of research which has taken on this kind of small group work, including research on becoming a history teacher (Hasbach & Hoekwater, 1992), reshaping mis-preconceptions about schooling (Smith, 1991), or examining new beliefs in the light of old (Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992).

Building on Rothenberg's research, Van Hook(2002) asked 59 pre-service early childhood teachers at the beginning of their teacher education program to describe, in writing, a significant experience that they remembered from their elementary school years. Van Hook discovered that the teachers mostly focused on their own teachers. A majority of the student teachers (65%) recounted negative

memories of teachers, while 25% described positive memories of teachers, and just 10% described specific interactions with their peers. Based on these findings, Van Hook called for a greater focus on self-reflection in teacher education programs, that "pre-service teachers should recall their memories related to previous school experiences and consider how these memories have impacted themselves and their interaction with teaching pedagogy" (p. 154). Much like other research before and after this, Van Hook highlighted how teacher memories of early childhood and early school experiences, especially the negative and painful ones, may influence one's pedagogical values, beliefs, and expectations (Hollingsworth, 1989; Calderhead & Robson, 1991, Saban 2003). Saban (2003) similarly described how student teachers' negative experiences "endured long in their memories with a lot of hatred of the teachers and his or her subject as the years passed by" (p. 840).

In Chang-Kredl and Kingsley's (2014) research, the authors examined how memories influenced a teacher's reason for entering the profession. They asked fifty-three pre-service teachers to write biographical narratives on the topic and discovered that teachers referenced many school and work memories, as well as family memories. When examining the narratives, they found that these teachers wanted to emulate or oppose past teachers, to fulfill or find present convictions, or to influence or be affirmed by future students (p. 34). The teachers cited mostly memories that were "emotionally charged"—strongly positive or strongly negative, never neutral. However, in contrast to Van Hook's (2002) findings, in the majority of cases, the authors discovered that, when asking a teacher about their memories and linking it to

the reason why he or she teaches, the result was mostly positive reflections (75% positive in this study). The authors suggested that teacher educators attend to these "emotional dimensions" when engaging in self-reflection and identity work with teachers, supporting and encouraging teachers to access and articulate how their past connects with their reason for teaching. As a result, Chang-Kredl and Kingsley called for more longitudinal studies on teacher memory in order to more accurately evaluate how it impacted one's identity as a teacher.

Miller and Schifflet (2016) engaged in a similar inquiry when they asked sixty-nine pre-service elementary teachers, during a semester-long course, to write about a meaningful memory from when they were students. These students were later asked to connect this memory to their future role as teachers in the field. About half of the students described teachers from their past that they hoped to be like, who had specific characteristics or took actions that were helpful and meaningful to the student. The other half of the students described negative experiences with teachers, which were often associated with some kind of fear. Miller and Schifflet concluded with a call, like the others in the field, for teacher education to foster the art of both recollection and critical reflection to help pre-service teachers both access and analyze their early memories of schooling. However, it is important to point out that in Miller and Schifflet's findings, they noted an outlying trend in their data, a kind of shift or inspiration that emerged among a few of the participants. Miller and Schifflet (2016) wrote:

> *An interesting subtheme emerged from the data, as some participants used fear and past experience or teacher to create a desired self. A*

> *subpopulation of nine participants described their motivation to approach a desired self, by utilizing a negative memory. Using the negative to inspire a positive action was less common in posts; however, these outliers should not be discounted because they illuminate an interesting appendage to the data (p.25).*

This inspiration, the use of the negative to explore and imagine a positive, desire-based self and educator, is important to note because of the findings from this study, as described below.

The work of the Meristem teachers differs from the above-described body of literature in a few ways. While current research focused on pre-service teachers who are just entering the field of education, this study focused on in-service educators. In the Meristem group, we spent one year engaging in writing and small group discussions. In the research described above, researchers engaged the teachers on a one-time basis. In addition, the research described how teachers reflected on their memories by answering very specific questions. Consequently, these studies did not capture how memories are fluid, changing, and evolving as teachers experienced their own practice in the classroom. In addition, these researchers did not always take into account the social, cultural or racial backgrounds of the teachers. Instead, the researchers viewed these recollections as neutral, individual stories that belonged to the teacher, rather than situated in the community in which they are gathered and shared.

In an effort to build on this literature and our group's willingness to share their stories, I was inspired to further foster a collaborative space for these teachers to access and share their memories. I designed writing activities that asked the teachers

to reflect on more specific memories of their schooling, including influential educators, transitions from school to school, and emotional impressions of certain schooling experiences. I asked them both about their experiences as a student and their experiences in becoming a teacher. I soon discovered that this kind of writing and sharing of memories was described as a methodology known as "memory work." Haug (1987) first established this work, and Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault and Benton (1990, 1992), further developed this method, which also became known as "collective memory work." In New Zealand and Australia, groups of women originally used this work to explore issues of gender and sexualization. Similar to our group, these researchers asked participants to write down their memories and then share them in a group setting. Ovens and Tinning (2009) outlined the basics of memory work:

> *In general, memory work involves participants writing narratives about recalled experiences that are then analyzed with the collective research group. The aim, through discussion and reflection, is to achieve an intersubjective understanding of the participants' experiences as the basis for (re)interpreting the research material (Markula & Friend, 2005) (Ovens & Tinning, 2009, p.1126).*

When we engaged in our own memory work, the Meristem educators also wrote about and shared out their own memories of learning and teaching, exploring the similarities and differences of our pasts.

Our Collective Memory Work: Digging Deeper & Revisiting Our Memories

Throughout the study, I asked the teachers to respond to a series of open-ended prompts (which can be found in Appendix B of this paper). In their responses to these prompts, the teachers wrote about their memories of early learning

experiences and then shared these memories with the group. When comparing what the teachers had written down with what they shared aloud, I found that often the teachers would publicly share one or two specific moments of their journal entries. In the process of sharing these moments aloud, other teachers would follow up with memories that were similar or different to that which was shared, broadening the discussion beyond the initial memory shared.

For example, after the teachers mapped their memories of teaching and learning, they created timelines of major moments in their lives. During the share-out of the maps, Laurel admitted that she couldn't remember a single name of any of her elementary school teachers. She had attended one of the largest public schools in New York City, and she only remembered the emotions she felt about certain teachers—scary ones, angry ones. She remembered how some of them dressed and what shoes they wore but couldn't remember their names. Some of the other teachers were shocked by this admission, and this memory sparked a much longer discussion about our recollections of our early teachers and how much we each remembered them. In contrast to Laurel's experience, Ella said that she remembered all of her elementary school teachers' names, and she kept in touch with some of them. She was even friends with them on social media sites. Through this type of sharing, the teachers thought about —and remembered—other aspects of their experiences as young children that they hadn't written about before.

In our discussions, sharing became so important that often the teachers said that they wished they could return to some of the activities or even do them again. In

a transcript excerpt from the sixth workshop, Ella said that she would like to "revisit" the maps that we had created, spending more time both creating the maps and sharing them with one another. The group went on to discuss how they could spend more time revisiting all of the writing activities that we had engaged in that asked them about their memories:

> *Mara: I think you bring up a valuable issue about revisiting, just because we did that [activity], it's not over, in fact each activity or thing that we talk about, what if one revisited each map and looked at it with those new eyes after conversations like that. Something to refer back to – maps are things on your journey that you refer back to.*
>
> *Maggie: And add to.*
>
> *Anya: And memorable educators [the activity], even afterwards, we reflected how we might have picked someone else. As I was writing today, well there are several people in the last twenty years that I would look at, not just my teacher trainers but other important figures that helped shape . . . open my eyes . . . . or your experience of taking that class and realizing how one experience can become more important or more weighted . . .*
>
> *Samara: When I was answering the question about why we teach, I was thinking, I thought about— but I also thought about other times when I have asked that to myself and it was totally different from when I read it here. It is always changing . . .*
>
> *Bree: The context.*
>
> *Samara: It's always happening, we're always learning, any way. Its tied to what you were saying, like, revisiting . . . . .because even if I think I write why I teach now—it's probably different than even though we just did a few months ago.*

Memories, for these educators, are always happening, always being created, and are situated – they may be "totally different" depending on when, where, and with whom they are remembered. Learning memories, for Anya, can hold different "weight" or

influence depending on when she accessed them. Memories, as Mara described, are part of "our journey" as educators, and they can be continually visited, recalled, and reflected on.

Through turning memories into texts that could be shared, the Meristem educators described how we could further explore these ideas by reading and rereading them, contemplating and questioning them in light of today's context, and potentially accessing new memories in the process.

Memory as a Situated Practice

In this study, I realized that this way of revisiting memories based on the discussion and reflection among the group highlighted an important role that the social context of the group played throughout the project, where memory was not an individual, strictly cognitive-based, neutral act but one that was strongly influenced by the setting and culture of the group and the context. In this way, memory became a situated practice. Ovens and Tinning (2009) described memory, or what they referred to as reflection, using this sociocultural perspective. These authors noted that the use of reflection in professional development and teacher education had grown in popularity over the past 20 years (Clarke & Chambers, 1999; Loughran, 2006; Tinning, 1995). Ovens and Tinning (2009) noted that often the tool of reflection, or using memory, in teacher education had been used to assist teachers in acknowledging how their own experiences and knowledge shapes their "identities and actions as teachers" (p. 1125). However, these authors argued that by viewing memory as a tool and or process, researchers regarded the teacher as a "neutral, self-

conscious agent capable of rational analysis" rather than as an individual socially situated in a specific context. In their research, Ovens and Tinning demonstrated how a group of student teachers, engaged in this kind of group memory work, affected one another. The researchers found that "the nature of the discourse community in which the individual is situated enables different forms of reflection" (pg. 1130).

Much like Ovens and Tinning (2009), I also found that the way that the teachers remembered and shared their memories was altered by the social context that they themselves had created in the group. For this community of teachers, their collective memory work became a situated practice. During the fifth workshop, Ella brought up her own feelings about missing the previous workshop. While she had gone ahead and independently written on the topic from that missed workshop (a memorable educator), she hadn't had the chance to share out her writing and reflection. As a result, she felt like she hadn't fully completed the activity. She missed the opportunity to question or go deeper with her own memories. For Ella, the social aspect of sharing was a key component to engaging in this kind of memory work:

> *I found these kind of free writes, to be surprising to me and what's come out but I also think that the social value of doing that in a social context is— I feel like hearing, looking at other peoples maps, next to my own, and I just remember being especially struck about hearing about Alison's map next to mine, in which she had talked about her early memories, as being memories of feeling like the adults were telling her things about herself that felt untrue to her and so many of my memories were about times that adults were telling me that I was smart . . . it was placing some of the maps next to each other that made me just think—not only how this process is so valuable in thinking about what we bring into the classroom and into our work with kids and recognizing some of those things and what we're working on, but also how wrapped up it is in personhood and identity, and politics, and all of this stuff is so tangled . . . the process of diving deep and then*

> *also that kind of space of hearing others, you know I missed last month around the memorable educator and I did that free write but it feels unfinished or something, like I just wrote it out, but I would love to put it in conversation with others and see, oh I didn't think about that, or I didn't go there. –Ella*

Because this memory work was a situated practice among the teachers and not solely an individual and neutral endeavor, I was also able to discover a shift, or trend, when looking at the whole collection of stories and the entire process of memory sharing in the group setting.

Our Memories: From Damage to Desire

At the conclusion of the project, I compiled all of the teacher memories that were shared, both in written form and aloud during our discussions. I discovered that, during the first four workshops, seven out of the nine teachers wrote about and shared memories that were negative experiences. While I had not asked for these kind of experiences in the writing prompt, the teachers described restrictive learning environments and controlling teachers. In the group discussions, the teachers focused on these memories and explained that these were in part why they wanted to change the course of education with their own practice, providing an alternative for their students. In the transcriptions of these discussions, I found that often when one or two negative memories were shared, the conversation would then build up from this negative space, with other participants sharing similar stories. For example, when Mara shared a memory of her early schooling experience, she described feeling a lack of any kind of "emotional care or safety." Immediately after Mara shared, Samara, Alison and Laurel shared similar experiences, noting that they too had felt this lack of

care in their early schooling. Meristem members' practice of sharing and discussing similar and specific kinds of memories demonstrates the situated nature of our memory work.

As the project continued, I found that all but one of the teachers began to reflect on positive memories of their early learning, which were often outside of the school or classroom setting. In these memories, the teachers described moments of learning with their friends, family and mentors. This shift from remembering their negative learning experiences to their positive ones helped create space for these teachers to think more deeply about the kind of learning environment and pedagogy that they desired to create and practice with their students, compared to the damaged experiences that they were trying to avoid.

Through her work on the ethics of social science research and educational research, Tuck (2009) described the concept of damage and desire. In her 2009 article, "Suspending damage: A letter to communities," Tuck called for a moratorium on solely "damage-centered" research on communities—or research that described communities, neighborhoods or even cultures as "defeated or broken" (p.412). Citing bell hooks, Tuck stated her concern about this kind of research:

> *I am concerned with . . . research that invites oppressed peoples to speak but to "only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain (hooks, 1990, p. 152)*

Tuck asked communities and peoples to "consider the long-term repercussions of *thinking of ourselves as broken*" (p.409). During the fourth workshop, I shared Tuck's (2009) letter with the teachers as a resource to read and think about as they

began to design their second cycle of inquiry projects. When we discussed Tuck's letter during the fifth workshop, three of the teachers, Bree in particular, discussed how this work had really resonated with their way of thinking about their teaching, their students of color, and the communities in which they work. In particular, our group discussed Tuck's urging or "cautionary note" to not see desire as a replacement or opposite to damage, but instead to conceive a desire-centered story as a complex one, which acknowledged the pain and damage but focused on the positive aspects, including survival. The teachers discussed how they hoped to acknowledge and recognize not just the broken and pained experiences of their own histories but also to describe their memories of positive learning experiences and moments.

Memories with Damage: Schools & Teachers

> *I was sort of noticing glaringly that my experiences in school that began in kindergarten - but really first grade all the way through the 12th grade - I never felt emotional care or safety. And that began very very early on –Mara*

At the beginning of the study, during the second workshop, the teachers drew a timeline of their life and listed major moments of their learning, schooling, and teaching experiences. On their maps, the teachers could include places, dates, names, and any other memorable facts or memories that occurred during their lives around the broad topics of teaching and learning. After they spent time jotting down notes on these memories, I then asked the teachers to write down the emotions that they felt during those times. So, on the top half of their timelines, the teachers described the memories, and, on the bottom half, they told their emotional impressions during those times and in those spaces. After they completed their maps, I asked them to share

aloud and to respond "to this whole activity as a process—what it felt like to do this, but also what common themes you saw emerge and if there was anything that was surprising to you." As this was early on in the project, only our second workshop, I was hesitant to ask the teachers to immediately reveal very personal information, in case they weren't yet comfortable with that level of intimacy. By asking for their response to the activity and for any patterns or themes that emerged, I hoped to simply open a space for them to share as much or as little as they were comfortable with. When the teachers went around the circle, I began to notice a trend of negative memories of school. The first four teachers to share, Anya, Laurel, Alison and Renee, all shared negative memories of their early learning experiences. Ella and Tracy shared some positive memories, but then Mara, Samara, and Bree shared negative experiences.

These memories focused on two main themes: teachers and the school environment. Two of the teachers, Laurel and Alison, described how their teachers spoke to them, treated them, or disciplined them for their personalities or behavior. In the excerpt below, Laurel talked about being reprimanded on her first day of kindergarten:

> *I had a experience of all of my early, early stuff . . . one of the first things that I wrote down was that I got put in the corner on my first day of kindergarten, I remember what I was wearing, I remember how excited I was, I took a banana peel and I danced it across the table and I got put in the corner and I remember feeling so horrified, and I couldn't figure out what I had done, it was a whole visceral memory. –Laurel*

Alison described a memory from her nursery school classroom:

> *I was told I was shy and I didn't have any friends . . . we would go around in a circle and say if you are a son or a daughter and I thought girls are bright like the sun and I said "I'm a sun!" and they said no you are not, you are a daughter, and I was like "but I want to be a sun!" These moments—those are what stuck out—these moments of someone telling me something that didn't feel like I am. –Alison*

Renee, Anya, Samara, Bree and Mara described some of the negative feelings associated with the structures in a school or classroom setting. Anya described the fear of getting lost or being late to class. Mara and Samara both described not feeling emotionally "safe" in their classrooms. Renee described the stress of taking tests at an early age and how she "shut down" as a result of such anxiety:

> *I had an experience in second grade— the one that I remember– I had my first anxiety attack ever, hyperventilating—in fifth grade because I couldn't test well and it set up a whole paradigm for the next two plus years of failing in school and I was placed in junior high—I was placed in lower level classes and I was excelling at them, I was bored, but I can't test—I had just shut down. – Renee*

Based on how the Meristem educators described their early memories during the map activity, I then designed an activity for the following workshop in which I asked the teachers to write about and share out a description of an "influential educator" in their lives. When I asked the teachers to share it aloud, I made the mistake of asking about their "favorite" teachers–Alison questioned my request and then went on to describe two educators who had influenced her—one somewhat negatively, the other positively:

> *Maggie: Ok, if you could finish up [writing] your thoughts. I would love to hear about your favorite teacher, if you want to share.*
>
> *Alison: I didn't necessarily take it as my favorite…*

> *Maggie: Ahh, that's fine! I don't even think I said that [in the prompt] – I asked for "what is your most influential . . . "*
>
> *Alison: My fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Reynolds, she told me that I was good at writing and in doing that, she changed writing from something that I enjoyed into something I was good at, something that could be evaluated from good or bad. Instead of doing it for pleasure, I did for praise. She had me enter a contest, and writing for that contest was really not fun. However —recently, taking classes with this herbalist and being asked to encounter plants with all of my senses and trying to figure out to describe that sensual experience and compare it to others, with scholars or classmates and so that learning experience began with our bodies. I was writing about how I could feed it back to other people––and the questions— and how I can make the feedback about the outcome of what something is doing, instead of right or wrong instead of good or bad, how to position learning so it begins with the experience one learns. How to honor and hold sacred the simple joy of doing something, so it doesn't have to be good or bad.*

In the above excerpt, Alison again focused on how a teacher negatively influenced her perception of writing by making it an activity based on praise, rather than one based on her own intrinsic motivation. She went on to describe a more recent adult learning experience that is much different as it honored and held "sacred the joy of doing" which, for Alison, was very positive.

After these teachers shared these negative memories, I noted that they often vocalized or expressed some collective disappointment at the stories – either shaking their heads or expressing shock at the memories that involved teachers mistreating young children in such a way. The teachers reflected on how they did not want to become such teachers or create such environments. One example of this comes from Alison, who continually shared stories of mistreatment by teachers throughout the entire project. Throughout the project, Alison described how she was treated by

teachers and told things about herself that she didn't feel were true. In the seventh workshop, Alison continued to reflect on her experiences as a young child, who at three years old was mistreated, and how that continues to inform her practice:

> *As you are all talking, it's made me think through some of this too, as I'm writing I want to spend a lot of time in the preschool years because I have a preschooler and thinking about [starting] a preschool and there are a lot of about what people had told me about myself that didn't feel true. Even as a three year old. And that is totally part of my personality now and how I want to create educational spaces, "get out of these kids spaces and stop telling them who they are - back up". – Alison*

While Alison reflected on these negative memories, she also continually defined herself and our group as "transformative" educators who are looking to change aspects of the schooling experience for children. Alison was the first person to introduce the idea of calling our group Meristem, based on the concept of growth and change. She was also in the midst of starting a school with a group of parents in the community and was continually brainstorming new and different ways to help children learn. While this memory work may have helped Alison think about her current practice, it seemed that much of her reflections concluded with a list of characteristics of teachers and school structures that she did not want to be a part of. This was true of much of our workshop discussions around the negative aspects of schooling and teaching – that our memories of damage led us to reflecting on the aspects which we did not want to create, did not want to perpetuate, or did not want to enact.

While Alison continually shared these negative memories, I did begin to notice a shift in the kind of stories that the other eight teachers began to

share in our discussions. Each began to describe more positive, desire-based, memories of learning.

Uncovering Our Memories of Desire

During those first workshops, I had asked the teachers to bring forth their memories of schooling, to think about the different classrooms and schools that they attended, the teachers who taught them, their interactions with peers while at school, and even their decisions to become teachers. By the fourth workshop, when our group began to shift our focus from ourselves to our communities, I noticed that the teachers began to share more positive experiences of their youth, including the people who played influential roles in helping them learn, and the environments that fostered such learning. Of the seven teachers who initially shared negative memories during the first workshop, all but one (Alison) began to share positive memories of their early years. One theme continually emerged in these discussion, that of family.

Finding Desire for Learning Outside of School. Much like the negative memories that these seven teachers shared out, some of their positive experiences also focused on the role of teachers in their lives but the teachers described in this series of memories were notably outside of the school setting, often in the role of family members or close mentors. In one workshop discussion, Bree described how at the age of twelve, she left school and joined a community of family friends who were "unschooling" – the process of learning according to your own interests and choices as a young student of the world. Bree described the moment when she decided to leave school – what she described as an "expansive moment":

> *I think, what like stuck out to me in the process of writing this was this—I guess for me, were politicizing moments or moments where I know something shifted in my awareness of the world. An expansive moment, where the world got larger. My understanding of things got larger, and they are very specific moments in my life. I guess, my unique experience was leaving school— the act of leaving school at 12 years old and trying to figure out my own thing, that's when I got really interested in the theory behind schooling and learning.– Bree*

Early in the project, Bree described leaving school at the age of twelve in a negative context, noting what bad experiences she had in school. But in the above excerpt, Bree described this moment as positive, "where the world got larger." Bree went on to describe the different kinds of mentors she met during these years and how they affected her in positive ways, including models for how she wants to presently work with children:

> *What I like thinking about is the different people who influenced me is that I feel attached to the idea of the kind of adult or educator that I want to be in a kid's life… it's nice to think about all these different people who have really different personalities and really different approaches and influenced me in different ways, some were super buddies and some were not, but really made an impact anyway so its kind of nice to think about the different models for good educators – Bree*

Ella also described her family when describing how she connected positive learning memories with her sister:

> *I was really surprised how much my sister was present and often how often my memories that I had - I was doing this, she was doing that – this was really paired, when I was thinking about the good emotional counterparts of [those memories]. – Ella*

One teacher in particular, Mara, continually brought up the learning experiences that she remembered from time with her family. This became such a strong aspect of her work with Meristem that she decided to focus part of her book chapter on the topic of

memory and how her own early memories influence her current teaching practice. In the chapter, Mara introduced the idea – or "perspective" - that recalling and reflecting on one's memories can be a tool for teachers:

> *I think this perspective will aid me in recalling details of my life that have contributed and lead me to where I presently stand in time, as an educator. It may aid me in unfolding my story in a way that is interesting and relevant to others, and which in the process, might serve as a tool, to usher me forward in this work that I do. – Mara*

Mara wrote about learning with her family in her book chapter as well. In the following excerpt, Mara described one specific memory of her childhood and reflected on how that memory continues to influence her work with children today:

> *Memories. They are key to me and have been for as long as I can remember. And that is a long time. They go back to when I was 2 ½ years old. And they are vivid. They are film clips. They include visual, olfactory, emotional, tactile information. They include important memories of people and places, of activities, of myself and most importantly how everything made me feel. A range of feelings, responses to events, occurances, things I saw or felt or heard or smelled.*
>
> *The importance of having held these memories for so long, and having always considered them somehow important, is that the memories are my sense of self, known only to me. Known only by me, they are the sense of self that supports me, that I wrestle with, that I feel have failed me, they show me my strong side and my weak side, that remind me I always have more work to do. They are battered against and forgotten, only to be remembered again. But, very importantly, they remind me that I am from a time and place. I had an origin and who and what I am now, has continually emanated from the place of origin. I consider it my truest self. My newest self. My enduring self. A self I can go back to. And this is something that supports my work with young children. The early information, the early relationships being formed with things, places and spaces, people, ideas and actions, desires. I must always remember my very dimensional self at those early ages. It is a way in and over time. It is in and of the children I am working and growing with.*
>
> *What I know now, after half a century of observing and reflecting on my own experiences as a learner, a seeker of knowledge,*

is that what we learn in our earliest years can often pop-up, through memory, so many years later and support our understanding as older learners. In my case, I was probably 2 ½ years old, and we had driven from New York City to Colorado to visit my grandparents. My uncle, a college student, was still living at home with them.

It was a sunny, bright day. Warm. I was on the driveway, a wide, light colored cement driveway, not very long, the led up to a modern home and which had a low, stone wall running along one side and grass along the other. I think my uncle and I had been using the hose on the driveway because I remember the color of wet cement. The activity we were undertaking was pulling the petals off of flowers and placing them in cardboard egg cartons so my grandmother could plant the seeds the following spring. When we were done, we carried the egg cartons into the laundry room where they were placed on shelves to be stored until spring.

This memory had always been strong, but it became revelatory in my mid 30s, when for some reason I was engaged in pulling petals off of marigolds and was broadsided by a smell that was SO familiar and in an instant pulled forth the imagery of that day in Colorado.

In this memory, Mara reflected on the role that her family members, specifically her uncle, played in her learning about seeds and plants. Mara described this memory two other times during the school year, as a very concrete, visceral memory that involved her senses – the sight of the wet concrete and the smell of the flowers. Mara continued on in her writing to reflect on how that memory impacted her perspective on working with young children:

That moment of brilliant illumination was profound! It moved me! …Knowledge in this form is visceral. It contains sight, sound, relationships, smells. It comes from a place and was part of an activity that was a part of daily life. This approach to knowledge is the knowledge I want to be able to somehow share. Knowing that what I do with children is relevant now, in time, and that it has the potential of re-entering their lives or growing with them through their lives as time progresses, as their lives develop and unfold. That what we do now, what we talk about now, what we discover now, what we question and explore now, has the possibility of living within them and informing them in ways that will be theirs, their story, their memories, their moving forward into and through their lives.

After Mara shared her writing with the group, the other teachers began to discuss the importance of reflecting on one's early memories and the role that adults play in those memories. Laurel told Mara that the story made her immediately reflect on her work with her students from that very day – when she had planted flowers in the nearby school garden. Mara responded by acknowledging that our memory work over the course of the prior year, and my role as facilitator and designer of the activities, brought these memories forward for her:

> *You [Maggie] opened the door for us, asking us these questions about our memories, it brought them to the forefront – our memories, our stories – and I was able to reflect on how they were a part of who I am, as a person and a teacher. – Mara*

When I asked the other teachers in the group if they felt that this kind of memory work was important to their current work, all nine of them responded that yes, it was an important process. Bree described how this work encouraged her to dig deeper into her memories but with a new kind of lens – that of an educator:

> *The workshop activities led me to wanting to dig more into my past - bring up memories of learning and schooling and look at them now through the lens of an educator …The process …is absolutely important for educators. It is essential to our growth and skills of reflection and self-development. It's also deeply gratifying and feels like an important form of acknowledgement for a role that often can feel isolating or underappreciated. Feels so important to be thinking/working on larger threads and ideas when classroom time often feels so immediate in its day-to-day demands ….– Bree*

This kind of reflection, for both Mara and Bree, became an important process when examining their current teaching practices.

Recognizing Our Damage and Desire

Based on my analysis of the Meristem educators' early memories of schools, classrooms, teachers, families and friends, it has become clear that in our memory work, we captured and reflected on both the negative and the positive memories of our past, both the damage and the desire. The teachers used these memories to reflect on their current teaching practice. This kind of memory work aligns with Tuck's (2009) suggestion that we must acknowledge the pain, damage, and challenges in our lives, as well as the achievements, celebrations and desire. She indicated that, as educators, and teacher educators, we must work to recognize the spectrum of our experiences as learners and teachers.

Reviewing Our Desire and Damage

At the conclusion of our year together, as I was analyzing and writing up my findings for this chapter, I started noticing this pattern of damage-centered memories that turned towards more positive desire-centered ones. I wasn't sure why this turn had taken place, whether it was based on the questions and prompts that I asked, the content and resources that I had been sharing with the group, the increased amount of trust and support that the teachers had created for one another, or simply a combination of multiple factors. During one of our follow-up meetings, I decided to share my writing for this chapter with the group and ask them for their thoughts. In addition, I provided them with the writing prompts and my own personal facilitator notes that I had given them during the first few workshops. As a check, I wanted to know if they had noticed this pattern as well and what they believed the reasons were

behind this change. I provided the teachers with quotes from their writing and discussions. In the following excerpt, we talked about this trend (note, a new teacher, Isabel, had joined our group that night, only learning about our work and project for the first time):

> *Maggie: . . . I guess I'm trying to check myself as a researcher— is this, did this really happen, did this timeline, of grinding on some negative stuff and then emerging to the positive really happen, or was it mixed in or muddled together? And you can pick it apart. Did any of you who experienced this have a gut reaction to that?*
>
> *Alison: I can't really remember. . . I do feel like I was a little prompted in that way. Thinking about it, I was kind of like "well, I was taking Maggie's lead and she was leading us through this process, to think in that way.". But maybe not, maybe you were just opening the space and that's what was happening and maybe because you were holding the space that was your intention but maybe it wasn't. Maybe we were just able to share in that way.*
>
> *Maggie: Right. Well this is the messy fun of research for me: Did I do that? Did they do that? Did we do that together?*
>
> *Bree: But this was your prompt, right? This here (pointing to paper that I provided). Which is interestingly neutral . . .*
>
> *Maggie: Yes, these were my notes—that I read aloud, so even the prompts that I gave you were just two sentences long, these (pointing to notes) were the things that I wanted to make sure to say aloud to the group [before we did the activity].*
>
> *Isabel (outside teacher): So the actual prompt was way less, even more neutral?*
>
> *Maggie: Yes.*
>
> *Bree: Now I am remembering writing the timeline, I think I mostly— I remember it being about influential memories so I had almost entirely positive —all the awesome people and awesome moments or important things that happened in my life. They were generally positive . . .*
>
> *Maggie: That's also true— not everybody falls into this pattern.*

Bree: Right, but that also means that we weren't prompted by you to start with our negative . . . and then go to our positive. So to answer your question— I think that did happen, fairly organically.
(others make agreeing sounds)

Mara: I think we did notice in our group discussion that there was a lot of negative but there were also some positives and that shifted our conversation around for some of us— allowed some of us to say "oh right, what about those positives" I think in our conversations there was a shift off of where we had written, based on the conversation.

Alison: Even in the context of the group—we're educators interested in transformative education –we're all striving for this transformation—doing something different.

Samara: You are asking if this is leading, "am I leading the conversation of where it's going" . . . I don't feel that way at all
Maggie: I designed each next month that month, I didn't design workshop #9 before, I tried to design it based on what I heard you all saying and go in those directions.

Mara: That would be an interesting thing for your narrative – an emergent curriculum.

Isabel: Why not allow all of that thinking into your text, why not wonder aloud on the page, those every things that you are wondering now— it makes it all the more radical to read, it makes the research–it both validates and contextualizes the research to hear you ask those questions.

Bree: And it seems like there's no reason to make the case for this to be a neutral research container. It's so informed by our relationship to you, it's very responsive and generative.

Isabel: And that kind of narrative wondering is so fun to read, it's so satisfying"

In the above excerpt, Mara once again discussed how our memory work was situated in the group, how we influenced one another when the group's memories "shifted our conversation around" and either more negative or positive memories were shared.

During this last conversation, the group reflected back on the process to think about their own personal experiences of recollecting and sharing their memories, as well as the group's way of working together. They agreed that this shift had taken place "fairly organically" as a group. Mara pointed out that the process of sharing reminded and encouraged everyone to look beyond just the damage and remember their positive memories. Bree and Alison stated that my prompts for them were neutral, but the context of the group, including their collective interests in transformative education, all played a role in how they discussed topics and looked towards desire and change for the better. The group confirmed that this shift from damage to desire did occur in our community, and that multiple factors influenced that shift.

Summary

> *[The] mapping [of my] educational histories again goes back to the origins of why I teach. This was my favorite activity of all because it helped me see the journey of my teaching in a process and how events, people and experiences in general connect to one another and to who I am today. It was muraling of the invisible strings that makes the big picture –Samara*

The history of the concept of memory is broad and complex. Researchers in the field of education have mostly focused on collecting the memories of student teachers just entering the profession. These researchers have collected teacher stories and experiences of schooling using cross-sectional methods, capturing memories from one single point in time. In these studies, memory has often been conceived of as both neutral and belonging to a single person, unaltered by the setting in which it is recalled and reflected on. Most of the studies asked the teachers to write their

narratives and submit them for research, without giving the participants an opportunity to reflect on them in other ways, such as in a group setting.

During the course of this professional development project, our group was able to access, reflect, and conceive of memory in a different way than the field of prior research. I discovered that the teachers were very willing to engage in memory work as a group—both in the writing down of their memories and most especially in the collective sharing out and discussion of those memories. I was able to see how, through this social sharing, teachers were able to dig deeper into their memories, uncovering more details and aspects, because they were encouraging one another to do so in a safe space. I found that the teachers wanted to revisit their memories, continually referring back to their own and one another's stories. And lastly, this project was continual, longitudinal in its design, so I was also able to see how teachers' memories changed and altered over the course of the year.

In the process of reflecting on their own memories of learning, I found that some of the Meristem educators initially described negative instances of schooling. However, with additional and deeper reflection and discussion within our group, they began to share more positive memories of learning, which were often with family members and outside of the school setting. My data suggests that this process of reflection and memory work is an important one for teachers as they consider the many different ways that they design learning environments, communicate with families, and teach young children.

Chapter Five: Meristem: An Edge Community

Educators formed the Meristem group based on a collective desire to create a network of support in their local community, as all of the teachers had initially expressed feeling isolated while working in their private, alternative, and early care settings. Over the course of this study, the members of our group described the many different ways that they teach, including how they communicated with children and families, how they designed learning environments, and how they created curriculum for their students. We focused many of our discussions on this range of perspectives and teaching experiences, with the teachers describing and sharing their practices in the workshop writing activities and reflective discussions. While these discussions revealed our differences, they also became a space to find common ground in our work together.

As we engaged in this work together, the Meristem group became what Gorodetsky and Barak (2008) called an "edge community of practice." This peripheral space, or "edge environment," was one of rich diversity and flexibility. Over time, it became a space for dynamic change and productivity. This chapter describes the features of an edge community of practice and examines how, over the course of a year, this specific group of teachers became such a community, bringing their diverse perspectives together to form a group focused on collaboration.

Edges and Boundaries: Relevant Literature on Teacher Learning

At the beginning of the year, upon discovering the differences that the teachers described in their work, I began the search for literature on professional

development communities that had explored similar teacher communities that merged multiple backgrounds and pedagogies. Recent research from Israel used the metaphor of an “edge community,” which provided a helpful framework for understanding the experience of our group.

Ecological Edges & Cultural Capital

The field of ecology originally used the metaphor of the edge as a transitional zone. An “ecological edge” is a biodiverse area where two different types of habitat or ecosystems meet and influence one another (Odum, 1971). These transitional zones are rich in a variety of species and highly dynamic, influencing one another where the system edges meet. Turner, Davidson-Hunt, and O’Flaherty (2003) built on this concept and used the metaphor of the edge in their sociocultural research to describe the kind of sharing, learning, and transitioning of knowledge between communities of humans. According to Turner et al. (2003), a cultural edge is a zone:

> *Where two or more cultures converge and interact—are similarly rich and diverse in cultural traits, exhibiting cultural and linguistic features of each of the contributing peoples. This results in an increase in cultural capital, and resilience, by providing a wider range of traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom on which to draw, especially in times of stress and change. (p. 439)*

These authors stated that these cultural edges are zones of “social interaction, cross-fertilization, and synergy wherein people not only exchange material goods but also learn from one another” (p. 440). Using examples from archaeological history of aboriginal communities across Canada, Turner et al. (2003) proposed that humans actually benefited from living close to multiple ecosystems and multiple cultural communities. Through the exposure and sharing of diverse habitats and social

behaviors, these humans had opportunities to "interact and exchange knowledge, skills and resources" which may, the authors proposed, have helped the communities become both more "resilient" and "flexible" (p.442).

Further developing this study on ecology and culture, Gorodetsky and Barak (2008, 2009, 2016), educational researchers from Israel, adopted the metaphor of the "edge" to help describe and understand the kind of work that can happen when educators from multiple school sites or cultures interacted, collaborated, and exchanged ideas and knowledge to form a new kind of community, what they called "participative edge communities."

Participative Edge Communities

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) described a community of practice as a group of people who shared a common craft or profession. Through a process of sharing information and experiences, the group members learned from one another and gained the opportunity to develop their own skills as well. Wenger also described the concept of "peripheral participation," where a novice member worked to gain knowledge to become part of the community of practice.

Gorodetsky and Barak (2008) built on Lave and Wenger's work to imagine a different kind of learning that happened on the periphery. Rather than novices working towards the center of a community, Gorodetsky and Barak (2009) described members who came from multiple cultural experiences and groups to form a new kind of community: "a participative edge community is a learning community wherein the different voices of its members serve as scaffolds for revealing the

multiple understandings that mold the community's knowledge" (p.587). These new edge communities of practice are "future-oriented"—focused on "innovation and change" through the sharing and learning of knowledge, rather than "negotiating their repertoire towards improving present enterprise" (2008, p.1909).

In their research, Gorodetsky and Barak (2008) worked with educators from both a school and a university teacher education program. The educators in their work brought together a range of perspectives from the cultures of their two institutions. The Meristem group represented a somewhat different kind of edge community. Instead of bringing together individuals from just two different educational settings, our group represented five different learning environments, including three early childhood centers, an alternative learning program, and home-based care. Each of these settings represented an established pedagogy and had its own culture. In addition, as the participant-researcher, I brought my own experience from the university setting, where I had previously conducted three years of research on the professional development of teachers in public high schools. This combination of multiple cultures and teaching practices made the edges of this community even more diverse.

While varied in their teaching practices and cultures, the Meristem group of educators did share a commitment to innovation and change. Throughout the year, the educators in our group continually committed to working towards examining and reflecting on educational theory and practices that were transformative, focusing on change and betterment in our work. Our group name, Meristem exemplified this

commitment. We often discussed what name we should give ourselves as a group. We talked about the main themes that we were reading about (teaching, learning, inquiry), our differences and our commonalities. Mara described this process of navigating our differences and the opportunities that we had to become what she called a "new thing":

> *. . . .we all bring together, to this place, these very differing ideas and notions, and how do we navigate or create this new thing that we are? And offer the opportunity to influence each other? I think if there is trust there, it begins to happen –Mara*

In our discussions, we often focused on our collective desire to explore alternative methods of teaching and learning. Alison often referred to us all as "transformative" educators—dedicated to transforming the normal pedagogical practices of public schooling. She suggested the name "meristem," which she described as the "the part of a plant where new growth occurs." We looked up the definition on a laptop, and Ella read it aloud:

> *MERISTEM (n.): the tissue in most plants containing undifferentiated cells (meristematic cells), found in zones of the plant where growth can take place. Meristematic cells give rise to various organs of the plant and keep the plant growing. –Ella*

We all agreed that this was an appropriate name for our work together and adopted it as our own. In many of our discussions throughout the year, we talked about this commitment to growth, transformation, and change. Much like the edge community of educators in Gorodetsky and Barak's (2008) research, "change became embedded in the very existence of the cultural-educational edge" of our practice (p.1910).

Characteristics of an Edge Community

Gorodetsky and Barak (2008) described how edge communities should not only include the characteristic of learning communities as suggested by Wenger but they should also: focus on knowledge production; show established ways of deliberation and discussion among the members; work to ensure that participant voices and opinions are used as points of departure for those deliberations; have a culture that encourages equal status among all the members; and their collective work should incorporate their everyday lives (p. 1909).

Much of the work on edge communities in the field of educational research focuses on bringing two different communities together to create a new kind of community of practice focused on respectful sharing of knowledge and practice. In their work, Gorodetsky and Barak's (2008) described the coming together of two groups, educators from a school and a teacher education program. However, in this dissertation project, we had a range of different social and cultural learning communities and practices that melded together in our group. Each educator, while they may have some shared classroom environments and pedagogies, brought a diverse range of worldviews and orientations to our group discussions. Consequently, in the formation of our edge community, we blended together multiple edges, including their teacher-training experiences and their pedagogical approaches.

Gorodetsky and Barak (2009) went on to describe how a core process within these edge communities was the development of a "respectful and legitimizing culture" that involved "reflecting and re-evaluating its practices, its moral judgments

and its new resolutions" (p.587-588). By engaging in discussions and deliberations about topics, what they refer to as boundary object, new, shared understandings among the group members may emerged.

Boundary Objects

Gorodetsky and Barak (2009) described how a legitimizing and respectful discussion among a diverse group of educators would not necessarily lead to innovation and change—that the edge community required a deeper inspection of "ideas and ways of being that otherwise might have been repressed and ignored" (p.588). They proposed that this newly formed group must engage in discussions around "commonly used boundary objects that are carriers of what is taken for granted" (p.588). They defined boundary objects as the historical and social artifacts, which are commonly used in human social spaces (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Tsui & Law, 2007; Gorodetsky & Barak, 2009). In their description, these objects are artifacts shared among different members and communities, and it is that sharing which allows for communication to occur between and among the communities. However, they noted that these boundary objects are also "weakly structured"—the same boundary objects may have different meanings among different members of the group. Gorodetsky and Barak (2009) wrote:

> *The differences in understandings can serve as points of departure for the surfacing of conceptions and understandings that have been taken for granted in each community. It leads to a process of learning and re-learning that culminates in the construction of more tightly structured boundary objects that are specific to the involved community. Edge communities are not only unique in legitimating the different classifications of boundary objects but also in legitimating membership within the community of those holding the different*

understandings and different worldviews and orientations (Gorodetsky & Barak, 2009, p. 588).

Over the course of the year, our group engaged in multiple discussions around many different kinds of boundary objects. The following is a description of two such discussion topics, where each teacher brought their unique perspectives on these broadly defined topics and were able to engage in this process of "learning and re-learning" that Gorodetsky and Barak described, leading to "the construction of more tightly structured" understanding of those boundary objects.

Our "Classrooms": Alternative Learning Spaces for Children

During the very first activity in our first workshop, when the teachers introduced themselves and a description of their classrooms, I noted the multiple learning environments and settings present in the group. In these discussions, the concept of a "classroom" became the boundary object in which we each held differing definitions and experiences. For example, one teacher's school was located in a renovated barn located in a rural setting on a farm. One classroom was inside the school director's home. A classroom was located on the campus of a local Methodist church, and another was located in a renovated brick building that was once a forge and foundry of steel railway wheels. Mara taught in the homes of the children under her care. Some of the teachers had access to fields and forests in Hays, while others had access to the downtown areas of the city of Emporia. In our discussions, the teachers often talked about the physical locations of the classroom spaces and environments, as they described their students and communities. All the teachers acknowledged that their classrooms were set apart from the traditional spaces known

for schooling children, and many of them saw this as an important opportunity for new kinds of teaching and alternative class projects. Ella, who helped her students conduct on-the-street interviews with citizens of Emporia for the radio show, viewed her access to the local community as an important component to her teaching. Alison, who started the preschool program on the farmland, saw the natural lands as an important space for her students to explore and engage in learning about their environment. In addition, in her depiction of the unique benefits and challenges to working directly in children's homes, Mara often described field trips and outings that she would take with these children, using nature to explore different topics and ways of the world.

When the teachers shared out their respective experiences in their "classrooms" – the others would listen and ask questions. By the end of the project, it became clear that we all had different conceptions of what a classroom might look like but we also appreciated that a classroom could be an alternative to the traditional public school space that many of us had grown up with. Creating and learning in these alternative spaces became a shared value among our group.

An example of this can be seen through Anya's experience in the group. At the beginning of the project, we held a workshop in Anya's classroom, a room filled with traditional wooden Montessori materials, with child-sized furniture, plants, and a circular rug that was used for meeting with the whole group of children throughout the day. The classroom, like many Montessori classrooms, had a clear and defined structure for the children, which specific ways to move, play and work in the space.

Throughout the year, Anya often spoke with Bree, Laurel and Ella about their programming at Sparrows. In addition, she talked with Alison and Mara about working with children in the outdoors. She often described bringing her students outdoors to work in the garden, harvest food, and propagate plants and flowers. I noticed that increasingly, during our check-ins at the beginning of each workshop, Anya would discuss her interests in schools that are based in the outdoor environment. In six out of the last eight workshops of the year, Anya described new ideas, projects and interests in using nature as a place for learning. At the beginning of the fifth workshop, Anya started off our workshop showing the teachers a video clip from a documentary about an outdoor school based in Europe where the children were exploring the outdoors, constructing shelters, playing games, and even starting fires, with just a small amount of guidance and assistance from adults. Anya said that it had reminded her of Sparrows "with that flavor of children exploring their inner wildness, and creating a space" that is all their own. She described wanting to create a "space in an urban place where children can meet" and engage in this kind of play and exploration. After she shared this video clip, Laurel described a school in California she had visited which was similar to the one in the film. Bree described a local educator who was also interested in creating such a space for children in Emporia.

By the end of the year, I noticed a transformation in how Anya was thinking about learning spaces and environments for children. At our final workshop, she described her family's decision to sell their Montessori program and move, with their

family of five children, to a piece of land with no electricity or shelter. They would spend the first year building a home and living off of the land. They had future plans to eventually start a nature school on that piece of land, encouraging students to learn from the materials found in the wild. While clearly there were many influencing factors that encouraged Anya and her family to make this move, her time spent in the Meristem workshop allowed for her to share out her ideas with other educators and discuss how different spaces for children can lead to different kinds of learning opportunities. The other teachers in our group had encouraged her to take this step, offering suggestions and resources about other models for this kind of classroom design.

Over the course of the year, the teachers collectively worked with Anya to share out, re-define, and re-imagine how different spaces can foster children's development. Collectively, the teachers pushed one another's definitions of a "classroom" by describing the many different ways that their students had experienced the classroom in which they worked. This pushing, re-imagining, and re-conceiving helped form a new, broader, conception of this boundary object.

"Assessment" in the Classroom: Documentation & Power

Another boundary object that the Meristem group spent time discussing and interrogating was the process of *assessment* in education, how to measure student learning and communicate that learning to the families and co-teachers. The teachers all brought their own unique perspectives and practices to the group, which were

influenced by both their own experiences being assessed as a student and also by their teacher training and background.

These nine educators brought varied professional background experiences and pedagogical practices to our discussions. As described in Chapter Two, Anya is a Montessori-trained teacher, Mara and Renee are trained in the Reggio Emilia approach to teaching, and Samara is currently finishing her final thesis project for a masters in Early Childhood Education through an online teacher education program which focuses on "culture-centered" pedagogies. The remaining five teachers described a mix of pedagogical practices that had influenced their teaching, including project-based learning and emergent curriculum. Many of the teachers were able to describe the fundamental features of other pedagogies but were also very curious about the specific materials and methods used in practices that were different from their own.

The topic of assessment emerged during our very first workshop activity. When I asked the teachers to generate "great questions" about teaching and learning were, 6 out of the 38 questions involved some aspect of observing and assessing student learning and the process of communicating that assessment to students, families and co-teachers. They included:

- *How do teachers/I make time and space to share and remain in dialogue with parents about social/emotional learning observations and experiences?*
- *What are ways we can measure learning that aren't "gross"?*
- *How to begin initiating changes in educational approaches in an environment where classes have been run a certain way for many years…activities, projects, ways of communicating with children and other teachers?*
- *How do I see, value, and support the work/ ideas/ways of being of kids whose minds work very differently than mine?*

- *Parental involvement and communication– what does this look like?*
- *How can I tell if my students are learning?*

Throughout our year of discussions, the teachers described the assessment of student learning in many different ways, using such words as “measuring”, “observing”, “documenting”, “listening”, “reporting”, and “communicating”. Bree and Laurel often talked about “authentic assessment” and how that was a confusing term – asking, “who was it authentically for?” When the teachers were choosing their book chapters, three of them decided to explore the topic of assessment in their current practice. Laurel was interested in investigating the many different ways of how to write narratives that described student learning in the classroom. Anya was interested in researching the ways to communicate and “open the door” to parents during school conferences. And Renee wanted to explore how to share her photographs and running records through her online classroom blog. Her research questions focused on how to make the process of documentation “child-centered.” All three of these teachers shared out their topics with the group and received feedback on their chapters. In this feedback, Renee and Mara often referenced their Reggio Emilia backgrounds and the use of “documentation” to record, track and communicate student learning among a school community. Documentation is a tern often used in early childhood education to describe the process of recording a child’s interactions and processes with the use of a video, photograph or a written record by the teacher. Documentation may also include the collection of artifacts that the student has created, such as drawings or writings. During the fourth and fifth workshops, Mara and Renee brought in their collection of Reggio Emilia publications and shared how that specific method of

assessment could be used in a classroom. This sharing process, as described in Chapter Three, helped direct our collective research and the topic of documentation became a focus for our book project.

During this time, Mara also shared out her own documentation process with the group. She brought a collection of photographs and a written description from a series of five days with one of her students, a boy named Stefan. The documentation was about the process of Stefan learning how to use a digital camera, with Mara's help. Below is an excerpt from a written description from Mara, which she titled "Meeting the Camera: Day 1":

> *I ask Stefan if he would like to use my old camera, because I have a new one. He excitedly says he does and is immediately curious. I know that this is the first time he is using a camera. I know that I want him to learn to respectfully use this new tool. Not later, but from the beginning. ...Stefan jumps right in with questions. He wants to know how the camera machine works. How do you turn it on? He watches the lens protract. Then he turns it off and watches it retract. He does this many times….We talk about how delicate the lens is. He is interested and shows it in the care he takes with the camera. How he holds it as though it were a small, helpless animal. This is how his relationship with the camera begins.*

Mara read aloud the excerpt to the group, while showing a series of photographs, taken by both her and by Stefan. The photographs show a young boy looking and touching a camera, learning how to use it. After Mara finished sharing her documentation process, the teachers discussed this method of assessing a child's learning, noticing how Mara allowed Stefan to explore the camera at his own pace. Mara described how she viewed documentation as an assessment tool that helped her as a teacher: "documentation helps me take a place, and stay in that place, it helps me

see." Bree responded to Mara's comment by noting that documentation, like many methods of assessment, may also introduce a power dynamic between the teacher and the student:

> *Bree: Reading this is making me think about the process of documentation – often I think about the kind of objectification that documentation has, placing ourselves as the documenter, how it can be objectifying for the child, who has no agency in the process. But here, you [Mara] put documentation as almost a third party, the process becomes part of the learning and the child has total agency. It balances that power out.*
>
> *Maggie: It places the power into Stefan's hands and camera?*
>
> *Bree: Yes, totally.*

In this excerpt, Bree noted that Mara's method of documenting Stefan balanced this power dynamic, providing Stefan with agency as the learner. This moment in our discussions marks a turning point where the group began to discuss how the process of assessment, and specifically documentation, involved a relationship with power dynamics between the teacher and the student. When Bree raised this topic, it raised our awareness of the issue of power in assessment and became an ongoing part of our discussions about critical literacy and how to teach with a social justice perspective. Assessment, we recognized, is a part of that perspective and a challenging one to navigate as a teacher.

In this example, the teachers began the year by asking questions about assessment processes that focused on measuring student learning and communicating that learning to families and co-teachers. By the end of the year, the teachers had collectively re-imagined the process and definition of assessment, discussing it as a

process of documentation, one which required a recognition of the power that we held as the teachers who observe, assess, and communicate information about our students and their learning.

In addition to our re-examination of the boundary object topics of classrooms and assessments, the Meristem group also demonstrated how through careful deliberations, their collective inquiry work could produce a new and innovate ideas.

Working on the Edge: Deliberations and Inquiries

Gorodetsky and Barak (2008) described an edge community of practice as engaging in knowledge production and thoughtful processes of deliberation. They discussed how these communities value participant voices and use these voices as points of departure for their deliberation. The structure of an edge community encourages an egalitarian status of all the participants. The authors described how edge communities should be a component of the participants' daily lives—the work within our group should be reflected in their work outside of the group, in the teacher's lives and communities.

During my analysis of our workshop discussions and writing activities, I discovered two discussion threads over the course of the year that demonstrate how the Meristem group engaged in thoughtful deliberations in order to produce new and innovative work. The first topic was our ongoing discussion of a framework that we created to talk about our collective inquiries and further our book project. The book project itself was the second topic, including the overall purpose, our perspective as the authors, and the audience for the book.

Creating and Critiquing Our Framework

The first episode began during our fourth workshop discussion. In this workshop, we discussed how to move forward with our list of great questions and begin our second cycle of inquiry—which was focused outwardly on our communities and classrooms (rather than the first cycle which was focused on our own learning and teaching experiences). During this discussion, Mara handed out copies of a drawing to all of the teachers. The drawing was a framework for how she had begun to think about our list of questions and started to code them into themes or patterns. She described how, during her time outside of our workshop, she tried to understand and work with the many different topics that we had raised in our list of great questions through this drawing.

> *Mara: So I was just trying to figure out a way of grappling with all of these incredible questions that the group had come up with. I just kept reading through them and realizing that they were falling into sort of either tight or loose categories and how many and it was kind of four categories that I was coming up with and so I just started —I gave a title, a title to each category, and then just started going through the questions, and that allowed me to be just—oh that is more of a [question from a] "teacher," and that's more of a [question from a] "school director,", and it just helped me break it down that way. Being a very visual person—well how do all these things relate— I need to see a picture of it.*
>
> *Ella: I love this.*

This was a moment in our year together that Mara really started taking on a leadership role, demonstrating here how she had been thinking about our work together, outside of our time together. She described her process of thinking about the group's questions, her "grappling," and she worked to code this set of questions to

better understand them, which for her, meant to represent them in some visual way. With her drawing, Mara's thinking emerged as a point of departure for our work together—a main feature of an edge community. Mara went on to describe how she first imagined these patterns as a visual representation of a compass:

> *Mara: . . . a compass was the first thing that came to mind and but the fact is the children and the families are the hub of the compass and all of these questions can actually radiate or go between each point on the compass but it helps me always bring it back to: Who are we talking about? What is the setting? Is it the big question? Is it a conversation between two of these? . . . it comes back to the children and families for me, if we're talking about education.*

Mara continued to share her thought processes with the group, describing how she moved away from the visual of a compass and instead began to imagine our question according to themes that could be represented as a nest of embedded circles, as shown below:

> *Mara: As I was doing that, I started imagining as a nest, just the beauty of what is the other imagery around this? Just needing a visual . . . And again, how do we—I have a hard time and I get off, I get far away from initial ideas and I just always need to be anchored and to see things as a picture. That's my offering. And I—this is how I thought of different ways of looking at things and understanding and organizing in order to handle things.*

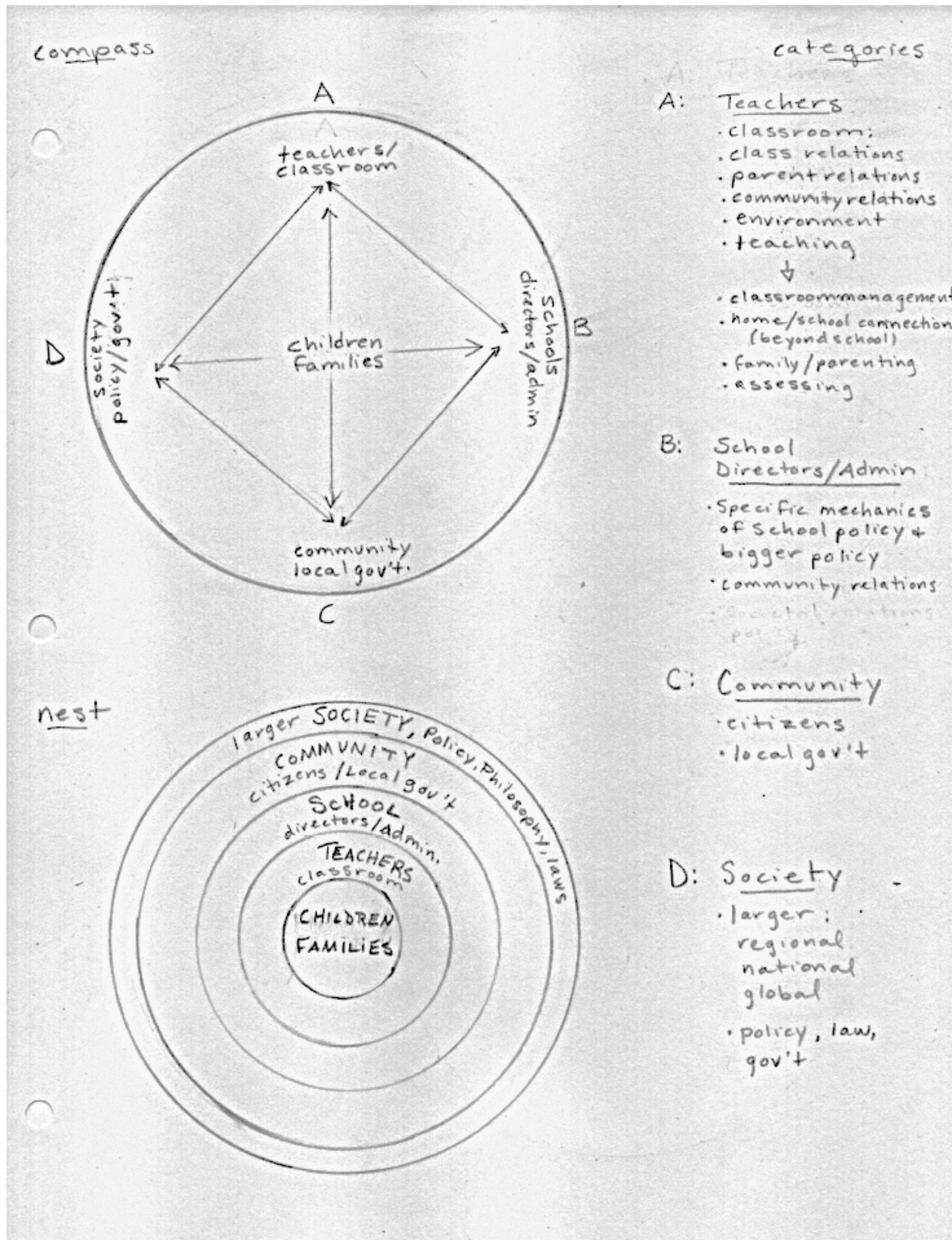

Figure 7 Mara's drawing of both a "compass" and a "nest" framework

Other teachers in the group went on to think about the nest as a framework, appreciating how it, as a visual and a framework, captured many of our questions.

> *Anya: This is so succinct and digestible, all of those [questions] fit within here. And it seems like it becomes more protected or intimate, it's become smaller and centered. I really liked the nest.*
>
> *Ella: I really like this—this really resonates with me too because I feel like sometimes those questions do get all kind of jumbled and that they do move across scale, some of them are— but they actually sometimes are quite different questions in those different contexts, sometimes you can ask the same question at every level . . .*
>
> *Mara: Right. And what does it look like in that level?*
>
> *Ella: Sometimes a question is specifically about one thing but it can get a little dizzying because things are so big and also so specific, so to give a little bit of framework to —I love this. This is awesome.*

In the above comment, Ella described how challenging—or dizzying–it can be think about all of the questions that we have about teaching and learning, how it could feel daunting to know where to start our work as a collective, simply because so many different topics are covered.

At that point in our discussion, I asked the teachers to look back at their list of questions (which I had typed up and handed out to all of them), and I asked them how we might use this framework of a nest in order to further our collective inquiry. In asking this question, I purposely left it very open-ended, wondering if the group would begin to further define a specific question that they wanted to research. I did not want to drive their inquiry topics or work and hoped that a focus would emerge more organically, based on our workshop discussions. However, this question left some of the teachers confused.

Renee: . . . I feel like I'm missing a step of what we're doing.

Maggie: Ok . . . . so we've done a cycle of inquiry where we went through this cycle of learning about ourselves, and now I'm proposing, that we go through this cycle learning about our community and rather than doing it in our own classrooms, individually, and thinking about our students, what can we learn from doing as a collective? Cause we're bringing such different perspectives to the table, and experiences.

Renee: So would we gather documentation from our personal settings, where we are—Sparrows, my school, your [looking at Anya] work with children.

Maggie: Ok, say we chose or created a question around documentation. I could imagine you could bring documentation around what you [Renee] are doing in the classroom, so your blog, text from your blog, photographs from Stefan [a child that Mara cares for], we could look at policy around documentation, what school policy says about that – how they define it . . . when they use the word to "document", what does that mean?

Bree: We could think about it too in its role— in a couple of ways—its role in assessment, but in authentic assessment, which is very different to me than types of assessment that happens in more conventional settings, and then also documentation that Mara does, documentation as the learning process, so kids interviewing each other, taking photographs, creating documents that are actually integrated into the curriculum.

Here we can see how Renee expressed her confusion about the project and how I responded by reviewing our model of two cycles of inquiry. At that point in the conversation, Renee brought up the idea of documentation of student learning as one way to think about our work. I used her example of documentation as a focus for our collective inquiry, and Bree responded with further thoughts on documentation.

In this discussion, Ella connected the theme of documentation with the nest framework, suggesting that the nest could be a way for each of us to think about documentation in our own practices as a way to do our collective inquiry or "how we

organize ourselves." Mara then suggested that we add the theme of "visibility" to our focus.

Ella: I wonder— I'm stuck on Mara's nest– but I feel like it would be helpful if we were to think of what that theme is— that question is that we want to focus in on just for the sake of having one, that focus, even though its kind of hard to choose– like what you were just doing in talking about documentation for example, I sort of imagined thinking about within each of these rings and maybe that's part of how we organize ourselves, or organize part of the conversation. . . . . thinking about the different things whatever themes it is . . .

Maggie: Using the nest to drive the way we think about it?

Ella: And its relevance to thinking about a learning environment within a community and what are the different ways in which . . . what if we set our theme with that space? I think documentation is a pretty interesting— I think there's a lot of interesting things we could do with it but I'm . . .

Mara: Is it too much to add to documentation, the word visibility? Because in a way we are addressing the visibility through documentation

Maggie: What do you mean?

Mara: Like making things visible—

Renee: Like in Reggio terms the documentation is not just for the teacher but they put it up for the children to make their learning visible for them to take in their experience also, through this perspective of honoring their voice and their image, and their different ways expressing themselves…
Samara: And also knowledge—and how they construct knowledge through what they do. So they go back and construct knowledge about what they did.

Mara: And how other people, how our community is seeing education— how does the bigger government or policymakers see education in communities, or for families, just that idea that the tool of documentation is an aid to making something visible . . . . That does bring up something else, when I describe to friends and family what our group is— it's a group of alternative educators, its people who are not within a system, we're all outside of systems, and I think that is incredibly powerful.

Renee: It is.

Mara: Liberating in terms of the conversation.

In the above excerpt, Ella, Renee, Mara, and Samara all contributed to the discussion on the main themes of documentation and visibility as a focus for our work. Renee and Mara pulled from their experiences and knowledge of the Reggio Emilia approach to documentation and described how they were thinking about that method of assessment. Throughout that conversation, every one of the seven teachers at that meeting took turns speaking on the topic of documentation and visibility. As the facilitator for our conversation, I attempted to confirm what I heard the teachers saying and asked questions for further clarification.

This nest became an ongoing topic of discussion for the group, as we further defined our topics for our inquiries and the chapters for our book. The nest became a framework, not only for thinking about our inquiries, but also thinking about the way that society thinks about education on a broader level. Each of the circles represented a sector of teaching and learning, with the child and family in the middle. However, during the seventh workshop, there was a change in our way of thinking about the nest. This turn began when Bree described the research that she was doing for our book project and brought up the nest framework once more, questioning its visual graphic, and realizing that perhaps this framework was too limiting for our work:

> *Bree: I think something that also came up, when I was looking at the notes again, was the nest of concentric circles. I was thinking about my subject and the nest, which in some ways makes perfect sense because it's all contained within the same sea. Then there's also something about it that seems very conventional too: the child, the family, the teacher, the school, the community.*

There's something about my premise I think that actually . . . that my premise is that those aren't necessarily the concentric circles of learning. The pathway of learning doesn't fit within that neat of a diagram and that there's something . . . maybe it's a premise that we all share, or maybe it's just some of us share, but its this idea of porousness and how integral it is to real learning. That there's actually a continuous exchange. I was thinking about spirals [shows the group an image of a spiral on her laptop screen] But in western culture people still think of spirals as linear because it's like there's a start and an end which isn't true really of the spiral, so it's not that useful. I was just trying to think another visual for it , . .

Mara, who had originally drawn the nest framework, nodded throughout Bree's description of another possible visual for our framework. She was the first one to respond to Bree's critique of the nest, acknowledging that the kind of learning and teaching that we are researching may, in fact, be more complex than can be represented by the nest framework:

Mara:Yeah, it's sort of like looking at the micro . . . the more you look in the more complex . . .

Bree: Yeah, there's something, I guess in my premise, there's something about the seed of learning can happen in any of these spaces, but it becomes legitimized in the transfer or the translation into other spaces. When you actually carry that knowledge or experience from one space into another, and that could be seamless, you don't even realize that it's happening, that you've just gone from classroom to community.

In my ideal world there isn't that much of a difference, from your family to your friends to your teachers. As we translate information or experience, we construct it and it becomes legitimized in the process of that. What I would consider the problem of schooling is that, when learning and information is held within the boundaries of schooling, we actually limit its ability to be absorbed into knowing. Because it's just . . . we don't get to translate it, does that make sense at all?

Laurel: Yeah totally. I can't help but think about cellular biology that's the cellular transfer, that's [focused on] who takes it to the next level, the next layer . . .

Bree:It doesn't exist until it moves . . .

Laurel:Yeah and there's a similarity there….

Bree:And the relationship between those cells. Maybe, instead of concentric circles it's a cellular relationship that they have . . .

Laurel:Yeah, cellular biology.

In this excerpt, Bree problematized the simplicity of the nest framework, pointing out how learning can happen at each level of the nest, and when learning and knowledge is transferred or translated between and among these levels, it becomes legitimized. To see these levels as distinctly separate, Bree argued, is to ignore the nuanced movement of knowledge, or what she called the "seeds of learning." This is problematic when learning and knowledge is held, or imagined, within the "boundaries of schooling."

At this point in the conversation, Bree went on to describe the data that she had begun collecting in interviews with parents and students. In my field notes from this workshop, I noted that, based on these comments from Mara and Laurel and later Alison and Ella, that the teachers acknowledged that the nest visual was not appropriate for our work, and they agreed to continue to try to imagine new and different ways to visually represent how we would discuss the processes of learning and teaching in our group and in our book.

This ongoing discussion of our framework revealed how this group of teachers engaged in thoughtful and respectful deliberations in order to further their thinking and produce new ideas, which are core components to an edge community of practice, as described by Gorodetsky and Barak (2008). Mara, who had spent time,

outside of the workshop, thinking about our list of great questions, had originally created the nest framework. Her observations and drawings became the point of departure for our next round of deliberations, discussing how two possible themes—documentation and visibility—could be the focus of our work. The teachers then discussed how each of us could contribute to those themes, valuing the different perspectives, voices, and experiences that we each brought to the group. For example, I suggested that Renee could use her classroom blog as a focus of documentation. Bree suggested to Mara that her photographs could be used. We were using and pulling examples from our everyday lives as teachers to think about our collective work together. This deliberation occurred over multiple meetings, as the teachers continued to think about the framework, with Bree examining and critiquing it three months after it had first been introduced.

Developing Our Book

The second topic that demonstrated how this group of teachers deliberated and processed their collective work is their discussion, development and design of a book. In this ongoing process, we discussed the overall purpose of the book, the research methods that we would use, and the audience for such a book. The following set of excerpts show these processes throughout the year.

At times, some of the educators were confused about the overall design and plan for book project and looked to me, the facilitator of the group, for more direction. For example, in the seventh workshop, Alison described her chapter topic, which focused on how caregivers are positioned and viewed in culture and society.

When discussing her topic and the potential writing that she would do for the book, Alison said that she didn't "fully understand what this project is." Mara described how her topic linked to our broader topic of visibility, and Alison suggested a project that she has been considering, turning a public space into a space for children:

> *Alison: I'm not quite sure I fully understand what this project is . . . . so I'm not quite sure what . . .I mean I can do some writing about my understanding of how that work [caregiving] is positioned. As far it as it being a really isolated position, or in private space . . . often done by women, or at least gendered feminine, so that it occupies a certain sphere that it is less valuable and less compensated, lower pay—that's the kind of stuff that I was thinking about.*
>
> *Mara: And less visible and how that doesn't link to public space—which is visible . . .*
>
> *Alison: I get really excited when thinking about how public money goes into supporting families and care for or support for any individual. I think about the libraries, I had this idea—so libraries, which aren't open until noon on Mondays and Wednesdays . . .what if the library actually basically ran a preschool, like put that money into the library? That's a publically funded preschool!*

When I noticed Alison's excitement about such a project, I wanted to encourage her to follow that enthusiasm. Earlier, Alison had expressed concern about not having enough time to work on the book project. I wanted to help her feel that our work and this book didn't necessarily require that she start a large-scale research project. Instead she could take the form of writing about such an imagined space and adopt a more reflective tone:

> *Maggie: I think it will be cool also to do just that— describe your ideal space where this could happen. So, perhaps it's a community center that worked differently than the one in Hays, or the library did that [host a preschool program]– almost like your dream space, letting yourself just go there and imagine.*

Alison: So Maggie, yeah, tell me more about what space you've carved out for us.

At this point, I was anxious that Alison felt that I was solely driving this project, worried that I had forced the teachers to take up such a book project because I was both facilitating the group and collecting data on our work. I responded by turning the book project back on the group and offering a range of different ways that they could participate in such a book project:

Maggie: I think I'm just wondering what you guys want to do . . . and sort of leaving it up to you. I think everybody is going to have a different desire for what they want to do or how much they want to do and the time that they have to put into this . . . I think a lot of value could come just from us doing some collective writing together and putting it into a document. And I think if you wanted to take it to the next step of going out and really talking to people in the community and using those sources to form more of a collective opinion, rather than just your opinion, I think that could be great, too.

Alison: Ok, yeah—well, that's the project I would want to do—actually bringing families into the library and designing feedback.

Maggie: How can we help you?

Alison: Well, just this [conversation] is great.

After this dialogue, Alison seemed more encouraged that her participation and work was solely her own, not based on what I thought would be appropriate. I wanted to let her know that we were all there to help her. At that moment, Ella jumped in to give Alison feedback on her topic:

Ella: . . There's one thing that really resonated with me that you read [about your topic], was this way that you framed it about the expertise that people have, that it's not just about how to raise kids . . . . I love that you said it: how vitality thrives? How vitality . . . I can't remember how you said it.

Alison: Vitality is nurtured.

Ella:I just love it —it is like insight into humanity and it is not just knowing how to give care . . . because I do think there's awareness that there's a specific kind of knowledge that caretakers have for caring for the young. That was something that really resonated [about your topic]

In this excerpt, Ella acknowledged that she liked the language that Alison used in her description of her chapter. She then returned to Alison's question about the overall purpose of the book and began to discuss how the scope of our chapters and inquiries. In my field notes from this discussion, I noted that Ella was looking around at all of the teachers at the table, not just at me. This stood out to me because I was feeling relieved that the focus had turned away from me as the leader of this book project. Instead Ella was opening up the conversation to all of the participants in our group. After Ella pondered how else we could imagine doing research, I reinforced the idea that it was okay to simply imagine what kind research we might do and to share what questions we might ask. Bree then further reinforced the value of sharing our individual perspectives as teachers by describing the different ways she could imagine the book project coming together:

Ella: . . . The next question—that question about what space is carved out. I guess there's a part of me that kind of wonders if it's okay if some of our pages— because I feel like we all have really big questions—And there's one way of having some big questions and then designing a project that is very small in scale so that can fit into our lives and encompassed in something we make. Or, I can imagine some of our pages being like designs of a project that we would love to do or that one might do, which I feel like its really valuable even if we're not doing it all. The idea of reading through not only the big questions that we have, but also what we would want to share—like this thing we've been talking— the questions and the data . . . but maybe not actually then doing it all. I guess I feel like there's value in the framing of it

because I'm struggling hardest with how do we actually do some of the things that we're saying within the scale of this [book] project.

Maggie: 'Cause some of them are totally huge, right? You can spend 20 years studying this stuff. But by Alison even bringing up these questions and writing that initial description . . . you're doing it, you're showing it, right?

Alison: Thank you so much. I struggle- I was like, how do I share this?

Maggie: You're doing it—you're showing that it's on your mind as the caregiver and by writing up something in this chapter you're making it more visible, right?

Bree: Yeah. I think that's like elaborating on your [Alison's] premise which is this concept of marginalization . . . that concept . . . I think all of us were like "yeah totally" but it's not necessarily something that I see a lot of writing about, nor that is actually very commonly discussed, or put out there. Especially based in you very rooted experience . . . you're not an academic writing an academic paper around the economics of domestic work or something—which is interesting to me—but it's more interesting to me that you're writing about it as a care provider, not as an academic. I think just that perspective in writing is unique and interesting. The premise, the problem, or the concepts and visions for ways that that could change. Even like listing things like "the library could be like a public preschool," you have like a million ideas of how those things could happen. Even just like stating all those . . . wow, those would be interesting to read about.

Bree and Ella not only reinforced the value of Alison's perspective and inquiry topics, they also expanded upon her ideas, offering a new set of perspectives based on their own understandings. Bree linked Alison's work to the concept of marginalization and then noted that this kind of writing, which is rooted in the author's—or in this case, the caregiver's—experience, was something new to her and would be interesting to read.

Later in that conversation, Alison brought up the topic of audience for our book. Mara expanded on Alison's question of audience and went on to ponder who we are as a group.

> *Alison: I'm also thinking about: who's our audience, who are we writing for?*
>
> *Mara: But also, who are we? As we're talking and we have been talking it seems like we all have these thoughts we're all thinking and we're all responding to our thoughts and others' thoughts. It's like how are we thinking? And that's coming up in so many different ways— and revealing itself in so many different ways— like how are we thinking? Maybe we're doing something because we're trying to understand how we think and we're watching ourselves think by doing and sometimes we're thinking and asking questions and doing research . . . Sometimes it's based on a very specific question like Laurel is talking about like assessments [which are] very specific, but it's all about thought—almost into an unknown realm. . . . Based on things that we're feeling and seeing, but also based on things that exist or have existed that are whole paradigms, so, as a group: how are we thinking?*

In the above excerpt, Mara raised the important questions: "who are we?" and then later "how are we thinking?" In her answer to these questions, Mara described how she viewed our group engaging in these metacognitive methods – "we're watching ourselves think" and how that may be important to communicate in our book project. Bree continued on to describe our group as a community of practice. When she imagined who the audience for our book might be, she included parents and other teachers.

> *Bree: Yeah, what's the unspoken kind of premise here [in this setting] . . . how are we expanding out of this [group]? . . ..It's really like reflecting on our own lens . . . I guess what I would call us is a community practice and then we are researchers within that community . . . we're researching our own community of practice from the perspective of practitioners, rather than researchers from the*

outside analyzing an intact group. So, it's very subjective and explicitly so– but I think in a way potentially more interesting and more accessible for the average person to read or engage with— a parent, or another teacher, or someone interested in becoming a teacher . . . those are the audiences that I've imagined.

Ella described the audience that she had imagined for our book—someone who discovers the book and would enjoy hearing our conversations and reading our questions:

Ella: The way I imagine the audience which is maybe not that inspiring because it's kind of small but I just think about the times when I've picked up like a book or a zine I'm like look "where did this come from?" like "did somebody do this?" . . . like when things are odd or fascinating and do not fit very clearly in any particular category . . . I don't know I am kind of imagining those people out there who would love to hear these conversations. Of course, there's probably tons of people who don't care and aren't that interested in these questions. But then I do think there's a lot of people who I can imagine who would be hear those questions and be like: "yeah!" I'm imagining like those souls, encountering our book in some place.

Mara continued on to confirm the perspective that we are writing as both practitioners and researchers, which she believed could be both "infinitely creative" and connected to our own experiences:

Mara: I feel like it's like we're doing research—we're practitioners—but we're researchers, too. Like we're totally in a way it's infinitely creative— the space that we're in. . . . We're looking back at ourselves and trying to understand it and what is the impact—we're researching our own lives and our experiences and using it as fodder to create new.

In this discussion of our book project, I noted how this group of educators deliberated and processed the purpose of the book, the perspective from which we were all writing, and the potential audience for such a book. Alison's questions became the point of departure for these discussions, with numerous participants

responding to her questions and offering their opinions and ideas for such work. The group used their experiences as teachers, their questions about learning, and their documentation of that learning as the chapter topics for their book. As the teachers considered the many different ways to conduct research and share their findings, they worked towards establishing an audience and purpose for their book. In these discussions, the Meristem group demonstrated how through careful deliberation and respectful dialogue, they could support one another while simultaneously producing a new body of work and research.

New Growth in Our Edge Community

In their work on edge communities of practice, Gorodetsky and Barak (2008, 2009, 2016) also described how new understandings, partnerships, and professional activities arose out of the connections between participants who worked together in such a space. In this dissertation study, Meristem members experienced growth via the meaning making processes that characterized our workshop discussions, the sharing and support among the members within our group, and members' new efforts and interests in reaching out and working with the local communities.

New Understandings & Collective Meaning Making

The deliberations and discussions of the Meristem educators during the workshops were the most evident examples of the new growth that this edge community of practice exhibited. When discussing the multiple boundary objects, their inquiry projects, and their book writing projects, each participant was given an opportunity to share their personal experiences and knowledge. As we engaged in

cycles of sharing, questioning and more sharing, we broadened our collective knowledge base. This can be seen in our discussions of classroom designs and methods for assessment. By broadening our knowledge base, we not only provided one another with more examples and practices in which to access in our teaching practices, we also established new understandings for our group's work. An example of this was how specific concepts and terms became picked up by the group, such as the concept of "visibility." During the first workshop, when the teachers were brainstorming their initial questions, the concept of visibility was never explicitly mentioned. It was brought up seven times in the fourth workshop and twelve times in the fifth workshop. Visibility became part of the focus of our book project. During these discussions, the teachers spoke about the visibility of their students in their communities, the visibility of learning as a process that could be documented, and the visibility of caregivers in society. Visibility became part of our discourse as a group, a focus of our work and writing, and an example of how through discussions, we could collectively create new understandings for and with one another.

Sharing & Support Within Meristem

Another kind of growth in this edge community was the sharing of information and resources among the Meristem educators. Per the teachers' request at the beginning of the study, we started each workshop time with announcements of local events and resources for the teaching community. Anya often reported on events on methods used in Montessori and Waldorf classrooms. Renee and Samara noted events on Reggio Emilia pedagogy. Mara, Ella, Tracy, and Bree announced events

about local issues, including conversations and meetings about the local school district, community issues, and groups advocating for social justice. Outside of the meetings, the teachers also shared these resources on our group e-mail list or on social media sites, with one another. The teachers reported back that they had often attended these workshops and events, seeing one another and reflecting on the value of such an experience. One example of this was when Mara emailed the group to announce an upcoming professional development opportunity:

> *I just received information about a Workshop for Preschool Teachers "Young Children and Paint: Lines, Shapes & Color –Art and Thinking", which is being lead by a friend of mine and incredible early childhood educator in April… - Mara (email correspondence with the Meristem group).*

During the following meeting, Samara shared that she had attended the workshop with Mara and that she felt "re-energized" and "invigorated" to use more paint and art with her students. This kind of sharing of resources and opportunities emerged throughout the year. These teachers, who might not have attended workshops in other pedagogical areas outside of their own, were now sharing these spaces and knowledge. The sharing of teaching practices was beginning to reach beyond the scope of our monthly workshop discussions.

After our workshop time was officially over on those weeknight evenings, the teachers often engaged in a more casual kind of support. The teachers who were able to stay would continue chatting with one another. Many times, these conversations would last anywhere from an additional 30 minutes up to an hour or more. When I checked in with individual teachers, I discovered that they also helped one another on

a professional level. Halfway through the year, Samara left her job at her school, and multiple teachers in our group sent her job postings that they believed would be a good fit. She quickly found another teaching position in the area. Anya and Alison were both very interested in hiring Mara to teach in their schools and talked about wanting to recruit her. When the project started, Tracy was working an after-school program at the local public school. About halfway through our year together, Bree and Laurel invited her to co-teach in a program at their center. By the end of the year, she also worked as their administrative and design assistant. In the final questionnaire, Alison described how she connected with some of the other teachers:

> *I was able to observe a day at Renee's school which was great. I got to see my daughter in her element at school and was inspired by Renee's teaching. Mara and I have had a couple of conversations about our work outside this group and these conversations feel much richer because of the shared reference points of this group. —Alison*

New Research within the Meristem Group

Another example of growth in our community took the form of new research that focused on our work. During this study, Samara was finishing her online master's degree in early childhood education. Six months after I finished collecting data, Samara e-mailed the group and asked if she could collect data from our next monthly workshop for her master's thesis paper. During this workshop, Samara provided each teacher with a prompt asking us about an "aha" moment in our teaching experience. The teachers spent 15 minutes responding to this prompt in writing and sharing their responses with the group. The writing activity was similar to the kinds of activities that we had engaged in the previous year. After the workshop, Samara and I decided

that it would benefit our work to continue to share our reflections as researchers and participants in Meristem.

Reaching Out to the Community

Throughout the project, the educators of Meristem also expressed an interest in sharing our work with the greater community. When we were designing and planning our book project, we often discussed this kind of sharing, but this idea of reaching out also took on other forms as well. During the fifth workshop, we started discussing the future of our group: how to make it sustainable and how we wanted to interact with the local community. Bree brought up our relationship, as a group of educators, to public schools, and described how reaching out to this community was "so important" to her. I went on to suggest that we invite parents or public school teachers to our discussions to "bridge that gap":

> *Bree: I've been thinking about how mainstream public education can benefit from the work of independent education happening in the community . . . That is so important to me. And what feels really important to me about this group, is: what is our relationship to public education? You know, I think we are really . . . trying to explain the sort of benefit of having this alternative space . . .*
>
> *Maggie: . . . Mara and I talked about, inviting more parents —who aren't in the classroom— but also more public school teachers who are in much different settings than we all are. To try to bridge that gap. Or an administrator . . . or just expand[ing] this group to include more voices.*
>
> *Bree: Yeah, or even hosting a panel discussion or something about the relationship between alternatives and schooling . . . you know what I mean? Or like some . . . maybe there's some way we could occasionally host something.*

In her written response from the final questionnaire, Alison also discussed sharing our work in a more public setting. I had asked the group, “What aspects of our workshop and this space do you hope we continue as we meet over the next year?” and Alison wrote:

> *Space for reflection on work that is often isolating. Bringing challenges in our work to a group for discussion and help. Collaborative projects that can give our work meaning in other more communal or public contexts. –Alison*

After I had collected data from our year together, the group continued to meet and discuss how else they could share space and engage with members of the public school setting and the local community. In a sense, this edge community looked to broaden to include even more edges, more perspectives, and more differences. While the teachers recognized that they could support one another in this group, they also recognized that such work is challenging as well.

Challenges to Establishing a Sustainable Approach to Professional Development

When we neared the end of the study, many of the educators expressed interest in continuing to meet on a monthly basis to move forward on the book project. During the last “official” workshop, we discussed which elements of the workshop approach we wanted to continue. We all agreed that there should be a “lead” in scheduling the meeting and sending out e-mail reminders to the group. Mara offered to take this lead. However, during this discussion, there was little talk about what aspects of the structure were to remain in place, and who would decide how we spent our time together, moving the book project forward. In the following two months, the teachers agreed to skip the meeting, as the new school year had begun,

and few teachers could make it. At the next meeting, several teachers e-mailed on the day of the meeting saying that they couldn't attended, and only two teachers were present—Anya and Alison. Fearing that the group would disappear, Mara asked for my help, and we talked about tactics to bring the group back together—such as using an online calendar to schedule meetings and more e-mail reminders about the group.

Six months after the official end to the workshops that were led by me, Meristem had only met three times, with five teachers at the most present. When I visited Alison at her schoolhouse, she introduced me to another teacher as "the former leader of our education group, which is now leaderless." I feared that my goal of creating a bottom-up community of practice without the need for a leader had failed. When I met again with Mara, we discussed reasons why the group was feeling disjointed. I posited that it was a busy time of year, but perhaps also the teachers felt pressure to do a lot of work on writing outside of the workshop time. When they were unable to do this writing, they felt bad about attending the workshop itself. Perhaps the pressure of writing the book had become too great. I offered to write an e-mail before our next scheduled meeting, suggesting that we pause the writing project and meet one more time to see if anyone was interested in gathering on a regular basis in a much more informal way. The following is an excerpt from my email to the group:

> *A thought . . . Mara and I were chatting last week about how great it was during our last meeting to have such an open-ended, supportive space for one another, a time to connect and just be together. I wonder if we'd like to push pause on our writing project? That's fine with me and if anyone did want to continue writing, we could do that in another space (perhaps an online writing group? could be fun). . . .All in all, I think it is just so nice to be together and connect with you thoughtful ladies. – Maggie's e-mail to the group*

After I sent this email, four more teachers responded to the online calendar for the next meeting saying that they would be able to attend. Eight teachers were available for the next meeting, including a newly invited member. I decided that perhaps it was a good time for me to step back from the group and give them the space, without me present, to reflect on how they wanted to proceed. The morning following that meeting, Laurel e-mailed the group a document with notes on the previous night's discussion. The notes were titled "Notes from our conversation: on structure of the educator inquiry book moving forward" and included each person's hopes for the group structure moving forward. All eight of the teachers wanted to continue to meet. Seven of those eight teachers described wanting to continue to work on the book project, but they felt like they needed more support, and that writing on one's own, outside of the group, was hard because of their own teaching schedules. By the end of the meeting, the group agreed to continue to both meet and work on the book together. A proposed new structure for the group was written up at the bottom of the notes:

> *Proposal for the group and those not in attendance.*
> *The group would like to continue to meet 1x per month, with this structure:*
>
> - *Each educator will take turns bringing in a prompt /question for the group to answer in a writing session and discussion period. That way, it's a space for both writing/reflecting, talking, and has the potential to move chapters of the book forward. Also, with this structure, some people can be working on chapters, and some can choose not to.*
> - *We would also like to not lose our space for connection. Each time we come together we can start with "weather reports": a part of meeting when each person can share, without feedback, keeping it to a certain amount of time (2-3 minutes?) A way to check in. Somebody can ask for feedback if they're really struggling with something.*
>   *Notes on this structure:*

- *Each facilitator is free to structure the time together as loosely and as structured as would be helpful to their process.*
- *At the end of each session/ meeting and then next educator could self elect, and one backup educator will volunteer in case of schedule changes.*
- *At the end of 12 months, (March 2017!), is the deadline for completion of our book.*
- *In the spirit of Maggie, holding on to flexibility re: agendas—that we might not always get through everything, and that's OK. Flexibility, graciousness, active listening."*

Samara agreed to be the lead for the following month's meeting, with Mara as her "backup educator." The group, without my presence, was able to reflect on what they wanted for the space, how they wanted to connect with one another, who would lead each meeting, and how they would work towards their common goal.

Summary

> *A genuine edge community of practice provides a respectful and legitimizing culture for reflection and re-evaluation of its practice, its involved moral judgments and its constructed new resolutions. It provides space for the emergence and growth of ideas and ways of being with students that otherwise might have been a priori repressed or ignored. (Gorodetsky & Barak, 2008, p.1909-1910)*

As Gorodetsky and Barak noted, participative edge communities are dynamic and flexible, ever changing with the different cultures and perspectives of its participants. In addition, edge communities are richly diverse, pulling from a multitude of belief systems and boundary objects. Through the stories and experiences collected over one year from this group of nine educators, I learned of the multiple ways and possibilities that educators can both collaborate and support one another when given the opportunity to explore their unique and diverse experiences. The community that was created in this study—this edge environment—established a

new common culture of sharing and reflection and became fertile ground for new collaborative work and relationships.

As noted in the review of literature on professional development opportunities for early childhood educators, often the content and design of these settings are based on a single chosen topic, taught in a teacher-centered setting, on a one-time basis. Researchers and educators continue to call for more process-based, inquiry-oriented and longitudinal approaches to professional development. This project answered this call by providing a space for educators to come together, share their diverse experiences, and collaborate on new projects. These edge communities are a helpful approach to professional development because they present a new way to think about the potential growth and innovation that could emerge when we invite educators, who may feel isolated in their solo practices, into a group to share and learn something new. It is not enough to simply place them together, but the approach must respect each of their voices as a body of knowledge, legitimize each of their own experiences and practices, and work to foster new understandings.

Chapter Six: Implications and Conclusions

Summary of the Study

This dissertation is the study of a group of nine teachers, who met over the course of one year to share their teaching and learning experiences, and worked together to reflect on their current teaching practices. Although these teachers all taught young children, they brought together a range of different pedagogical practices and styles to our group. As a participant-researcher for the project, I facilitated monthly workshops based on a model of collaborative inquiry and focused on the theory and practice of critical literacy. Throughout the project, I aimed to create a space for these educators in which they could carefully examine and reflect upon their own histories of learning and teaching and the educational experiences of their students as well. During the workshops, the teachers wrote about these topics and then shared them with one another, engaging in a reflective process that included both a self and collective inquiry. This inquiry process was cyclical, initiated by asking questions, collecting data, and reflecting on our discoveries and explorations.

The research questions that drove this study were:

1. On Critical Literacy: How do these early childhood educators understand the concepts and practices of critical literacy? How are these teachers living critically literate lives?
2. On Memory: How did the teachers engage and interrogate their own stories and memories of schooling? What themes or patterns emerged from this work over the course of one year? And how did the process of documenting and

sharing one's memories help us both reflect on our current teaching pedagogies and support one another as teachers?

3. On a Sustainable Approach of Support & Collaboration: How did we, as a group, work together to support one another in the context of this professional development experience? What elements of our collective work helped us to create a sustainable approach to professional development?

I based my methodology on a design-based approach to research, which allowed for flexibility in the format, content, and methods used in the study. This qualitative approach to research required continuous and reflective analysis of the data, which in turn, enabled the interests of the educators to become the driving force in the decisions that I made in designing the workshop activities and choosing the content for our workshop discussions. I included my own reflections and field notes, audio recordings of the workshops, textual productions from our writing activities and questionnaires, and interviews with the three case study participants in my data sources.

Summary of the Findings

Our Critically Literate Lives

Throughout this year-long project, the Meristem educators read about and discussed the body of theory and educational practice known as critical literacy. In my data collection and analysis, I discovered that these teachers were indeed living critically literate lives, both inside and outside the classroom. They engaged in thoughtful, critical interrogations of their own practice and were capable of reflecting

deeply on their own educational histories. I also found that, when I asked the teachers to write definitions of critical literacy, they all described processes of reflection and the reading and writing of texts. These processes, according to the teachers, examined multiple viewpoints and worked to uncover power dynamics within the texts. However, only two of the teachers explicitly linked their definitions of critical literacy to taking action to promote social justice, the fourth dimension of critical literacy as described by Lewison et al. (2002). When I looked at how the teachers described their teaching practices and activities in the communities, I found that they were all indeed engaging in critically literate practices, both in and outside of their classrooms and even during our workshop activities. They described the many different ways that they were engaging in critical literacy on a personal level, a pedagogical level, and even on a societal level with the writing of their book. In this chapter, I considered that perhaps this distancing from social justice action in their definitions may have resulted from the many challenges and tensions that arise from doing this kind of work, especially from the perspective of a white, female educator.

Our Memories of Schooling

During this study, the teachers engaged in important collective memory work that was influenced by the social context of the group. During the process of sharing and reflecting on their memories, the teachers were able to explore their personal histories of learning more deeply and also support one another in those explorations. Their memories became sites for multiple examinations, texts that the teachers could return to and think about with different questions and varying lenses. Initially, in our

process of sharing, I found that some of the teachers reflected on memories of their learning that were negative in nature. These teachers described restrictive learning environments and difficult relationships with teachers. When the teachers reflected on these memories, they thought about the many different ways that they didn't want to lead their classrooms, or speak and work with their students. In the second half of the project, I noticed that the majority of the group began to describe more positive memories of their childhood learning experiences. These memories often involved learning outside of the traditional school setting, with family members, friends and mentors. When the teachers began to reflect on these memories, they were able to establish the qualities that they did want to embody in their teaching practices and think about the learning environments and opportunities that they did want to create for their young students. In this chapter, I conclude that it is important to reflect on both the positive and the negatively charged memories of our early learning. By reflecting on both the good experiences and the bad, these teachers were able to connect those experiences to their current teaching practices and imagine what kind of teacher they wanted to become. This kind of collective memory work is one that requires a safe and collaborative space for considering, writing and reflecting on our stories. Based on my findings, I believe it would benefit the field of early childhood education if more in-service educators were given opportunities to engage in this kind of reflection.

An Edge Community of Practice

In addition, I described how this group of teachers represented what educational researchers call an edge community of practice. An edge community of practice is the peripheral space, or "edge environment," that is made up of a diverse collection of member perspectives and orientations (Gorodetsky and Barak, 2008). This environment is a space of dynamic change and productivity. During our year together, I discovered that this group of teachers implemented a diverse collection of pedagogical practices and educational orientation. In their discussions, the teachers described the many different ways that they each worked with children, designed learning environments and curriculum, and communicated with students and families. In this chapter, I discuss how two specific topics, that of classrooms and assessment, were explored through the group discussions. The teachers shared their experiences with these topics, which in turn influenced the whole groups' understanding of those topics. In addition, I also analyzed how this group engaged in deliberations, especially when deciding how to work together and how to collectively design and write a book. These discussions became evidence of the new kind of growth emerging from this edge community of practice. By the end of the year, this group of teachers had become a close-knit network of support for one another, with plans to continue meeting beyond the project timeline, and continue to work on a book.

Implications of the Study

In the following discussion of the implications of this study, I will focus on two topics. First, I would like to discuss the research methods and design of this

study—why these methods were important to this study and what potential implications these methods have for the field of professional development with early childhood educators. In this section, I will reflect on the use of design-based methods, my own role as a participant-researcher, and the importance of allowing space for teachers to grapple with and question our collective work.

Second, I will discuss the professional development approach used in this study. I will take a broader perspective and outline how specific features of this professional development approach fostered community and collaboration in the group setting. I will highlight the features of this situated approach which could be used with educators in other contexts and settings. These features make up what I call the SITE approach to professional development for early childhood educators. I will describe how this approach takes on a new and different orientation to teaching and learning and current practices in the training of teachers. I will conclude my discussion with a rationale for why I believe this approach matters to the policy and practice of training teachers of young children.

1. Research Design & Methods

Researching both with and on educators: Reflecting on my role.

Throughout this project, I took on multiple roles, including the lead facilitator of the workshop structure and design, a participant in the activities and discussions, and a researcher collecting data over the course of the year. Throughout the project, I realized that I was collecting data both *on* and *with* this group of early childhood educators. Early on in our year together, I found the educators were very willing to

share their memories of when they were students as well as their current experiences as teachers. In my collection and review of these memories and stories—through audio records, written reflections and interviews with the case-study participants—I discovered that every one of the Meristem educators shared with me and with one another a complex and varied collection of their experiences, beliefs, and practices. By joining them in their conversations and revealing my own range of past experiences as a teacher of young children, I was able to step away from the leadership role as facilitator and researcher and join them in that process of sharing intimate and personal stories. Our discussions, as shown throughout this dissertation, involved multiple, if not all, members of the group. In our space, we focused on our thoughts, writing, and shares of our experiences based on open-ended prompts and writing activities.

In taking on these multiple roles in the group and holding a kind of power of leadership, I often found myself in a difficult position. For example, when we began planning our book project, the teachers asked me for more leadership and direction. I continued to respond by raising more questions for the entire group about our collective goals for the book and what we wanted to explore.

As described in Chapter Five, the teachers took a greater role in the overall leadership of the group, which led to a shift away from my facilitation and to a greater amount of group discussion. In my memos from this time, I acknowledged this shift and brainstormed different design choices that I could implement to foster such a change. At the conclusion of the year, I discussed the shift with Mara, and she

offered to step up as the first facilitator to take on the main communications with the group, sending e-mails and setting agendas for our work. When we discussed this in the group, everyone agreed that this felt like a good move and that eventually each one of us would take turns in that leadership role.

By implementing a design-based approach to this study, I was able to continually reflect on our experiences and alter the workshop activities and structure according to the needs and wants of the group. In another example, early on in the project, Anya asked all of us if we could set some time at the beginning of each meeting to share any interesting resources and upcoming events. As the facilitator, I wrote this time into the next agenda. This short period—usually 10-15 minutes at the beginning of each workshop—became an important entry into our discussion. During this time, the teachers supported one another by providing information about opportunities in the local community. They used this time to share and reconnect before we began responding to a specific writing or discussion prompt that I had planned for us. While I had not anticipated this need for reconnection, as the facilitator, I quickly grew to appreciate this time and recognized how valuable a design-based approach to research can be.

Reinking and Bradley (2008) described design-based research as adaptive, transformative, inclusive, and flexible —all terms that made me, as a researcher, facilitator, and participant in this project, comfortable both with my own role and the overall approach that I wanted to communicate to the group. I was willing to follow the group based on where they wanted to go in their learning processes but

recognized that I would play a major role in creating the structures and spaces that would either foster or hinder those exact processes. Reinking and Bradley (2008) also discussed the kind of *vulnerability* that a researcher must accept when engaging in this kind of research, continually removing oneself from a place of power, and routinely *inviting* the participants to interrogate, reflect, and share out their opinions on educational topics and theory.

Design-based research *with*, not *on*, educators is an important methodological orientation, as it allows the voices of the participants to be present in the data, to drive the design of the workshop activities and discussions, and to provide data that reveals the kind of collaborative meaning-making that I was hoping to find when I began this study. Through design-based research, I was able to bring my own research agenda and plans for creating a sustainable community of educators, while simultaneously allowing their voices, experiences, and knowledge to be both shared and valued.

Acknowledging both the damage and desire in analysis. In Chapter Four, I described how the educators discussed the work of Tuck (2009) who wrote on the comparison and complexities of a damage-centered perspective of research versus a desire-based one. While damage-centered research described the challenges, pain, and struggles of participants and communities, desire-based research outlined the achievements, realizations, and success stories of participants. Per the recommendation of Dr. Tuck, I, as a researcher, aimed to examine the lives and experiences of the Meristem group using both perspectives, acknowledging the nuances, challenges, tensions, and successes of this group of educators. During the

workshop discussions, the teachers shared pieces of their lives and memories—which were at times focused on negative and damage-based experiences, while at other times described positive, desire-based stories. When the teachers decided to design and write a book on their practices and student communities, I was especially excited to see their voices and perspectives raised to the forefront of our collective work. These stories, written in their own words and from their own perspective, allowed the nuances and complexities of their thinking and learning processes to come forth. As I described in Chapter Five, this group of educators demonstrated their thoughtful and profound thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills through their topics of inquiry and their discussions on the overall purpose and design of the book project.

As a researcher in the field of early childhood education, I believe it is imperative to communicate the power and thoughtfulness of such educators—to show the intellectual curiosity, insightful reflections, and progressive pedagogical stances and practices that these teachers engaged in. By sharing them with local and national communities, perhaps we can begin to translate the important work that these educators are doing in the classrooms of our youngest students, while also acknowledging the challenges and difficulties in doing such work.

Leaving space for questions and tensions. About halfway through the year of this study, I realized the importance of the time in our workshops when the teachers questioned and discussed learning and teaching theory, their current teaching practices, and their own past experiences. The teachers collectively grappled with these topics, thinking about them in different ways and questioning them. These

discussions led to some tensions but also led to revealing moments and instances of growth and understanding. In Chapter Five, I described when Alison questioned the purpose and audience of our book. She was confused about the direction in which we were headed. I remembered having a very strong instinct to jump in and offer more direction and leadership. Instead, I chose to put the question back to the group—asking them about what they wanted to do. At that point, Bree, Ella and Mara all stepped in with ideas about how to move forward in our project, how to imagine an audience for our book, and how Alison herself could share her topic. This kind of tension, while initially uncomfortable, led to a new understanding of the group's collective work.

In addition, as mostly white, all female participants, we were challenged by the process of recognizing our own privileges and power as educators. As noted in Chapter Four, one's memories of teaching and learning emerged as an important theme during the workshop. By reflecting on one's experiences, we can begin to discuss our own positionality and privilege in the world, especially in terms of our race and ethnicities, our cultures, and our socioeconomics. In their book on critical literacy and teacher education, Vasquez, Tate and Harste (2013) raised this important issue of self-reflection:

> *While on one level critical literacy might be thought of as an academic subject, it really is a lot more. It involves action, starting with one's self. We see critical literacy as fundamentally a call to action; a call to position oneself differently in the world, a call to take seriously the relationship between language and power (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 18)*

According to Vasquez et al. (2013), starting with oneself and "understanding one's own involvement" in specific social issues aligned with the concept of reflexivity:

> *Metaphorically, we see understanding one's own involvement in an issue as the ability to catch oneself with one's hand in the cookie jar (Leland & Harste, 2000). Scholars have referred to this ability as "reflexivity" (Peirce, 1931-58; Eco, 1970) and have defined it as an awareness of one's personal complicity in maintaining the status quo (or the very systems of injustice one is fighting against). Even though we may be committed to social change, more often than not, we are part of the dominant culture and hence, part of the problem. Until we understand how our current identity and the positions we take mitigate our reform efforts, we cannot truly become part of the solution (p. 18).*

The authors went on to note how Paulo Freire saw "reflection and action as cornerstones of reflexivity" (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 19). To be critically literate, they argued, you must "develop eyes in the back of your head" that can observe both the changes that you make while simultaneously questioning and interrogating your own role in the problem that you are investigating.

Vasquez et al. (2013) brought up this important point of reflexivity and examining one's own involvement in social issues but, according to those authors, that reflection is set in the present time. They offered activities for teacher educators that helped one think about and question the current social context and learning setting. Based on my work with this particular group of teachers over the course of one year, I believe that our reflexivity must include not only an examination of our present circumstances but must extend that gaze to look to our pasts. By examining our memories of teaching and learning, as I explained further in Chapter Four of this paper, we are able to re-examine how we got to where we currently are, learning and

teaching the way that we do. This self-reflection of one's past offers new opportunities for understanding today. Miller and Schifflet (2016) raised this important point:

> *Current and future educators must engage in activities designed to critically examine these past events in order to effectively build upon or disrupt memories while constructing future selves (Boyd et al., 2013; Holt-Reynolds, 1992). As the nation's obsession with new standards and performance on standardization assessment continues to grow, the new focus may undermine the importance of thoughtful reflection (Ward & McCotter, 2004). Preparing teachers for future classrooms should not be limited to the current wave of new initiatives; but rather, should support the development of reflective habits that will stay with students. Prompting students to consider the influence of past selves on their future selves as teachers early in their training can lay the foundation for ongoing and critical reflection for the betterment of teaching and learning (Miller and Schifflet, 2016, p. 28).*

I agree with Miller and Schifflet but urge the entire field of teacher education and professional development to consider broadening the scope even further to include teachers who are already in the field, including veteran teachers who have been in the classroom for many years. When we encourage deep reflection–the questioning and grappling with these past memories—only during our teacher education programs, and then deny teachers the opportunity to do such reflection during their professional development opportunities, we risk sending the message that this kind of ongoing self-reflection is not an important one to maintain in our careers.

Recognizing our social justice actions. As described in Chapter Three, I discovered that this group of teachers was taking important steps in promoting social justice in their classrooms and communities. The Meristem educators cared deeply about this work. They worked after school hours to create and meet with social justice

networks in the local communities. They designed and implemented programs for youth in the community on topics including food justice, environmental and land rights, and human rights.

It is important for the field of educational research to acknowledge this important work and how challenging it can be for educators. We must remind the greater field of education that early childhood educators are capable and skilled at taking such action in their communities and can be leaders in demonstrating how to connect school, family and community around important and challenging issues of race and culture. Perhaps instead of ignoring the experiences and voices of these educators, we instead should provide spaces, forums and opportunities for these educators to share out their practices, raising awareness about the thoughtful and careful work that they do.

2. The SITE Approach to Professional Development

In this dissertation study, I focused on exploring and understanding how this group of Meristem educators worked together to learn about new educational theory, reflected on their memories of learning and teaching, and examined their current pedagogical practices. In addition, I was also interested in examining and highlighting how the features of this situated approach to professional development fostered community and collaboration and could be used by teacher educators in other contexts and settings. As I had expected, the Meristem educators and their teaching experiences mirrored the challenges that face early childhood educators from around the country. Each of the Meristem educators faced some aspects of the following

challenges: low wages, lack of professional development opportunities, isolation in their teaching practice, and a lack of ongoing support in their profession. At the end of this project, while many of them still faced low wages in their profession, each one of the Meristem teachers reported that they experienced some level of support and sense of community from the group. They had found a place to share resources and network with other educators of young children and generally felt less isolated in their practice.

In this professional development approach, learning and teaching is situated, dynamic, and collaborative. Learning takes place in a specific social and cultural setting— the here and now—and evolves as the participants describe and discuss their experiences, their knowledge and new theory. These dialogues did not necessarily lead the group to some imagined best practice or stagnant truth about education but instead created tensions and challenges as we grappled with our understanding of ourselves, one another, and the overall purpose of our collective work. Mikhail Bakhtin, a mid-20th century Russian philosopher of language and literature, described the concept of dialogism, the process of acquiring knowledge as a social act or a dialogue between the center (or the self) and the non-center (the other). Bakhtin described how we "become": when the self and the other are in conversation, or dialogue, with one another. This dialogue is never-ending, it is a dynamic act, one that is set in a social context (Holquist, 2002).

This dialogic orientation and focus on community in teacher learning is new to the field of the professional development of early childhood educators. As

Sheridan et al. (2009) reviewed, much of the professional development opportunities for in-service early childhood teachers focused on either (1) specialized training, which involved “specific skill instruction or skill-building content for on-the-job application (Maxwell, 2006; Tout, Zaslow, & Berry, 2006)” or (2) coaching/consultation, which involved “direct efforts to improve the trainee’s learning and application of child-specific interventions or teaching strategies” (Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 381-382). According to Sheridan et al. (2009), training and coaching “represent relatively short-term and small-scale learning encounters” (p. 383). These encounters are unidirectional and transmission-oriented, the teachers/coaches pass on the knowledge to the learner. Sheridan et al. (2009) went on to note a third approach: communities of practice (CoP), which was used in this study. The authors noted that CoP meetings have only recently become more widely known and implemented in the field. In this kind of setting, the orientation to teaching and learning took on a different form, a bi-directional one with a facilitator:

> *“CoP meetings require an expert facilitator who has relevant experience and practical wisdom and can help the group ask questions, connect and build ideas, expand key points, provide history and useful resources, and stay on task (Kennedy, 2004). As such, the relationships can be characterized as bidirectional, with information transferring from facilitator to participant and back.” (Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 383)*

I would argue that learning in such a community also takes place between and among participants as they share and discuss their experiences and knowledge. In the Meristem group, our learning happened *in situ*— in the lives, homes and classrooms of these teachers on weeknight evenings. The teachers shared their memories, their reflections, and their everyday lives with one another in this community. In doing so,

the teachers themselves became researchers. This situated approach builds on the work of multiple researchers who have called for teachers to take on the role of researcher and the field of educational research to do research *with* educators, not just *on* educators (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, 1999; Nieto, Gordon, and Yearwood, 2002).

I called this collection of professional development methods an approach and not a model because it is a framework that must be grounded and situated in the local and social context. The specific content and design of a professional development community must follow the needs of the educators from that community. For example, while the educators in this study aligned with a social justice perspective and read about critical literacy practice in their workshops, that may not be as relevant for all early childhood educators.

This situated approach, what I called the SITE approach, focused on the development of a sustainable community of support for teachers, in which they are encouraged to reflect deeply on their own experiences and work collectively to examine the questions that they have about teaching and learning. Based on this dissertation study's findings and analysis, the SITE approach is made up of four key features:

- **S**upport & Community: The community of teachers supports one another through a sharing of resources and a network of opportunities. They work together towards a common goal.

- **I**nquiry Cycles: Teachers use the cyclical process of inquiry to explore personal experiences, imagine collaborative work, and research challenging questions about teaching and learning.
- **T**eacher Voice: Teachers' pedagogical knowledge, experiences, and voices are valued and celebrated.
- **E**ngaging Theory: Conceptually interesting and relevant educational theory is used in workshop activities and as topics for discussions.

In the following section, I describe these four features and provide a rationale for why these features are important, in light of the challenging climate that these teachers face in their profession.

Support and community. The first feature of the SITE approach is a focus on establishing a community of teachers that are provided opportunities to work, share and support one another in a myriad of ways. As the Meristem group demonstrated, in their discussions and reflections, educators are capable of supporting one another as they collectively make meaning of educational research and theory. When engaged in dialogue about educational practice and theory, they were able to create friendships and even new working relationships that extended beyond our group setting. In addition, when given the time and space, the Meristem teachers shared resources and opportunities with one another.

When I first met the Meristem educators, I discovered that some of them described feeling isolated in their teaching practices. While many of them had a few teacher colleagues, they lacked a larger network of support in their community. This

feeling of isolation is not unique to this group of early childhood educators. Rogers and Babinski (2002) reported that the limited interaction with colleagues, or the "social isolation" of teaching for new teachers, is discouraging and prevents dialogue, cooperation, and collaboration. Educators working in classrooms set outside of a larger school community are even more likely to feel isolated. In light of the teacher isolation found in this study, I was excited to find that the teachers were able to establish a connected network of support for one another. I observed them chatting with one another after our workshops or outside of our group meetings. Halfway through our time together, the group discussed how they could continue to meet with one another after the conclusion of my research. Six months after I completed collecting data, the group continued to meet, and new working relationships, such as Mara and Samara's caregiving team, were being formed.

Inquiry cycles. The second feature of the SITE approach to professional development is a focus on a balanced model of inquiry. In this study, the inquiry model was based on a structure that included two cycles of inquiry—a self-inquiry that explored one's own experiences and a collaborative inquiry that focused on the classrooms and communities. At the beginning of the study, the teachers explored, revealed, and remembered the stories of their own experiences of teaching and learning. They then turned their attention outward to examine their classrooms, students, and communities. This structure encouraged a balance between inward processing and reflection, followed by an outward focus on the students and communities. The two cycles also allowed for multiple opinions and experiences to

surface as the educators questioned one another and also expanded on their ideas and perspectives. When the teachers described both negative and positive memories of their early schooling, they recognized how some of their current practices were deeply influenced by their pasts. When describing their present-day classrooms, they were able to see and compare how their everyday pedagogies and beliefs were different from one another. Through thoughtful deliberations and discussions, the group also engaged in collective meaning making practices as they formed the way that they would design, research and write their book. The differences in this edge community of practice allowed for new understanding, collaboration, and growth in the group.

It is the balance of the two cycles—the inward and the outward focus —which allowed for such new growth and development to take shape. The space that we created allowed for deep inquiries into the differences we hold in our own beliefs and practices, and the differences and similarities we have among one another. This, in turn, allowed us to expand our understandings and perspectives on teaching and learning with young children. Our inquiries were driven by the cyclical approach that we took to our work, visiting and revisiting our questions, our reflections, and our findings. We did not solely focus on the self, ignoring our current teaching environment, nor did we look at our pedagogy without carefully considering what personal beliefs and experience we bring to it.

This focus on inquiry contrasts with the majority of professional development available to early childhood educators that focuses on the training, coaching, and the

process of teachers acquiring of skills and pedagogical content. These approaches are grounded in the transmission of such skills and practice. They were deemed successful if teachers implemented such skills with fidelity. In comparison, the SITE approach values the process of inquiry, the act of asking questions and searching for answers. During our last workshop, when we discussed a possible outline for our book, the teachers agreed that it would be a good idea to include a final chapter that was a list of more questions—questions that had been elicited by our original inquiries. For this group, questions led to more questions, and that became part of our understanding of the acts of learning and teaching.

Our inquiry work demonstrates that if early childhood educators had more professional development opportunities that offered this balanced approach to inward reflection and outward inquiry, perhaps the field, as a whole, could better support our educators in process-oriented and inquiry-based approaches to professional development.

Teacher voice. The third feature of the SITE approach focuses on the appreciation and recognition of teacher voice and knowledge. This means that all teachers' experiences and understandings are valued in the group discussions and collective work. These voices must also drive the overall design of the structure and content of the workshop. The role of facilitator is an important one in ensuring that the teachers' voices and experiences are both shared and heard.

As the facilitator and researcher in the Meristem group, I continually attempted to open space for all of the participants to share out their thoughts. I did

this by creating writing activities based on open-ended questions and prompts, which were followed by discussions in which all participants were asked to share their answers to such questions. By opening the floor for all teachers to participate, one can help ensure that all voices are being shared. While there may be times when not all participants want to share out, it is important that they are always given the opportunity to share. Using a design-based approach to the research, I was able to use these shared topics and questions to help design the workshops, create activities, and choose resources that aligned with their interests. In this way, the teachers' own knowledge directed the structure and path of the whole professional development approach.

Much like Nieto, Gordon, and Yearwood's (2002) work in an educator inquiry group, the SITE approach conceived of educators as "transformative intellectuals" (p. 345). Neito et al. (2002) referenced Henry Giroux's (1988) work, where he described teachers as intellectuals who are capable of reconsidering and transforming the "fundamental nature of the condition under which they work" and he called on teachers to "create the ideology and structural conditions necessary for them to write, research, and work with each other in producing curricula and sharing power" (p. xxxvi). By engaging in a community of practice where all voices are heard, these teachers can take up this role, researching their practice, and imagining how to transform any challenging conditions they may face.

This focus on teacher voice and knowledge differs greatly from most of the current research on early childhood educators. As Ryan and Goffin (2008) described,

the absence and silencing of teachers in early childhood educational research has negatively impacted the profession as a whole. The authors argued that when researchers ignored the teacher voice, they diminished the profession as a whole by describing teachers as lacking skills and training. ,By recognizing, valuing and sharing teachers' experiences and knowledge, we, as researchers and educators, may begin to raise the cultural impression and economic value of the profession.

Engaging theory. The fourth feature of the SITE approach focuses on the introduction and discussion of conceptually interesting and relevant educational theory. Early on in this study, I introduced the theory and practice of critical literacy to the Meristem group. We discussed the definition of critical literacy, how it could be implemented in classrooms with young children, and the challenges to doing such work. We read and discussed the work of multiple theorists, including: the concept of desire-based research vs. damage-based research as presented by Eve Tuck, the theory of care described by Nel Noddings, and the broad field of social justice education discussed by a host of practitioners, including educator-poet Clint Smith.

Current prevailing approaches to professional development with early childhood educators are often one-time activities or workshops, driven by content and led by an outside facilitator. Some of the teachers in the Meristem group reported that their only recent professional development was through the local council of early childhood education, which offered classes to maintain a teaching license or school license. These classes were focused on very specific topics, such as administering CPR and first aid, communicating with parents, and designing a developmentally

appropriate classroom environment. The teachers were unable to bring their own challenges and questions into the setting but instead were given specific and limited content to learn.

When the field of teacher educators can design professional development curricula and introduce educational theory based on the interests of the teachers, these teachers are, in turn, provided with opportunities to read, reflect, and discuss that theory with other educators, who work in different settings, with different students, and using different pedagogical practices. Each teacher is able to bring their specific lens to the theory, examining how it may or may not be relevant to their practice.

Why SITE Matters: The Need for a New Approach

New, transformative, and community-based approaches to professional development approaches are important to the field of early childhood education for multiple reasons. Across the country, teachers of young children are working in a challenging climate —they face unlivable wages, experience low morale, and feel isolation in their profession. In addition, these teachers have few professional development and training opportunities that focus on providing ongoing support based on their own needs, questions, and experiences. Instead, they are offered one-time professional development workshops that take a transmission-oriented approach, focused on delivering specific pre-chosen content, and aimed to ensure that teachers implement such content with fidelity. In these settings, the teachers' own knowledge and voices are ignored and silenced.

At the same time, we are witnessing a growing recognition from the media,

policy makers, and politicians from both parties about the importance of fostering young childrens' cognitive, physical, social, and emotional skills. They have heralded the education of young children as the key to the economic and social future of our country. This climate marks a unique time for the field of early childhood education. As researchers and teacher educators, we must create opportunities and spaces for teachers to reflect on their work, share their knowledge, and establish sustainable ways to continue working with young children. As described below, the SITE approach aligns with current policy recommendations and simultaneously provides support for educators by creating a community of educators that encourages reflection and collaboration.

Early childhood education and policy. In December of 2015, President Barack Obama signed the "Every Student Succeeds Act" (ESSA), the new federal education bill. It is generally believed that this act will push more control of schools and education away from the federal government and back to the states. While there is not separate funding for early childhood education in the new ESSA, this act does establish some new and important connections made between early childhood education and the elementary school years. In particular, as a result of this bill, educators in both preschool programs and elementary schools will be prepared, trained, and recruited through Title II funding. Bornfreund (2015) reported on this funding stream:

> *One way districts can use these funds is by providing programs and activities to increase "the knowledge base of teachers and principals on instruction in the early grades, and strategies to measure whether young children are progressing." Another is by increasing "the ability*

of principals or other school leaders to support [educators] to meet the needs of students through age 8, which may include providing joint professional learning and planning activities for school staff and educators in preschool programs that address the transition to elementary school.

Bornfreund noted that this funding for teacher preparation is important because it could prepare teachers and administrators in the developmentally appropriate kinds of learning and instruction for the early grades, which has been found to be an area that many elementary teachers are lacking in their teacher training. The bill also includes funding for early childhood educators that feed into elementary school programs, even if they are off school grounds.

With passage of this new bill, multiple state and federal policy makers and education administrators are suddenly interested in the role of early childhood education in our broader culture of schooling, thus raising the potential for increased spending and attention on early childhood education. While this attention brings potentially great potential, it could also lead to greater scrutiny and control over the field, if we become forced to align with elementary school practices, which could lead to great standardization of classroom curriculum, pedagogy, materials, teacher training, and professional development.

Perhaps, as we move into this new era of the ESSA and increased attention on ECE as a field, we need to protect our outsider status, including our flexibility as teachers, by continuing to present powerful examples of successful approaches for teaching our youngest children and supporting their teachers. By presenting research that focuses on the potential in the field, we can show policy makers and education

administrators what children and teachers are capable of, in turn helping protect that which we care so much about. And perhaps, by establishing connections and communities between and among early childhood educators with their colleagues from elementary schools, we may be able to enact change in the other direction, encouraging a more play-based, developmentally appropriate practice for older children as well. I believe that now is the time when we must not just protect our practices, we must also continue to promote, share, and tell our stories of potential and success.

Leaving space for critical literacy in policy. While the inclusion of early childhood education in the ESSA offers great possibility and potential for the field, I also argue that the absence of mandates on critical literacy practices may encourage and allow space for such practices to grow and become more common in our teaching practices. Unlike other reviews of research that may ask for policy makers to pay more attention to this kind of work, it is important to remember that the processes and practices of critical literacies are highly unique to each classroom, community, and culture. By mandating such a practice, ESSA may in part limit its possibilities. As Allen Luke (2000) described, "perhaps it is not a question of whether and how government might bring "critical literacy" under an umbrella of state curriculum policy, but rather a matter of government getting out of the way so that "critical literacies" can be invented in classrooms . . . perhaps it is absence and silence from the centre that enables" (Luke, 2000, p. 259). One can find this absence or silence in policy documents such as the NAEYC & IRA (2009) and the Common Core State

Standards (2010) which define literacy in the classroom in broad enough terms to allow space for critical literacy practices and perspectives. With a deep understanding of the foundational theories of critical literacy, combined with a pedagogical focus on modeling and questioning texts in their classrooms, teachers have the opportunity here to take on these stances while also adhering to specific learning standards. Through the continual engagement of critical literacy perspectives in early learning classrooms, the teachers foster the children's understanding of themselves and the world. When teachers are then given the opportunity and the space to share these practices with other colleagues and parents, the practice of critical literacy may continue to grow and become more common throughout early childhood education.

Suggestions and Questions for Future Research

At the conclusion of this study, I am left with additional questions about the study of productive, authentic, inquiry-based settings for supporting and furthering the learning and development of the nation's early childhood educators. Specifically, I would like to explore how the features of this situated approach to professional development could be used with other communities, how memory work could be used as a method for healing with educators, and how the concept of edge communities of practice might serve as a framework for future work in the field of professional development with educators.

Future Work on The SITE Approach

I would like to further explore how this collaborative inquiry model might help foster networks of support with educators in other communities from different

pedagogies and among educators of different demographics. Specifically, I would like to find out how different sets of teachers might respond to a similar approach to professional development that focuses on collaborative inquiry, educational theory, and the creation of a sustainable and supportive network.

In this study, the Meristem community of educators was particularly interested in social justice education, progressive and transformative educational theory and discussing new and alternative ways to work with young children. When I introduced the foundational theory and practice of critical literacy, this group of educators was eager to learn more and discuss the multiple aspects of the theory. However, it is important to note that not all educators will be interested in these topics, so the theory and content of the SITE approach must align with the interests and questions of different educators at different sites with different backgrounds and histories. Future research must address the following questions: What are the interests, concerns, and challenges for teachers working in publicly-funded programs? In urban areas? With more restrictive curricula and standardized assessment methods? With different cultures and communities of students? What educational theory could assist these teachers as they grapple with teaching challenges and support one another in the process of learning about that theory? As researchers, we must provide explicit examples for how new research and theory align with educators' interests and questions. Using this approach, teacher educators and providers of professional development are in the unique position of helping bridge the divide between research and practice by paying attention to the SITE based factors.

Memory Work as a Healing Strategy for Educators

There is a need for additional research on the collective memory work of early childhood educators. Based on my analysis of the Meristem teachers and their memories of early learning, I am left wondering if this kind of memory work could be used as a tool for teachers who have experienced restrictive learning environments and teachers at a young age. In his work on structural violence in urban communities, Ginwright (2015) reviewed studies and discussed how teachers can use "healing strategies" to help students overcome such violent acts and become political actors in their communities. Perhaps our collective memory work can serve as such a healing strategy in professional development settings.

In this study, I found that our memory work opened up the space for teachers to reflect on both their negative and their positive memories. Many of them described how they were personally affected and influenced by these memories. The teachers were able to re-visit these memories and dig deeper into them by responding to one another, asking questions, and comparing and contrasting their experiences as young learners. Future work may be able to take this reflective work a step further and examine how these memories are connected to greater structural and pedagogical issues that exist in our school environments. In this way, memory work may serve as a healing strategy for these teachers.

In addition, I am interested in studying the role that teacher educators play in this memory work, how can we assist teachers in this healing work? How can we both foster their reflection on memories and then assist in the interrogation of the greater

structural and pedagogical factors at play in these memories? How do we ensure that this kind of work is indeed healing and not creating further damage or violence? What activities and prompts are most productive in this kind of work?

Edge Communities and Professional Development

I would also like to research how the concept of edge communities of practice may be used as a framework for teacher training and professional support. I believe that this framework may be one way to align early childhood education and elementary school education, which is the focus of the new ESSA education bill. In one description of an edge community of practice, Turner et al. (2003) described:

> *Where two or more cultures converge and interact—are similarly rich and diverse in cultural traits, exhibiting cultural and linguistic features of each of the contributing peoples. This results in an increase in cultural capital, and resilience, by providing a wider range of traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom on which to draw, especially in times of stress and change (p. 439).*

I would like to further explore exactly how such cultural capital is increased in these communities, how resilience is fostered by the participants, and how teachers take up that knowledge and wisdom to help themselves in the current teaching climate.

The Meristem edge community of practice involved a range of diverse perspectives on teaching pedagogies, classroom environments, daily rituals, teaching histories and experiences, and much more. The teachers brought their unique experiences to the group and given time, were able to share those experiences, notice the differences, and recognize and celebrate their similarities. Much like the dynamic edges of ecosystems that are altered by their shared space, these teachers were also

able to share and eventually collaborate in new ways.

Early on in the project, our group recognized that, not only were we different from one another, but we were also different from teachers working in the normal public schooling spaces. Both pedagogically and physically, alternative and early childhood education is often placed outside of the public school. Our classrooms are not usually on the public school campuses, and our pedagogies are rarely embraced in these spaces which utilize standardized curriculum and assessment strategies. So, in addition to noticing the differences we had from one another, we also shared an outsider status. This shared status allowed us to support one another. We found solace in our differences and recognized (even with our group's name of Meristem), that we were all working towards a new kind of growth, an alternative to the norm. This new growth was demonstrated in the deliberations and discussions of multiple boundary objects during our workshops. These included topics such as classroom designs, methods for assessment, the purpose of our inquiry work, and the audience for our book project. Each participant was able to contribute their individual understanding during these deliberations, which in turn, helped further develop our collective understanding and meaning making. This work was the new growth in our edge community of practice as it broadened our knowledge base and provided a diverse foundation of wisdom and practice for all of the participants.

What if more professional development for early childhood educators embraced this approach of valuing rich, diverse perspectives and collectively worked towards a goal of "new growth"? Often professional development is offered to

teachers of the same ilk, working with children of the same age, from the same cultures and community, and having shared the same pedagogical history. What if we were given the opportunity to connect with educators who were very different from us, worked with students unlike ours, in neighborhoods and families unlike our own? What if alternative educators were able to meet, share, and support public school educators? What if more early childhood educators were able to engage in this kind of inquiry approach with middle school teachers? Much like the theory of edge community of practices, we found that it is not enough to simply place diverse perspectives together. In order to broaden our base of experiences and ensure new growth, we must also work to respect those voices and establish a common goal in our work. to work towards, a broadened base of experiences, a new growth.

Many believe that the state of education in the US is facing a set of tremendous challenges and we must continue to search for sustainable practices which can begin to alleviate some of the trials that teachers face. At this moment in time, perhaps there is great potential for collaborative partnerships to grow between different school sites so that educators are given opportunities to come together in a sharing, trusting, and flexible space where they can learn from one another. Educators working with children of different ages may now have the opportunity to share, as they create a new kind of collaborative culture of professional development. We could then expand on the limited research on collaborative partnerships within the field of early childhood education.

Conclusion to the Study

In sum, this dissertation described how a group of teachers came together to share and reflect on their practices, perspectives and communities. These teachers discussed memories of being treated poorly in the school system, when they were told things that were hurtful or or untrue. They also described moments when teachers were important mentors and classrooms were inspiring learning environments. They asked questions of one another about their current teaching practice and critically examined their everyday practices and their assumptions and privileges. They took a careful look at the communities of students that they were teaching, thinking about how they could improve their own practice to become better teachers for their students. And in all this sharing, reflection, and critique, they gradually became a network of support and care for one another. They listened, asked important questions, and learned from one another's stories and experiences. This process was carefully designed and facilitated in order to make sure that teachers had access to a space where they could share, listen and support one another.

Early childhood educators are often described as caring, thoughtful, patient, reflective teachers of our youngest citizens. However, our society doesn't always appreciate the profession, monetarily or systemically, rendering it an unsustainable career for many. Perhaps this study, and the SITE approach outlined here, will provide an example of how early childhood educators can work together and support one another and how they might cultivate an ethos of care. By coming together and showing dedication to listening carefully to one another's voices, teachers may be

able to create their own sustainable support network, one based on collaboration, trust, and respect.

And, perhaps, by continuing to create these networks, where we share the stories of educators and their abilities and potential for care and change, we can continue to raise the profession in the eyes of outsiders. Perhaps we can show them what is possible when a group of thoughtful citizens come together.

List of Appendices

APPENDIX A: Written Questionnaires

APPENDIX B: Workshop Activities

APPENDIX C: Critical Literacy Handout

Appendix A: Written Questionnaires

1. Literacies, Inquiries & Communities (November)
2. Reflections on Self-Inquiry Cycle: Free Write & Share Out (March)
3. On Living a Critically Literate Life (June)
4. Writing Activity: Reflecting on Our Workshop Activities & Discussions (July)

Questionnaire #1. Literacies, Inquiries & Communities: Participant Questionnaire

About You.
Your name:
Age:
Email:
Pseudonym (code name you would like to use for research purposes):

Your Teaching Experience.
How long have you worked with children?
If you are currently teaching, what kind of setting do you work in? (ie, home-based, center-based, school? privately-funded, publically-funded, non-profit?).
How long have you worked in this setting?
How many children are in your setting/classroom:
Describe previous classroom settings that you have worked with children, if any:

Your Community.
Describe the community setting that your classroom/school is based in (Is it rural or urban? Are their spaces for children and young people (parks, community centers, etc)? What are the driving economic forces in the community?)
Describe your/your school's relationship with your community (Do you have any partnerships in projects and programs? Do community members ever come to your classroom?)
Describe the families of the students in your program/classroom (Ethnicities, languages, cultural practices)

Your Pedagogy.
Describe your teaching pedagogy: What beliefs about teaching and learning help guide your practice? Do you align with any defined pedagogy (Reggio-Emilia, Montessori, Project-based, Experiential, etc)?

Your Colleagues.
How many other educators do you work with in this setting?
Describe your working relationship with these educators:
Do you connect/communicate with other educators from other schools/classrooms? If so, in what way?

Professional Development Experiences.
Describe your most recent professional development experience:
Describe one of your favorite professional development experiences (if you have had one!):
What do you think are the most important characteristics to a successful professional development experience?
What makes a successful collective learning experience?

About Our Group.

What are your hopes for this group?

What topics do you hope this group will discuss/think about over the next eight months?

Questionnaire #2: Reflections on Self-Inquiry Cycle: Free Write & Share Out

Name:

Together, we have engaged in three activities that explore our own memories, histories, and experiences in teaching and learning:

1. Why do you teach?
2. Mapping Your Educational Histories
3. A Memorable Educator

What did you learn about yourself from these activities?

What was challenging about these activities and the process of self-inquiry?

Outside of our group meeting times, did you find yourself reflecting on what you had written or shared during these activities? What were you thinking about?

Do you think self-inquiry is an important process for teachers? Why or why not?

Questionnaire #3: On Living a Critically Literate Life

Name:

Critical Literacy is the capacity for a particular type of critical thinking that involves looking beyond the literal meaning of texts to observe what is present and what is missing, in order to analyze and evaluate the text's complete meaning and the author's intent. Critical literacy goes beyond conventional critical thinking in focusing on issues related to fairness, equity, and social justice. Critically literate students adopt a critical stance, asking what view of the world the text advances and whether they find this view acceptable.

Four dimensions of critical literacy identified by Lewison, Flint and Sluys (2002) include:

1. Disrupting a common situation or understanding (seeking to understand the text or situation in more or less detail to gain perspective)
2. Interrogating multiple viewpoints (standing in the shoes of others or thinking about texts from perspectives of different characters or from perspectives not represented in the texts)
3. Focusing on sociopolitical issues (thinking about power in relationships between and among people and exploring how power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions)
4. Taking action and promoting social justice (reflecting and acting to change an inappropriate, unequal power relationship between people)

Vasquez et al (2013) outline the importance of living a critically literate life and critical literacy as a "way of being rather than as a set of activities" which includes teachers and students becoming "justice-oriented citizens."

Writing Prompt (think about and respond to the following)

- How do you live a critically literate life?
- Are you a critically literate teacher? Are you a critically literate person?
- If so, how?
- If not, what challenges or restrictions do you face in your life (both inside and outside the classroom) that prevent or challenge you from becoming a critically literate person?

Questionnaire #4: Writing Activity: Reflecting on Our Workshop Activities & Discussions

Your Name:

Teaching Setting: In one sentence, describe you teaching setting (private early childhood classroom, alternative learning resource center, home-school parent, family child care provider, etc.)

Teaching Title/Role: In one sentence, describe your teaching title or role (head, assistant, director, etc.):

On Critical Literacy

1. Thinking back to some of the readings and our discussions over the past 8 months, how do you define critical literacy?

2. What does it mean to you to live a critically literate life? (If possible, give some examples)

3. What does it mean to you to be a critically literate teacher? (If possible, give some examples)

Our Histories, Stories and Memories

Over the year, we have conducted multiple writing activities and discussions that explore our own histories of learning and teaching (ie., influential educators and making maps).

4. What, if anything, surprised you about your responses and reflections during these self-inquiry activities?

5. What did you learn about the other members of this group during these self-inquiry activities?

6. What are the benefits to engaging in such reflective practices?

7. What are the challenges to engaging in such reflective practices?

Workshop Activities & Discussions

8. Have the activities and discussions in this workshop helped you or altered your teaching practice in any way? If so, which activities and how?

9. What, if any, ideas from our activities and/or discussions have stuck with you? What will you walk away with? (Even though we plan to continue to meet!)

10. What could have been improved in our workshops?

11. Has anyone in the group acted as a support to you and your teaching practice? Have you supported anyone in the group in their teaching practice? If yes, how so?

12. We are group of educators working with a range of student ages and with multiple pedagogical stances. How has this diversity of practice helped us during our reflections and sharing? How has it challenged us?

<u>Looking forward…</u>
13. What aspects of our workshop and this space do you hope we continue as we meet over the next year?
14. What should our group name be?

THANK YOU!

Appendix B: Workshop Activities

1. Why I Teach
2. Your Great Questions
3. Mapping Memories of Teaching & Learning
4. Influential Educators

1. Why I Teach: Declarations of what we care about (30 min)

Free Write & Share Out: Why do you teach? Let's start off this year-long workshop thinking about what we do each day and why we do it.

2. Your Great Questions (40 min)

Free Write & Share Out: Your Great Questions about Teaching & Learning.

- Write down questions that you have about education, teaching and learning. List as many questions as you can. These can be the questions that fill your mind when you wake up in the morning, that happen split second while you are teaching, or sit with you at all times (an earworm question). These can be questions that you would like to explore with this group over the next year.

a. *Interrogate Your Questions: Categorize your questions as Closed- or Open-ended*
   - Closed-ended questions can be answered with "yes" or "no" or with one word.
   - Open-ended questions require an explanation and cannot be answered with "yes" or "no" or with one word.
   - Find closed-ended questions. Mark them with a "c."
   - The other questions must be open-ended. Mark them with an "o."

b. *Other ways to examine your questions:*
   - Local teaching and learning (self, your students, your classroom) vs. global
   - Focused on teacher vs. learner

c. *Share Out Your Great Questions With the Group.*

d. *Look for Themes and Patterns:*
   - What major shared themes are coming out of our questions – what interests do we share?
   - Which questions are local vs. global?

e. *Prioritizing Our Questions:*
   - Which ones do we really like? Why?

3. Mapping Memories of Teaching & Learning (1 hr)

Draw & Share Out: Map your history of teaching and learning. The purpose of this is to begin to dig into our own educational memories – to start scratching the surface, to think about different ways that we have taught and learned in our lives.

- Step One: Create your map, take your 11x17 sheet of paper, fold in half, fold in half again. Use this mid line as your timeline (half way is half way through your life).
- On TOP half: Start by mapping major educational moments, where and when you went to school, then begin to think about the places you were, the people you interacted with, you may be driven by years, events, try to fill up that timeline with dates, events, and places that involved teaching and learning. These may be good, bright moments or confusing, sad moments. Both are ok.
- On BOTTOM half: Start jotting down names – of teachers and students that were a part of those experiences. Further dig into those memories.
- And BELOW that: Jot some notes about the emotional impressions that those educational moments had on you – whether good or bad – what did you feel about that experience?
- Share Out: Sharing and note any common themes, emotions that we share, influence of people/teachers/students on our experiences.

4. Influential Educators (30 min)

Free Write and Share Out: Describe an educator in your life who made you think differently about yourself, the world, or how you learn about the world.

- What did you learn from them?
- Why do they stand out in your memory?
- What about them relates to how you teach today?

Appendix C: Critical Literacy Handout

Framing Our Work: Critical Literacy & Asking Questions

What is Critical Literacy? Reflection + Action.

- The capacity for a particular type of critical thinking that involves **looking beyond the literal meaning of texts to observe what is present and what is missing, in order to analyze and evaluate the text's complete meaning and the author's intent**.
- Critical literacy goes beyond conventional critical thinking in focusing on issues related to fairness, equity, and social justice.
- Critical literacy involves an analysis and critique of the power relationships among texts, language, social groups and social practices. It shows us ways of looking at **texts of all kinds (print, visual, spoken, multimedia and performance texts**) to examine and challenge the attitudes, values and beliefs that lie beneath the surface.

Questions used to interrogate texts may include:

- Who authored this text?
- Why did the author write this text?
- Who benefits from this text?
- What voices are being heard?
- Whose voices are left out?
- Is there another point of view?
- How is gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, etc. portrayed in this text?
- What if this story were told from the perspective of a different character?
- How is the reader positioned in the text?
- What are the design features of this text? Why were they included?

Four dimensions of critical literacy identified by Lewison, Flint and Sluys (2002) include:

1. Disrupting a common situation or understanding (seeking to understand the text or situation in more or less detail to gain perspective)
2. Interrogating multiple viewpoints (standing in the shoes of others or thinking about texts from perspectives of different characters or from perspectives not represented in the texts)
3. Focusing on sociopolitical issues (thinking about power in relationships between and among people and exploring how power relationships shape perceptions, responses, and actions)
4. Taking action and promoting social justice (reflecting and acting to change an inappropriate, unequal power relationship between people)

(One page document I created for the teachers and shared during the third workshop, Some text from: http://faculty.uoit.ca/hughes/Contexts/CriticalLiteracy.html)

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