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In this piece by Nancy Bleemer, we read how very young children make sense of the routines and expectations of existing in a group care setting. Her poignant descriptions capture the openness of 2 and 3-year-old children who are trying their best to participate on their earliest days at school, yet miscalculate in small ways and then feel embarrassed and fearful. Bleemer then focuses on many small moments throughout the fall semester that helped her to understand how children's earliest experiences in early childhood settings feel to them as though they are entering an unknown society—the strangeness only reinforced by young children's emotional need for a secure base. Bleemer's reflections help all of us think more deeply about how to prepare for these delicate beginnings by working with our coteachers, preparing the classroom, communicating with families, and waking ourselves up to the importance of these transitions that take place before our eyes at the start of each school year.

—*Barbara Henderson*

NANCY BLEEMER

Starting School for the Very First Time: The Stories of Three Young Children

Nancy Bleemer is an early childhood educator in New York City. She holds an MSEd from City University of New York, an MA from New York University, and a BA from Princeton University.

Photos courtesy of the author.

After six years of teaching 3- and 4-year-olds—first as a music and drama teacher, then as an assistant teacher—I have started something new. I am now the head teacher in my own classroom of older 2-year-olds and young 3-year-olds. Like my young students, since September I am experiencing something for the very first time.

In this new position, I have been struck by the difference between this group and my previous children. Most of my new class had never been to school before, and had no idea what school was. Previously, when I looked at the children in my 3's/4's classes, it was their stories and the ways that they told their stories that drew me to them—through their language, play, pretend, drawing, and dictation. I was fascinated by the trajectory, the how and why did it happen. When I think of the very young children in my class today, it is their stories that I am yearning to understand, especially as they start one of the most momentous tales of their lives: the story of starting school.

I wanted to learn just how these young children adjusted to the idea of school and navigated through separation, entering into a whole new world. Just as it's important in the preschool years to create a home/school connection, it is also important for very young children to understand the differences between home and school and to be able to cross the divide between the two. Inspired by Vivian Paley, I have attempted to discover and tell their stories partly in narrative form, striving for an in-depth understanding of

their individual experiences through reflection, observation, journaling, and documentation.

Through my teacher research study chronicling the stories of three first-time students in my class, I hoped to discover optimal strategies to facilitate a very young child's integration into the classroom, solidifying newfound identification as class members.

I focused on the following questions:

- **How do these very young children come to understand what school is?**
- **How do they make sense of what school is, and what it is to go to school and be a part of a class?**
- **What makes a child's integration into the classroom more, or less, successful?**

Review of literature

Children's difficulties starting school may "result from fear of the unknown" (Laverick 2008, 322). A key factor for a child's successful adjustment to school is developing a level of basic trust for this new environment (Erikson 1963). As stated by the Erikson Institute's Barbara Bowman,

> Erikson did not expect children to have basic trust (or basic mistrust) but to have a sufficient number and intensity of trust experiences to balance the mistrust ones and for the children to emerge from this stage with hope. (personal communication)

Yet, as Balaban states,

> Until children come to feel this sense of trust . . . the teacher and the classroom remain strange . . . until children are around three years old, they cannot retain a stable inner mental image of their absent parent, making words or explanations about caretakers' whereabouts ineffective until the child trusts the new adult. (1985, 5)

This would have great impact on a child's initial entry to school; the resulting anxiety of a child's inability to truly understand "Mommy will come back" can prove a huge impediment to a smooth transition.

Laverick (2008) stresses the importance of prepping the child beforehand, through direct experience and information. Fabian also emphasizes that starting school would be smoother if the child and the child's family has had several "pre-entry visits" in which both children and parents can "develop confidence and trust in the school" through a familiarization and understanding of the school's culture and physical space (2000, 151). Indeed, the physical space of a school, a new and unknown environment, can be overwhelming and frightening for the young child, and support for gaining confidence in the new environment through pre-visits can affect their successful integration (Barrett 1986). The importance of

these "induction strategies" as a crucial part of the child's successful navigation through the enormous challenge of starting school is echoed in several studies (Fabian 2000; Laverick 2008; Dockett & Perry 2001), for

> . . . prior knowledge of the building, organisational patterns, people or activities gave both children and parents more confidence in that they were able to think about, anticipate, and therefore have some control over the new experience. (Barrett 1986, 96)

Familiarity, on both the child's part and the parents', seems to have direct correlation to a more successful integration for the first-time student.

However, in a study that seems to contradict the importance of pre-visits and preparation for the child, Schwarz and Wynn claimed that a child's emotional adjustment to an early childhood program was facilitated not by a pre-visit to the classroom nor by the presence of the mother in the classroom for the first classroom visit, but that, indeed, "this particular combination of procedures may prolong or reactivate dependence feelings" in both children who have had experience separating and children who have not (1971, 879). The study cautioned against generalization in its findings about all early preschool populations, but did suggest that the seeming lack of "separation anxiety" in its findings may be due to the academic training and efficacy of the teachers guiding the transitions (880), an implication that teachers may be the more important link in a child's successful introduction to school.

In a study of 24- to 34-month-old children, Highberger (1955) defined successful adjustment as

> . . . the capacity to explore freely the nursery school environment of people and things . . . [and that] the number of hours a child had previously been away from his mother and the number of times he had been left with strange adults and children probably influenced a child's behavior during his first few weeks in school. (50–59)

Another assessment guide focused on the child's "coping with school" by using a scale consisting of just 12 items:

> Settling in school, cooperating with other children, relationship with the teacher, concentration, use of play materials, self-reliance, verbalising in school work, following instructions, coping with personal needs, sociability, physical coordination and fine motor control. (Hughes, Pinkerton, & Plewis 1979, 189)

For the purpose of my research, these criteria proved useful in my observations of the three children selected for the study, with a special focus on settling in school, relationships with teachers, and use of play materials—data that provided valuable insight into the children's adjustment to the classroom in the first few months of the fall.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

Theo, Douglas, and Veronica (not their real names) were selected for this study because they had no previous experience with school or any structured setting requiring separation from a parent or caregiver. They were also only children, without the benefit of learning about school from an older sibling. They were part of a class of 10 students, all older 2-year-olds and young 3-year-olds. Our setting was Morningside Nursery School, a progressive, urban, play-based nursery school in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. The children came primarily from middle and upper middle class families; many of the parents were associated with Columbia University, as both students and educators. Along with professors and researchers, the school counts many artists, writers, actors, directors, and musicians among the parent body. As head teacher, I had an assistant, Alan, who was teaching for the first time. I came to early childhood education later in life, after experiences as an actor, singer, writer, TV executive, and an adjunct professor of acting and playwriting.

Data collection and analysis

I adopted a qualitative approach to exploring and documenting children's ideas about and understandings of school as they tried on the identity of "student" for the first time. I followed the trajectory of these children's experiences during the first four months of school—August, September, October, and November.

I systematically collected data through a variety of means, including:

- home visits where I interviewed parents and children,
- parent questionnaires,
- anecdotal observations,
- documentation through photographs,
- notes after relevant conversations with my participants, and
- journaling.

During home visits in the last week of August and the first week of September, I interviewed parents about their children. I attempted to learn as much as possible about the children's home life, including any major changes in the household that might have had an impact and could affect their transition to school. I also gave parents a written questionnaire asking about previous school experiences or lack thereof as well as family makeup, the child's routines and interests, early development, and what, if anything they had done to prepare the child for the start of school. This helped me understand the child's temperament and relationships within the family,

which might also affect their degree of comfort in starting school. During these visits I also asked the children about their concepts and ideas about school, with simple and direct questions. These included: "What is school?" "Why do we go to school?" and "What do we do at school?" These questions provided a baseline of understanding of what the children knew or didn't know about school from the very beginning.

My primary method of data collection was through observation. I observed the children's use of play materials, their comfort with separation, and their verbalization with other children in the classroom. I also observed their connection to the teachers, the materials, and the other children. These observations were a means to assess the children's integration, providing an in-depth picture of how the children were coping with starting school.

I kept a daily journal in which I took note of each of the three children, describing their interactions, play choices, challenges, and successes. I documented my observations with photographs and carefully dated each data source in an effort to keep my study reliable. I focused on three key times during the school day: morning drop-off (separation), play choice (free play), and morning meeting (classroom community). My hope was that these three settings would offer a rich picture of the children's comfort or anxiety regarding school, their understanding of classroom navigation and play with others or with materials, and their understanding of what it means to be a part of a class. I also noted my developing relationship with each of the three children, describing interactions and my own feelings about a connection or lack of connection with each child. I kept a notebook in the classroom and jotted down notes after each of the three daily data collection periods, during class when possible, or immediately after. I then transferred and elaborated upon my handwritten notes after class on the computer. In this way, I hoped to assess the children's classroom integration and learn which strategies might help a child having difficulty with the transition.

I collected my data until the middle of November. Each week I reviewed my observations, journal, interviews, and documentation in an attempt to find patterns and trends for each child. My data was then organized into three independent files for each student. I used color-coding to highlight themes, such as separation successes or challenges, connection with materials, connection with classmates, connection with teachers, successful strategies, and unsuccessful strategies. As I read and reread the data I was able to develop strategies for children struggling to transition, revamp or revise some of my ideas, and understand the arc of their journeys as they progressed from novice to more seasoned students.

"Snapshots" of the three participants

I created snapshot-like descriptions from my notes of each participant from the beginning of the school year to provide a sense of their personalities. Here, we see how foreign school was to them at first.

Theo

Theo (2 years, 9 months old) is at the snack table for the very first time. He has tolerated having hand sanitizer put on his hands, though he does not rub it in. The gel drips from his fingers, falling to the rug. I lead him to the snack table, and he looks about with interest, yet it is apparent that he is confused about what is happening, what is expected of him. I tell him "This is your spot, Theo," and I guide him to his seat. He gazes at the table, at the napkin, at the cup with his name on it, then smiles when he spies the goldfish cracker snack. Without words, he takes the goldfish on his napkin and, one at a time, eats them as the other children eat their snacks beside him. When his goldfish are all gone, he looks at the goldfish still lying on Rebecca's napkin beside him, and reaches for them, eating one. I stop his hand, saying "No, Theo. At school, we do not share food. This is Theo's snack; this is Rebecca's snack." He looks at me with a mixture of bewilderment and incomprehension, then turns his gaze downward towards the table.

Douglas

It is the first day of school. The door is closed as the teachers hastily make last-minute preparations for the arrival of the children. A few minutes before nine, the door opens and Douglas (3 years, 3 months old) enters. He has taken it upon himself to open the door on his own, and with a big smile he starts to enter the room. I say "Good morning, Douglas! We will open the door in a minute or two. Please wait on the bench until then." Immediately his smile is lost, he retreats, his eyes downcast, his face flushed. He looks wary, embarrassed, and when I open the door a few minutes later, he hides behind his father, refusing to enter the classroom he has so jauntily entered just moments before.

Veronica

It is Veronica's first day of school. Throughout the hour she hangs behind her mother, watching guardedly, but she does not engage with the other children. This child is a markedly different child from the little girl we visited a few days earlier on our home visit—where she had been chatty, independent, articulate, and relaxed. Now, Veronica (2 years, 11 months old) is silent and tentative. At Meeting Time, I shake the maraca to signal the transition. As other children gather on the rug to start meeting, Veronica pulls up a "grown-up" folding chair and places it in the circle. Legs dangling, she turns her attention to the meeting. I invite Veronica to join us on the rug. She thinks for a moment, then slowly, quietly, climbs off the chair and sits next to a classmate. It had not occurred to her that in the classroom the big chairs were for big people, and the rug was where small children sat for morning meeting.

These three children walked into my "3s and Nearly 3s" classroom early in September unaware of just what was expected of them and how it might differ from expectations of home behavior. *At home I can eat any snack I like! At home I can open doors and come and go into rooms as I please! At home I can sit anywhere I choose—on a chair, on a sofa, on the floor! Now you are asking me to not eat this, not open that, not sit there . . . . What's up with that?* Over the course of several months the children have explored a whole new world—sometimes tentatively, sometimes reluctantly, and sometimes with great, gleeful enthusiasm.

Findings and discussion

My findings included the following:

- the children's familiarity with the idea of school impacts their comfort in embracing the role of student;
- the children find unique supports to bridge their transitions to school;
- children were able to integrate into the classroom with the aid of something familiar from their home;
- children are able to integrate into the classroom more successfully when the parents' leaving and return routines are clearly established; and
- frequent communication between parents and teacher is the lifeline that supports successful integration.

Finding 1: The children's familiarity with the idea of school impacts their comfort in embracing the role of student

Notes taken during my home visits in the weeks before school reveal that each child has varying degrees of understanding about what school is. These varying degrees seem to directly impact the child's smooth transition to becoming a student for the very first time.

When I first meet Theo at his home I note that he is

> *. . . running down the hall to greet us. The door has been met by Theo's mom. She laughs as Theo comes bounding behind her. When his mom turns to Theo and says "Theo, these are your teachers, Nan and Alan," the little boy's eyes open wide, he backs up, and then turns around and hurls himself back from where he came.* (8/29/13)

Throughout the course of the visit Theo seems frightened, does not speak, and refuses to interact with us, leading us to believe that his ability to integrate into the new world of the classroom could be challenging. He seems unnerved by the strangeness of the situation: Who are these people in his home? And what are "teachers" anyway? Later, I check the parent questionnaire I have handed to Theo's mom: in answer to the question "Have you had conversations with your child about starting school?" she responds:

> *Brief ones—I'm not sure he understands exactly what is going to happen—typical response is a wide-eyed stare and then change of subject!* (9/9/13)

When we meet Veronica for the first time, however, she is friendly, relaxed and articulate in a way that belies her young age of 2 years and 11 months. My notes relate this sense of ease,

> *"Well, would you like to see my room? I have a Pooh book there and I would like to show it to you." She settles into a chair and opens to the part of the book she would like to have read to her. I leave her with Alan, as she is chatting comfortably and asking questions about the story, which is about Pooh trying to be brave, though he is, in fact, very frightened.* (9/4/13)

Veronica's mother tells me that Veronica "plays school" with her older cousins:

> *They would sit in front of an easel listed with the days of the week, and the older children would tell Veronica what the schedule for each day would be.*

She is excited about the prospect of starting class in a week: they have walked by the school several times and happily pointed out the bright red doors that mark the entrance. After she reads the story with Alan, I tell her we will read lots of good stories at school, and I am looking forward to seeing her soon. I ask what she knows about school, and she replies "Pooh is very brave." Having been prepared for the journey through visits, discussions, and dramatic play all centered on "school," Veronica seems to be preparing herself to become a brave first-time student.

During Douglas's home visit, it is apparent that his shy nature will impact his ability to integrate into the classroom. When I tell Douglas "Alan and I are going to be your teachers at school," he runs and hides behind his dad. As my notes detail,

> *His father tries to push him forward, saying "Hey, buddy, you are going to have a great time." Douglas retreats further. He is not buying it. Douglas's mom says she thinks Douglas is ready for school, but they have not talked about school with him much at all. She thinks it may take him a while to become adjusted since he spends most of his time with adults. When it is time to leave, Douglas refuses to walk us to the door. As we leave the living room, his mother says to me "Douglas is very sensitive.'* (9/4/13)

It seems that sensitivity will have a profound impact on Douglas's ability to adapt and embrace the strange, new world of school.

Finding 2: The children find unique supports to bridge their transitions to school

Theo, Veronica, and Douglas all started school off-kilter, unsure, and afraid. Gradually, each child found a bridge to connect to the classroom and feel more grounded. For Theo and Douglas, that bridge was a connection to a teacher. For Veronica, it was a connection to materials and to the curriculum.

In the beginning, Theo was beside himself. He was confused and frightened, and didn't understand what was being asked of him. How could he stay in this strange place without the comfort of his mother, father, or babysitter? Why must he sit on a rug, get up, or get in a line when asked by people he neither knew nor trusted? For Theo, the first few weeks of school were bewildering and difficult. He sobbed when his mother left and cried when his father left; he grabbed their legs, pulled on their arms, refused to enter the classroom, and tried to stop his caregivers from leaving. All of this was without words. Through hand gestures, moans, cries, and body language, Theo expressed his discomfort and unhappiness.

The key to his comfort lay in his connection to our assistant teacher, Alan. A quiet, gentle man, Theo allowed Alan to sit with him and share his space, without words. Descriptions from my notes illustrate this:

> *On the second day of school, Alan and Theo sit playing with a large bead toy.* (9/12/13)
>
> *Theo smiles at Alan and stays by his side as he explores the room, moving beyond his customary puzzles and trains to the art table and the blocks.* (9/17/13)
>
> *When Theo allows me to take him to the bathroom for the first time, he calls out to the photograph on the classroom door upon our return. "There is Alan!" he cries, with a smile.* (9/23/13)
>
> *At snack time Theo looks at Alan and says "What are you doing?"* (9/23/13)

In fact, the most language I hear from Theo is related to Alan. Theo cries "There is Alan!" each time he enters the classroom. It is his touchstone, his talisman—the thing that grounds him, keeps him safe, and helps him to make sense of this strange new world. "Where's Alan?" "I am in front of Alan" "There is Alan!" are frequent refrains. As detailed in my notes,

> *Theo's babysitter, Louisa, tells me that when she asks Theo about school, the only thing he says is "I play with Alan."* (10/19/13)

This is not the whole story—by the middle of October Theo does not need Alan in the same way. However, his relationship with the teacher has served him well, supporting him through the very difficult process of separation and starting the journey of learning what school is.

Douglas also found in Alan a bridge to the classroom. As I observed in my notes,

> *While at first Douglas seemed to run from me and not allow me to sit near him, he seemed happy to have Alan interact with him building with blocks or doing puzzles.* (9/12/13)
>
> *Used to his father playing with him ("I'm his best buddy" Douglas's dad says to me the first day of school, "He's used to playing with me all the time"—*9/12/13*), Douglas allows Alan to take his hand and lead him to the meeting rug, then smiles at Alan a beautiful smile that lights up his whole face.* (9/13/13)
>
> *During the course of the first few weeks of school, Douglas does puzzles with Alan* (9/16/13)*, and takes his first trip to the bathroom with Alan* (9/19/13).

While his father seems anxious about his separation from Douglas, Douglas's initial discomfort is assuaged by his connection to Alan. He seeks him out, and seems comforted by the assistant teacher's presence.

In thinking about how and why Alan served as such a successful bridge for Douglas and Theo, I reflected upon the different roles of the head teacher and the assistant teacher in the classroom. As head teacher, I constantly navigated the comings and goings of parents and caregivers throughout the separation process: directing, reassuring, helping parents understand what the process was and how and when to go away and come back. As assistant teacher, Alan had the greater opportunity and responsibility of interacting with the children themselves: playing with them, reading to them, talking to them. This highlighted the hugely important role the assistant teacher has in the separation process and phase-in period. This was a new realization for me, and will inform my planning for the separation process going forward. I will make sure I communicate this awareness to my assistant, mindful that initially it will most likely be this person upon whom the children will depend "if things are difficult or they are upset" (Hamre & Pianta 2006).

Veronica's bridge was not a connection to a teacher, but a connection to the materials and activities offered throughout the curriculum. I observed the following:

> *When Veronica first entered the classroom, she was tentative, frightened. She stuck close to her mother and did not let her out of her sight. After a*

few days, she allowed herself to get involved with the material at the art table. Watching the girls pretending to have a "baby party" with the doll babies, she takes it upon herself to make "baby party invitations" at the art table, then hangs them in the pretend area. This baby party story continues through several days. (9/15/13, 9/16/13, 9/20/13)

This narrative served as a "through line" to her experience in the classroom, helping build her understanding of just what school is. It is apparent that Veronica internalized the curriculum in a way that supports her and allows her to be comfortable in the classroom. When she is inspired by Harry writing a "message" at the art table, Veronica emulates him. As I observed,

Veronica takes marker to paper. She then finds me, saying "I have a message, also." I ask her if she wants me to write down the words for her. She says yes. I ask her what it says, and she explains that "It says Mommy will come back." (9/25/13)

These are the words that we have repeated over and over, through songs and stories and games. She has taken those words and made them her own to aid her in building the bridge from home to school, becoming a student for the very first time.

Finding 3: Children were able to integrate into the classroom with the aid of something familiar from their home

Mindful of the importance of the home/school connection, and in an attempt to make school "less strange" during home visits in the weeks before school started, I instructed each family to create a "Family Book" and asked them to bring the books to school on the child's first day. I provided the families with a small blank board book with the phrases "This is me when I was a baby," "This is me now," "This is my family," "These are some of the things I love to do," and "These are some of my friends" written on the bottom of each page. The families were instructed to find photographs for each page, and together with their child, create a book that would be kept at school. Veronica's interactions with the Family Book are frequent and rich, serving as both a comfort and an anchor from which she can launch herself into the classroom. She often sits and looks at her book (9/12/13, 9/14/13, 10/2/13) and then shares her thoughts with others. When Veronica shares a picture of herself as a baby with Nellie, who is looking at her own family book, Nellie replies "Look, I was a baby too!" (9/24/13). In this way the Family Book serves not only as a grounding mechanism for Veronica, but a bridge to social interaction with other children in the class.

Theo returns to his Family Book again and again (9/24/13, 9/26/13, 10/2/13, 10/3/13), all on his own volition. One of the first verbal interactions I have with him is when he takes his book from the basket, sits

quietly on the rug, and turns the pages. I look at the front cover of his book and say "Oh, Theo, is that a train?" aware of his connection to all things railroad. He looks up and corrects me, saying "It's a tram!" then allows me to sit with him, all the while pointing out members of his family and answering my questions with one or two words. It is the bridge through which I am allowed to enter his world, thus allowing him to be more present in the new world of the classroom (9/24/13).

For Douglas, the Family Book is a source of comfort and grounding, though unlike Theo and Veronica it does not support socialization. Veronica's Family Book aids in her connecting to her classmates; Theo's Family Book helps in his connection to teachers. For Douglas, the Family Book has a sense of ownership and propriety. He sits quietly and looks at his book (10/8/13, 10/11/13) but when another child wants to sit with him and look at his pictures, Douglas gets up, thwarting the connection (10/11/13). When Eric looks through Douglas's Family Book (as all children are free to look at and share one another's) Douglas grabs the book from Eric's hand, wordlessly, and hides it under his shirt (10/15/13). When I scaffold the interaction of Douglas using words instead of grabbing, Douglas refuses again, even taking his Family Book to Meeting with him, so he can be sure no one else looks at it. This dynamic is repeated several times in the classroom and may speak to the general uneasiness Douglas feels in the classroom—a classroom, in which, Douglas still feels like a "stranger."

Finding 4: Children are able to integrate into the classroom more successfully when the parents' leaving and return routines are clearly established

A strategy implemented in support of the children's transitions in the morning is One Book/One Puzzle: the children are given a framework through which to organize their goodbyes by doing one book or one puzzle with a caregiver before their departure. This strategy allows Theo's dad to depart with more ease ("After we read this book, Theo, Daddy will go to work"—9/23/13) and makes Douglas's entry more successful. Instead of having to be cajoled into the classroom (9/13/13, 9/17/13) Douglas enters the classroom and goes straight to the book area where he selects a story for his mom to read (10/8/13, 10/11/13). By giving Theo and Douglas a framework through which to organize their goodbyes, there is less of the "unknown"—it is replaced with a temporal plan the children can understand and embrace.

Another routine used in support of the children's integration was the use of the picture book *You Go Away*, by Dorothy Corey, in which we introduced the refrain of "You Go Away, You Come Back," This idea is underlined throughout the day in the classroom—physically through hand gestures, games in the classroom and outside, and stories and songs. Theo's growing understanding that "Mommy will come back" was exemplified when comparing his initial exposure to the idea to his internalization of the concept several days later. My note on Theo's separation read:

At first Theo looks absolutely shocked that Mom has left the room. Then he looks like he is trying to process the situation. His eyes widen, he looks around the room with some dread and fear. His face turns white, he starts to sniffle. I try to comfort him, I pick him up saying "Mommy went away, Mommy will come back," but he fights me off, arms flailing. (9/13/13)

Ten days later, on a trip to bathroom, it is apparent Theo has internalized the concept; as he squirts soap on his hands he spontaneously speaks to me, using more language than I have ever heard from him. As I noted,

"*Daddy left the stroller," he says in a quiet voice. "Daddy went to get coffee. Daddy will come back. Then Theo will be happy." He looks at me, and for the first time, gives me a smile. He is beginning to trust me, and that trust directly corresponds to the secure knowledge that Daddy went away, but Daddy will, indeed, come back.* (9/23/13)

Finding 5: Frequent communication between parents and teacher is the lifeline that supports successful integration

Mindful that this transfer of trust from parent to teacher can only be achieved by working as a team, I kept the parents abreast of what was happening in the classroom through weekly email newsletters highlighting the week's events, along with copious photographs and daily reports on a white board outside my classroom detailing the day's events. During Curriculum Night I presented an extensive outline of the curriculum thus far and plans for the future, and followed up with a detailed email for those parents who could not attend. I also held Parent/Teacher conferences the second week in November, with each family allotted a half-hour conference time.

Looking at the feedback from the families, this frequent, open communication has built trust, which directly impacts the children's integration into the new world of the classroom. An extremely sensitive email from Theo's father reflects this, when he writes:

Thank you for your detailed message about Theo's week at school. He clearly loves being there, aside from the variable transitions when he sees us go. On Thursday when he cried I sat in the hallway and I know that he stopped a few minutes later. Of course I don't like to hear him cry, but I know these are occasions for him to learn something new. You should know that the way you carry yourself with Theo and the other children inspires great trust, and his mother and I are very happy that you and Alan are his teachers. Seeing you and Alan gradually join the small group of people who take care of Theo is a touching and wonderful process. (9/30/13)

By working together in a partnership, both parents and teachers have helped Theo on his challenging journey towards an understanding of how to be a student in a classroom for the very first time.

Conclusion

We are making "Group Soup" for our Thanksgiving Feast. After reading the book Group Soup *by Barbara Brenner several days ago, we have listed our ingredients and today each child has brought in one item to contribute to our soup. Now the children sit chopping carrots, celery, turnips, potatoes, green beans, and parsley with little plastic knives. They sit next to one another; they chat with one another ("Hey, look! I cut a carrot into a teeny tiny piece!"). They collaborate. They are a class. And within this class, they are individuals: Veronica sits, brow furrowed, intent upon chopping the turnip she was thrilled to contribute. Theo sits next to her, his potato sitting on the table, his eyes focused on the knife. He is interested more in the implement than in the collaborative process. And Douglas does not sit with the rest of the children at the cooking tables. He is next to them in the Pretend Area, making Group Soup from pretend vegetables. He smiles as he places the pretend carrots and pretend potatoes in the pretend bowl, and mixes the vegetables with a pretend ladle.* (11/26/13)

When these children first walked into my classroom they had absolutely no idea what a class was supposed to be or how they were supposed to behave. Now, three months later, they had an understanding of how to behave at school. They understand the fundamentals of how to line up, sit crisscross at meeting time, pick things up and put them away, raise hands, and be a partner. They've also gained the larger understanding of what it means to be a part of something—what it means to be a part of a class. In just three short months—one-twelfth of their young lives!—these children have adapted to and for the most part embraced an entirely new way of being. They have learned what it is to be a student, and what it is to go to school.

And what of the child who, still, did not seem completely integrated and comfortable at school? Theo, while not using much language, seems "at home" in the classroom—relaxed, happy, and engaged. Veronica, while not interacting often with her classmates, is always interested in and focused upon the materials and activities. Douglas, however, remains at times aloof and wary, although there are moments when he appears engaged as well. Douglas has separated from his home environment, but is not yet fully "present," though there are brief, joyful glimpses of this. For instance, when he is outside and Ramona chases him, he erupts into belly laughs. Will Ramona,

an extremely friendly and caring little girl, be his bridge to the classroom? After playing with the jingle bells at music time, Douglas looks at me and smiles his glorious smile, proclaiming "That was fun!" I feel like I have won the lottery. He's happy! He's engaged! And he told me about it! Will music be the bridge for Douglas's journey toward successful integration into the classroom? And given what I knew of Douglas's temperament, from the very first home visit when his shyness was so apparent, could I have been more supportive in his journey? Had I been more mindful from the very beginning, had I been more sensitive when Douglas opened the door on that very first day and marched in with a smile, only to be thwarted by my admonishment that we would "open the door in a minute or two," might Douglas's entry been smoother, less bumpy, less challenging? These are questions I will reflect upon going forward, as I strive to successfully introduce each child to the strange new world of the classroom.

Just as each child has their own personal history, temperament, and unique story of their young lives from birth to almost three years of age, each child has their own "starting school" story. Identifying the "bridge to the classroom" uniquely created by each young student and identifying strategies that aided in their integration helped me gain an understanding of and an appreciation for the individual child's remarkable journey of starting school for the very first time. Addressing my research questions and gleaning the answers provided a wealth of information that now directly impacts my planning, phase-in schedule, and curriculum as I guide my young students through their exciting, bewildering, confounding, and transforming journeys.

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Commentary on the teacher research of Nancy Bleemer

MEGAN BLUMENREICH

Teacher Research as a Form of Inspiration, Influence, and Mentoring

> There are labels that might be attached to Jason, but we'll neither define nor categorize him. None of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events.
>
> —*Vivian Gussin Paley* (1990, xii)

In my commentary, I focus on the potential of teacher research to serve as inspiration, influence, and mentoring for teaching, which has long been recognized as an isolated profession (Lortie 1975). While a classroom teacher may have occasional interaction with a coteacher or a colleague in his or her building, there are few opportunities in the complex working lives of teachers to share information and ideas and to learn from one another. Here, through looking at Nan Bleemer's work and process of learning about and conducting teacher research, I explore how teacher research provides an important tool for collaboration that can both help to overcome the isolation of the profession and also lead to better, more deeply informed teaching. The collaboration that teacher research provides can occur either in person with colleagues or with mentors' published work.

Nan began teaching young children after a career in the theater and a background in creative writing. While working on her early childhood master's degree she discovered Vivian Gussin Paley's writing, which "spoke to her" because of the way that it celebrates children's stories. Paley's widely-read work resonates with many of us in education. The well-known teacher researcher Cynthia Ballenger also cites Paley's work as an influence on her own teaching and research. Ballenger quotes Paley discussing her development into a teacher researcher, and how with the help of a tape recorder,

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"teaching became a daily search for the child's point of view accompanied by the sometimes unwelcome disclosure of my hidden attitudes" (2009, 6). Ballenger's work, which Nan read while she was a student in my teacher research seminar (because Ballenger "speaks to me") focuses on "puzzling moments," recording children in order to "stop time" and allow the opportunity for reflection on what the children actually say in the classroom. "Stopping time" is a phrase for documenting practice that was developed by the Brookline Teacher Researcher Seminar, a group of elementary teachers that included Ballenger that met weekly for 10 years.

Nan has stopped time in her work too. She has carefully and systematically documented three young children's first experiences with school in order to tell their unique stories. Nan stopped time by reflecting on the data in multiple cycles. First, she thought about the data as she typed her handwritten notes each afternoon after teaching and placed the data into different files. Then she reviewed the data herself and with others in our research seminar to rethink and reinterpret the children's and her own actions. In the way that Paley refuses to categorize Jason's unique narrative, Nan has been careful not to define, label, or categorize these children. Instead, she has analyzed her data (which she meticulously cites) and allowed the stories of three young children, Theo, Douglas, and Veronica, to unfold.

As Nan explains in her introduction, prior to her study she taught children for six years who were slightly older than those focused on in her research. When Nan first designed this study, during the first semester of my year-long research course, she intended to ask the children questions and to listen to their conversations with one another. Back in her classroom the next September, Nan returned to our graduate seminar (then in her second semester of the course) with the realization that many of the children didn't speak as much as she had hoped! She discovered that the children in her class, at 2.9 to 3.3 years of age, did not have the language skills to reflect upon and assess their situation, thoughts, or feelings. It's important to note that after three months of school (when the data collection period was over) there was much more language in the classroom as the children grew more comfortable and matured. Indeed, at the very beginning of her data collection, she had already learned important information about this new age group through her research process. Nan was forced to rethink her data collection plan, and decided to place more emphasis on observation.

It is through Nan's careful and thoughtful observations that this study shows the subtle aspects of these children's transition into the world of school. Nan's full study begins with her descriptions of the children at home, constructed from her notes during her home visits in August. These descriptions share a glimpse of the children's strengths and knowledge at home: Veronica is very verbal; Douglas shares his considerable knowledge of the New York subway system; Theo is found reading a book about trains by himself.

In contrast to the children's knowledge and behaviors at home, Nan's snapshots of the three children make visible tiny moments important to

the children's assimilation to school. Theo casually reaches over to take one of Rebecca's goldfish crackers when he finishes his own. Veronica sits in the one chair in the meeting area, not knowing it is the teacher's. These moments are only available—that is, they only become meaningful—as a result of Nan's many hours of careful observations. They demonstrate just how many subtle rules young children must learn, both explicit and implicit, when attending school for the first time. At the end of the piece, Nan writes "In just three short months—one-twelfth of their young lives!—these children have adapted to and for the most part embraced an entirely new way of being. They have learned what it is to be a student, and what it is to go to school." This study demonstrates, as Apple did with kindergartners in his seminal work on the hidden curriculum, that even at 2 and 3 years old children are able to "adjust their emotional response to conform to those considered appropriate by the teacher" (2004, 51). The adjustments the children make in this study are important in many ways in order to succeed in school, but as Apple reminds us, much is lost when children learn to adjust their impulses to school or classroom rules. In future research, Nan may want to explore exactly what is lost in this process.

In Nan's larger study she also documented her important work with the families of the children in her classroom—the informal communication, emails, and transcripts of in-person and telephone conversations. Most of her analysis was done independently, but Nan also used our research seminar as a sounding board from time to time, which gave her other perspectives to exploring data and offered her colleagues in class an opportunity to learn from her work. One way we analyzed data in the seminar was by practicing a version of the Documentation Studio at Wheelock College protocol for large group discussions about classroom documentation. We did this with a transcript of a conversation Nan had with one of her students' parents. Nan shared the transcript with minimal introduction, and the graduate students in the seminar read it carefully without talking. The class then gave feedback, while Nan remained quiet. The transcript was of a conversation with a mother about how her child was settling into school. During the conversation the mother shared that her child had sleeping issues. Some of the seminar students thought that the mother seemed anxious, and some thought that Nan should provide the parent with some sleeping-related advice. Eventually, Nan was permitted to share her point of view. She stated that she had refrained from giving sleeping advice because she felt the purpose of the conversation was about how the child was settling in, and she wanted to build rapport with the parent and learn about the child's home situation before presuming to offer advice. Nan also said she didn't think the mother was anxious. This gave us the opportunity to look carefully at the transcript to see if there was language that supported our ideas about the mother. The conversation was reminiscent of Ballenger and the Brookline Teacher Researcher Seminar's idea of "stopping time." We were able to look for evidence and carefully reflect, rather than make a quick analysis that was not based on evidence. It made many of us rethink our "hidden attitudes," as

Paley calls them. We needed to consider why some of us were quick to label the mother as anxious when there was no evidence of this in the transcript.

Nan's teacher research was also a vehicle for her own professional development. Conducting this teacher research study provided an opportunity for Nan to read the literature about young children starting school. She learned from studies on child development that some children this age might not be able to sustain an image of their absent parents. Some children may not be able to understand that their parents will return, which could result in understandable anxiety. Nan's greater understanding of child development has the potential to inform her expectations of her young students' transition to school and her reactions to issues that arise. In addition, Nan read in the existing literature about new strategies and routines to help young children adjust to school. She read about the "going away and coming back" mantra, which she tried out in her classroom. And finally, some of the literature Nan read confirmed what she already knew about teaching, which was also helpful to her. For example, the literature she read repeatedly stressed the importance of frequent communication between teachers and parents, validating her own beliefs and practices.

By systematically collecting multiple sources of data, Nan was also able to see her familiar classroom in new ways and to understand aspects of her own teaching that she had not previously understood. For example, when she analyzed all of the data she had collected from her communications with the children's parents, she was able to see their relationships in a different light. In the past she might have simply felt that she had a good relationships with the parents. But now, by looking at the data, such as emails, transcripts from telephone conversations, and notes in her teacher journal (from August when she first visited the families' homes to November when she finished the official data collection) she was able to see the history and development of the relationships over time. This perspective allowed her to reflect and to recognize that these strong bonds with her students' parents didn't just happen on their own, but developed in part because of her initiative, planning, and hard work.

By conducting her own study, Nan saw that she has the capacity to identify problems or issues in her own classroom and to find valuable information by researching what has been already published related to the topic. She saw that she could then study an issue in her own classroom and find solutions. Nan does not have to be told by "experts" what to do to in her classroom. She can generate her own knowledge by collecting data and through her research skills determine what works for her and her students in their unique context.

Through exploring how these three children experienced school for the first time, Nan was able not only to study their experiences, but also to share the unfolding of their unique stories. When teachers share their research, as Vivian Gussin Paley, Cynthia Ballenger, and now Nan Bleemer has done, it is not just the students' stories but their own unique stories about teach-

ers' day-to-day lives in the classroom that unfold. Telling stories that are of interest to other teachers is crucial; this can counter the isolation long documented as a widespread characteristic of the profession (Flinders 1988; Raphael et al. 2001). In this way, teacher research has the potential to "speak to" its teacher readers. It supports the teachers' experiences in ways that may not be accomplished by reading statistical studies that work to control variables and generalize knowledge (Falk & Blumenreich 2005). Documenting the power of teacher research as a form of inspiration, influence, and mentoring that is central for authentic teaching and learning is particularly relevant and important now, in this time of market-driven and accountability-based education for both children and teacher candidates. The teacher research of Paley, Ballenger, and now Bleemer reminds teachers to seek children's logic and ways of seeing the world instead of focusing solely on learning outcomes and testing, which can overshadow children's own important efforts to learn and understand.

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