CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Setting the Stage

The Personal Context

Denzin & Lincoln (1994) acknowledge the importance of autobiography and personal context in the process of action research (p. 301). This is a story about a school and I am an actor within that school. I feel it is important that I share my story and perspective with the reader so that a more complete picture of the situation is presented and the stage is set to understand what fuels this inquiry.

In the Fall of 2002 I enrolled in graduate school at Virginia Tech. I was offered a graduate teaching assistantship/head teaching position in the Virginia Tech Child Development Lab School (hereafter, the lab school) and I was thrilled to be given this opportunity. It was congruent with my professional goals of gaining more experience in a school setting and working to facilitate my understanding of how children learn. Supportive colleagues, parents, and the children at the school surrounded me as I enthusiastically, yet cautiously, began my first experience as a head teacher in a classroom.

Despite the special care and attention I received from some of my colleagues, parents, and children in the school, and my overall optimistic perspective, I was not prepared for all that I would experience and encounter as I worked in the lab school during the first year of my graduate program. I felt that my year as a novice teacher was one spent constantly trying to keep my head above water. Joseph Caruso (2000) has described the roller coaster of emotions that many student teachers face. Although I was a head teacher in the classroom and not a student teacher at this time I was able to relate
to this emotional roller coaster that many teachers ride. My goal that first year in the lab school as a classroom teacher was just to survive and at times I felt like I was barely meeting that goal.

I began the school year like many teachers I know. I spent numerous hours preparing and organizing the classroom, writing letters to parents introducing myself, describing my philosophy of teaching and learning, thinking and rethinking my image of the child, conducting home-visits with the families in my classroom, and attending to a million other small details. I thought that if I prepared myself by doing the things listed above and much more, my classroom and the school would be a positive place. I think I also felt that by doing all of these things I could control my experiences, and possibly, the experiences of the children and families in my classroom. I soon realized how naïve my thinking was.

I learned that no matter how many nights I lay awake in bed imagining the different scenarios of what a typical day in my classroom would be like; there would never be a typical day. One of my committee members, Dr. Lynn Hill, went so far as to say, “there is no typical year at the lab school.” Another committee member, Dr. Andy Stemmel, has said, “the only thing predictable about lab school is that it is unpredictable.” It wasn’t until my second year of working in the lab school that I began to realize the truth behind their observations.

There could never be a typical day (or year) because “school is a place of culture” (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001, p. 38). Collaborators from these two organizations go on to say that schools are places where “a personal and collective culture is developed that influences the social, political, and values context” (p. 38). In
return, this “social, political, and values context” influences the culture of the school illustrating a bi-directional process between the context and the culture, as well as, “deep and authentic reciprocity” (p. 38). Despite my attempts at establishing a solid foundation for the “typical” happenings in my classroom, I was ultimately influenced by the social, political, and historical factors that made up our ever-changing school culture.

**Lab School Culture: A Historical Perspective**

It is always wise, when thinking about where you are today, to step back and reflect on where you’ve been. To understand the lab school as it is today, it is important to examine the history of the school and it’s long, and sometimes difficult, journey to change. Because I was not part of those early moments in the development of the school, I depend on historical accounts and documents to help me understand. What follows is an abbreviated account of the process of change the lab school has undergone and an attempt to examine where we’ve been, how we got there, and where we will go from here (see Stremmel, Hill, & Fu, 2003, for an extensive and authoritative historical overview of the lab school).

**TIMELINE: The Process of Transformation** (Appendix A).

*The need for transformation*

Transformation and change may seem to imply adjustment and modification, but in my mind they invoke very different meanings. Change, simply by itself, implies modification with an undertone of passivity and inevitability. I see transformation as an active decision to take part in a process of metamorphosis and revitalization.

In 1995, Andy Stremmel, was appointed Director of the Lab School. He recognized the need for active transformation, for there was “no clear or consistently
agreed upon philosophical and conceptual basis” (Stremmel, Hill, & Fu, 2003) for the lab school. He and his colleagues recognized that the lab school philosophy and practice was incongruent with the theoretical perspectives that inform best practice (Stremmel, Hill, & Fu, 2003).

This level of incongruity seemed to be caused in part by the continuous staff turnover the lab school experienced. The lab school has a continuous staff turnover because it is a teaching laboratory and the head classroom teachers are graduate-teaching assistants supported by undergraduate student teachers enrolled in a practicum course for one year. Thus, the teachers leave the lab school upon completing their graduate studies and each year a new cohort of undergraduates contributes to the staffing (Stremmel, Hill, & Fu, 2003). This turnover mirrors the reality of most early childhood programs where frequent staff turnovers are due to reasons beyond their control.

The process of recognizing obstacles

Beyond the typical staff turnover associated with most early childhood programs, another limitation of the program are the variable experiences that have been achieved by graduate students who have been awarded an assistantship in the school. The head teachers are required to provide classroom instruction, collaborative work with parents, and implementation of current research, theory, and practice. Many of the head teachers come from disciplines other than teaching or child development, such as, psychology, human services, and sociology so continuity is not a typical in the school.

In the summer of 1996, Stremmel, Hill & Fu (2003) “embarked on an in-depth analysis” of the program to examine issues such as their “philosophy and curriculum, the issue of who we educate and for what purpose, the continuity between coursework and
lab school practice..., staff constancy and continuity, our organizational (staffing) structure, and collaborative relationships, particularly our relationships with parents” (p.7).

Making revisions

Recognizing obstacles, such as staff turnover, staff inexperience, and lack of funding to hire professional teachers, the lab school leadership team began to implement changes that would contribute to a cohesive program based on notions of socially constructed practices and relationships.

In 1996, a curriculum director was hired to be a “catalyst” for this transformation (Stremmel, Hill, & Fu, 2003, p. 8). During the “1996-97 academic year a major emphasis was placed on developing a negotiated curriculum approach rooted in a social constructivist framework” (p.9). This shift to a negotiated and emergent curriculum illustrated the lab school’s movement towards viewing the children, parents, and classroom teachers as essential in providing meaningful experiences and contributing to the quality of the program.

In 1997, hiring a full-time classroom teacher assisted the leadership team in translating this philosophical and curricular shift in practice to the graduate and undergraduate students (Stremmel, Hill, & Fu, 2003). Acknowledging that hiring a professional teacher for all the classrooms would not be possible, the leadership team examined how they could create a “caring community of learners” with a desire to promote “feelings of hospitality, unity, and shared vision among children, teachers, and families” (p. 14).
Listening and planning

With a theoretical framework encouraging the team to “move toward a more family-centered view of the home-school relationship” (p. 25) they placed emphasis on the important role parents play in the education of their children and in school participation. They realized the need to carefully listen to parents’ beliefs, values, and goals. A documentation display in the school hallway was erected for parents to encourage them to share their feelings and opinions. Much to the surprise of many of the school staff, the “interactive” display became a forum where parents would anonymously share sometimes painful opinions of the philosophy and practices of the school (Stremmel, Hill, & Fu, 2003). Despite, this painful process, the lab school continued to listen to parents and even created more forums for parents to share their feelings and opinions about the program.

The Amiable School Project

As a result of carefully listening to the parents, the school embarked on a project to examine how families saw themselves in relation to the school and to further explore how “an amiable school which recognizes families as true partners and collaborators” (Hill, Wells, & Fu, 1999, p. 8) could become salient to the program. Several community-building, collaborative projects resulted from these explorative questions that led to the discovery that “relationships are the foundation upon which a community is built” (Hill, Wells, & Fu, 1999, p. 39).

What happened to the amiable school?

When I came to work at the lab school, I never imagined that I would be influenced by social, political, and historical factors from several years past. I guess I
believed that each year was a beginning, isolating the antecedent years. But it seems that the “tempo” of each school year is predicated on the past and since we can’t escape it, why not listen to it and learn from it?

Everyday, since I began working in the lab school, I’ve been surrounded by evidence that an amiable school existed. The hallway and family-child-teacher gathering room is covered with artifacts and documentation that tell this schools compelling journey towards transformation, understanding, and the development of a collective identity based on meaningful relationships. This omnipresent display of the Amiable School story and its work led me to question, what happened to the amiable school?

In conjunction with the staff turnover (graduate and undergraduate students) typical of the lab school there was significant turnover in the administrative team over a three year period that lead this revolution of amiable change in the school. The year I came to work at the lab school, there was a new director, new assistant director, no curriculum director, new professional/pedagogical consultant, and a new full-time professional teacher.

From my perspective it seemed we lost the momentum that once drove the school. I wondered how can we get back the amiable school? Historical artifacts, documents, writings, and a Reggio-inspired, social constructivist perspective, encouraged me to listen.

The Purpose

This inquiry has come to be as a result of my need to listen. The primary purpose of this inquiry was to examine how parents at the lab school came to understand and attempt to define their school culture. Specifically, the purpose of this research was two-
fold: 1) to illuminate ways parents articulated their understanding of the lab school and 2) to describe what the lab school means to them and their family. I want to discern the topics that seem to be most important for parents to share and understand, and provide the school with strategies for creating amiable partnerships with parents. In a sense, to spend time seeking to understand the collective definition of the culture of the school (Bruner, 1990). I want to know what our intention and purpose is, why this group is together, and what makes this school a meaningful place. How do the parents interact with other parents, teachers, and lab school personnel to make a shared place for learning and caring?

With information about what is important and meaningful to them, I hope to gain a better understanding of how the parents see themselves in relation to the school and to one another. My thinking is that with these understandings, I will be better equipped to meet their essential needs and can work to create a meaningful place for them. My ultimate goal is to contribute to the reestablishment and renewal of the strong sense of shared understanding, shared purpose, cohesiveness, belonging, and community that was once present at this school.

*Subsidiary Aims*

To this end, there are four aims of this research. They are: 1) to understand the ways the parents articulate their conceptualization of the lab school culture, 2) to examine how parents negotiate change in the school, 3) to identify any social, political, and/or historical factors that caused this transformation, and 4) to inform best practice in the school.
Subsidiary Questions

Further questions that guided this inquiry were:

1) How do parents define their school?

2) What are parents’ individual perceptions of the school?

3) What is the parents’ collective definition of the school?

4) What are parents’ expectations of the school?

5) What do parents hope to gain from this experience and the school?

6) How have veteran parents’ perceptions of the school changed from the beginning of their experience at lab school to the present? How do these differ from newer parent’s perceptions of the school?

7) What is the culture of this school? How can this culture be sustained or transformed in this environment?
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Both theory and practice influenced the evolution of this topic and the design of this study. This review will highlight the following theoretical perspectives and practice: 1) key tenets of social constructivism, 2) sociocultural perspective, 3) the Reggio Emilia philosophy and approach, and 4) the Family-Centered Model. Key tenets of these theories and practices serve as the foundations for this study because they all essentially support the belief that “education does not stand alone and it cannot be designed as if it did. It exits in a culture” (Bruner, 1996, p. 28).

Social Constructivism

Key tenets of social constructivism serve as the foundation for this study because they emphasize that knowledge is co-constructed with others around a joint activity resulting in a shared understanding. Proponents of social constructivism stress that in order for people to be able to construct knowledge and come to a shared understanding, both time and opportunity are necessary (Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova & Leong, 1999).

The social constructivist perspective stresses that the construction of knowledge is “socially mediated” and that our thoughts and experiences, central to learning, are “influenced by present and past social interactions” (Bodrova & Leong, 1999, p.8). In many ways, Lev Vygotsky’s beliefs about how “culture influences the content of thinking” and the role others play in developing shared meaning parallel the sociocultural paradigm discussed below.

Sociocultural Perspective

The sociocultural perspective has become increasingly influential in the last few
decades since the work of Lev Vygotsky was translated into English. The basic idea of Vygotsky’s idea was that development occurs within a sociocultural context and that development is \textit{co-constructed} (Vygotsky, 1978). Development occurs in and emerges from a person’s “immersion in specific culturally defined activities, practices, and rituals” (Goldhaber, 2000, p. 327). Through participation in a particular cultural setting one gradually adapts and internalizes the various aspects of this setting. Hence, Vygotsky’s perspective has implications for this study that explores parents’ understanding of the lab school culture.

Jerome Bruner, deeply influenced by Vygotskian theory, has made several notable contributions to our understanding of the psychology of the mind in the cultural context. In his book, \textit{Acts of Meaning} (1990) he urges the fields of psychology and social science to “stop trying to be meaning free” and acknowledge that the “very people and cultures that are [psychology’s] subject are governed by shared meanings and values” (p. 20). Bruner (1990) challenges the reader to look beyond views of the human mind as a machinelike device or “information processing tool” from five to six decades ago (p.6).

So why is the study of culture important? Because culture plays an important role in helping us construct meanings about our world. Bruner (1990) proposes that there is “a world outside ourselves that modifies the expression of our desires and beliefs. This world is the context in which our acts are situated, and states of the world may provide reasons for our desires and beliefs” (p. 40).

Cultural investigations are “messy, ambiguous, and context-sensitive” (Bruner, 1996, p. 5). One example of the context-sensitive matter that is often situated in our school cultures comes from Nespor’s (1997) book called \textit{Tangled Up in School}. Nespor
discusses some of the impacts made on Roanoke City Schools when their system was turned upside down by administrative changes in the early 1980s. He mentions that one of the school’s struggles to move forward with the changes and get beyond their stressful situation was due in part to their “unstable political and community context” (p. 17). This is an example of the belief that we cannot examine culture by looking at individual entities, since “it is man’s participation in culture and the realization of his mental powers through culture that make is impossible for us to construct meaning about human psychology on the basis of the individual alone” (Bruner, 1990, p. 12).

The central concept of the sociocultural perspective “is *culture*, the notion that a group of people (including the children and adult members of a classroom) in prolonged interaction within a particular setting will construct a patterned way of conducting life together” (Kantor & Whaley, 1999, p. 313). This implies that the members of the lab school initially come with their own subjective perspectives. They have different ways of looking at things and will inevitably be influenced by one another. Bruner (1996) defines the process of *intersubjectivity* (Vygotsky, 1978) as the process of how human’s come to know each other’s mind. Sociocultural theory provides tools for understanding and solutions to problems. Essentially these tools help to bridge gaps and contribute to the collective culture’s shared understandings and meanings.

*Ecological Systems Theory and the Ecology of Developmental Processes*

Socioculturalist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed an ecological systems theory of human development that recognizes the importance of looking at the development of an individual within context. The four systems of Bronfenbrenner’s model are the *microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem*. The *microsystem*
includes contextual factors that influence the individual such as the family, peers, school, and neighborhood that surrounds the person. The *mesosystem* includes interplay between two subjects that are included in the *microsystem*. For example, the interplay of the individual’s experience between home-life and school comprises the *mesosystem*. The *exosystem* includes, but is not limited to, items such as extended family, friends of the family, community resources/services, and neighbors. The *macrosystem* includes the ideologies, beliefs, values, and goals of the culture the individual lives within.

In 1998, Bronfenbrenner and Pamela Morris, extended Bronfenbrenner’s original Ecological Systems Theory. The present model examines the role of time, environmental context, disposition, resources, and demands on the developing person (p. 994). Essentially, lab school, and the protagonists within it, is a reflection of the larger society. For this reason, Ecological Systems Theory and the Ecology of Developmental Processes serve as a framework to help guide this study.

*Reggio Emilia*

The Reggio Emilia approach embodies characteristics and beliefs of social constructivist theory and attempts to build intersubjectivity within its schools. In a small northern town in Italy, practitioners at the Infant/Toddler centers and Preschools of Reggio Emilia have revolutionized the way many people think about our schools and the actors who inhabit them. The *Reggio Emilia Approach* (Gandini, Foreman, & Edwards, 1998), with its sound and solid theoretical foundation provided by Vygotsky, Piaget, Dewey, Bruner, Gardner and others, encourages us to see schools as places of community. Centers in Reggio Emilia illustrate how pedagogy based on communication and relationships are fundamental to the quality care and education of young children.
They have mastered the fine art of listening, both sensitively and responsively, not only to the children, but also to all the protagonists in the school (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 1).

Among some of the values related to the pedagogy of relationships that the Reggio Emilia approach embraces is the role of parents in the school. Fu, Stremmel, & Hill (2002) illustrate how schools in Reggio Emilia believe when it comes to their children, parents know best. They encourage them to be a part of their child’s learning and experience at school. “Parents’ participation is expected and supported and takes many forms: day-to-day interactions, work in the schools, discussions of the educational goals and psychological issues, special events, excursions, and celebrations” (p. 16). Finally, the Reggio Emilia approach views parents as valuable and essential pieces of the complex puzzle of schools.

In Reggio Emilia, parents are valued as crucial components in building home-school connections. This fact is becoming more widely recognized by the early childhood education field in the United States as there has been a push to promote and sustain relationships with parents and families based on “partnership, equality, and genuine collaboration” (National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education [NIECDE], 2000, p. 62). Despite this fact, many parents are still not actively involved in their young children’s care and education. Bowman (2003) states that “parental expectations, poor program conceptualization and implementation, parental reluctance to participate, and insufficient public support” (p. 129) as some of the reasons why parents are not involved in their child’s school.
Family-Centered Model

Building upon these fundamental beliefs and values of the Reggio Emilia approach, Hill, Stremmel, & Fu (in press) advocate for a family-centered approach “which views parents as meaningful partners in the classroom, the school, and in the educational lives of children” (p.172). A family-centered approach is consistent with a “significant shift in ideas about how best to approach relations between families and early childhood programs” (Powell, 2000, p. 61). A family-centered approach mirrors the need to seek out parent partnerships rather than parent participation.

The Amiable School Project (1999) at Virginia Tech, provided insight into the importance of parent’s voices being listened to and demonstrated this shift towards seeing parents as partners in their child’s educational experience. As the school year came to an end, and staff reflected back on their journey towards amiability, they realized that if they had been truly family-centered they would have included parents in formation of their declaration of intent (p.40).

Hill, Stremmel, & Fu (in press) note that a family-centered approach is difficult to achieve because intersubjectivity is necessary in creating “authentic partnerships” between parents and teachers (p. 177). Time and opportunity are essential in helping parents and teachers to come to a shared understanding. A family-centered approach views parents as experts when it comes to their children and sees them as essential to providing important information to schools about their children. With this knowledge, schools have more opportunity to create a meaningful learning experience for the child. Another tenet of the family-centered approach is that “communication among administrators, teachers, and parents is essential” (p. 182).
In order to do the difficult task of sifting through and understanding this complex socio-cultural context, Eisner’s (1998) model of educational criticism and connoisseurship was used to help focus on the interactions and themes that will emerge from the data. Also, a constructivist perspective was used to frame this inquiry and methodology.

_Educational connoisseurship and criticism_

Educational connoisseurship is defined by Eisner (1998) as a process of differentiation and recognition “among complex and subtle qualities” (p. 63) we see in settings such as schools. “Connoisseurship is the means through which we come to know the complexities, nuances, and subtleties of aspects of the world in which we have special interest” (p. 68).

Eisner (1998) equates educational connoisseurship with being a connoisseur of wine and advises that researcher’s approach their subject with the same sort of keen perceptiveness that a wine connoisseur is known for. This keen perceptivity, an ability to differentiate typical from untypical, is necessary to “portray, interpret, and appraise educational phenomena” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 129).

This process of “heightened awareness” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 129) to qualities can cause a novice connoisseur to become somewhat overwhelmed. I think of it as a form of sensory overload. This feeling of sensory overload occurred when I first came to graduate school and began teaching in the infant classroom at the lab school.

The work environment, colleagues and co-teachers, classroom dynamics such as the children and families enrolled are some examples of the contextual qualities that influenced my overall experience. With so much input from the many contextual factors,
my mind became cluttered with thoughts. It was at those times that I put my blinders on and failed to see what was really happening around me. These overwhelming feelings and perception overload can present themselves in school research rich with complex qualities. In order to avoid getting to a point where it is necessary to put “blinders” on, Eisner (1998) suggests considering five dimensions of schooling to help organize thoughts related to the many layers of data and rich qualities that are intertwined. “These dimensions are: 1) the intentional, 2) the structural, 3) the curricular, 4) the pedagogical, and 5) the evaluative” (p. 72).

To understand the school, its qualities, and participants’ perceptions of these qualities, it would be wise to use these five dimensions to organize thoughts. Once this is done, the process of critique can begin.

Educational criticism is the ability “to transform the qualities of a painting, play, novel, poem, classroom, or school, or act of teaching and learning into public form that illuminates, interprets, and appraises the qualities that have been experienced” (Eisner, 1998, p. 86). Eisner (1998) recommends that the educational critic use four dimensions when sifting through recurring themes and attempting to tell the story. These include: 1) description, 2) interpretation, 3) evaluation, and 4) thematics. Essentially, the educational critic “describes, interprets, and appraises the phenomenon and thereby aids in the reeducation of the reader’s perception.

*Constructivist Perspective*

The aim of inquiry, under a constructivist framework, is “understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) initially hold, aiming toward consensus but still open to new interpretations as information and
sophistication improve” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 113). This process of consensus building and understanding is co-constructed. Denzin & Lincoln (1994) suggest that “individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction between and among investigator and respondents” (p.111). A constructivist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) is this interplay of reciprocity between the investigator and participants that ultimately leads to knowledge.

In short, the above theoretical perspectives and approaches inform this proposed study and serve as a framework for exploring parental understanding of school culture. It would be valuable to better understand how parents construct their understanding of school culture through experiencing and interacting with people in the school.
CHAPTER THREE

Doing Qualitative Inquiry

Situating the Study

Bruner (1990) claims that as a society we are no longer concerned with “intellectually unsituated little studies” but that we seem to be revisiting fundamental questions such as “how we construct our meanings and realities” (p. xi). Indeed this is true for this investigation. This study is qualitative in nature because it attempts to understand “phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.2). This study takes place in a dynamic socio-cultural context. Because of this, there is a need to look at the participants meaning making (Bruner, 1990) in “flows rather than states, focusing on the networks and the layered connections that knot [their beliefs] together” (Nespor, 1997, p. xiv) rather than examining isolated beliefs and ideologies.

Purpose Revisited

Because this inquiry focuses primarily upon ways contextual factors such as, social, political, and historical changes in one school have influenced the participants. It is important to note that a method of inquiry that will best illuminate the dynamic and complex story of the participants is necessary. There are strengths and limitations of both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches, but for the purposes of this research, qualitative methods will be used. By using qualitative methods, I feel I will be able to obtain rich, descriptive detail that will lead me to a better understanding of how parents think, feel, and attribute meaning to the culture of their school and how it is aligned with the constructivist theoretical framework guiding this inquiry.
The term *actors*, is used to describe the participants’ in this research because “the world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 118). Essentially, Denzin & Lincoln (1994) are trying to illustrate that “particular actors” attempt to try and understand and make sense of their “complex processes of social interaction involving history, language, and action” (p. 118). Tenets of constructivist perspective (Bruner, 1990), argue that as humans we are in a constant state of trying to understand and interpret our world. Therefore, we are all actors in this scene we attempt to understand, this play we call life.

Parents

Parents are just one of the many key components of school. Time and opportunity, however, allowed only for parents of young children who are currently enrolled or who were previously enrolled, to be interviewed for this study. Participants from this study were parents (single or couples) of young children from each classroom at the lab school. Two sets of parents were interviewed for the purposes of this study. These include: 1) *veteran-parents* – those parents whose children have been at the school for three to five years and 2) *newer-parents* – those parents whose children have been at the school for less than three years.

Participants’ were selected using these categories in order to get a more holistic representation of parents’ perceptions about the culture of the school. Administrators and the morning preschool teachers at the lab school were briefed about the study and asked
to recommend both veteran- and newer-parents who they thought would be most willing
to participate in this study.

A total of eleven parents participated in this study: five veteran-parents and six
newer-parents. There were eight female participants and three male participants. A total
of nine interviews were conducted. Of the eleven parents, only one parent was from the
afternoon program.

My Committee Members

Dr. Vickie Fu, my committee chair, and Drs. Andy Stremmel and Lynn Hill,
members of my committee are not simply members of my committee who guided me
through this process of conducting research. They also serve as social historians of the
lab school and have spent much time helping me to understand the lab schools’ evolution.

This trio of colleagues, good friends, and co-conspirators of transformation and
progress all played integral roles at the lab school over a period of nine years. They have
at different times served as director, curriculum director, and/or pedagogical consultant at
the lab school.

Because of their personal and professional investment in the culture of the lab
school, their numerous publications informing the practice at the lab school, and our
committee meetings about this paper, my committee members have helped verify my
process of understanding the social-historical context of the lab school.

The Researcher

I also chronicled the development of my understanding about culture, specifically
school culture. In essence I use myself “as an instrument that will engage the situation
and make sense of it” (Eisner, 1998, p. 34). It is not possible for me to remove myself
entirely from the situations about which I write. By the nature of my job at the lab school, I am deeply immersed and invested in this topic. Some may see this as a weakness in my research. Fortunately, Eisner (1998) and others view it as a useful tool that will influence my ability to perceive qualities and make educated judgments about their value (p. 34) and in turn inform understanding and practice in the school.

**The Setting**

*Virginia Tech Child Development Lab School*

The Virginia Tech Child Development Lab School in Blacksburg, Virginia has been providing care and education to young children since the early 1940s. Today, the school is located on the main campus of Virginia Tech in the lower level of Wallace Hall. This building was built in the late 1960s. University teaching classrooms, laboratories, and faculty/staff offices are located on the first floor of the building surrounding the school. There is also an Adult Day Care program located in the same building, next door to the lab school. The building where the lab school is located is unique from all the other buildings on campus because it is the only one that has a large, fenced playground.

The lab school has a three-part mission: 1) an early education mission, 2) a preservice teaching mission, and 3) a research mission. The lab school is a NAEYC accredited and licensed school, which provides part-time care and education to children age infancy through kindergarten. At the present time there is not an infant classroom due to the loss of funds for one graduate teaching assistantship/head teacher. The school serves families associated with the university (faculty, staff, and students) and is also open to the general public.
Approximately 80 children are enrolled in the program. There are three teaching classrooms in the school, but since the program is part-time, five classes are operated daily. There is a morning toddler (16-36 months old) classroom, one morning 3-4 year old classroom, one morning 4-5 year old classroom, one afternoon 3-4 year old classroom, and one afternoon 4-5 year old classroom.

Choice of Setting

The lab school was chosen as a site at which to conduct this research because: 1) I work as a teacher and instructor at the school, 2) I am familiar with most of the families there, 3) most of the families are familiar with me, 3) it is easily accessible and, 4) I hope to use the data from this research to inform best practice in the school and my teaching.

Study Methodology

Participant Action Research

Participant Action Research (PAR) is research with the intention of leading to change and improvement. Specifically, PAR’s two-fold mission is to 1) “produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people” and 2) “to empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 328). Another characteristic of PAR is that it is a “worldview that sees human being as co-creating their reality” with one another. I chose PAR as a methodology because my participants and I co-constructed our understandings of our school culture “through participation, experience, and action” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 204). My hope was that by attempting to understand the lab school culture, along with the parents, we would be more suitably fortified to know how to move forward.
Study Procedures

Informal approval to conduct this research at the lab school was obtained from the director. Upon expedited Institutional Review Board Approval (see Appendix B), the study was explained to some of the classroom teachers and administrators within the school. The classroom teachers and administrators were then asked to recommend two to three parents from their classrooms who might be interested in discussing their opinions regarding this topic. Parents of children who were enrolled in the lab school at the time of this study were contacted through a written letter (Appendix C) which explained this research initiative and invited them to participate. The cover letter (Appendix C) and an Informed Consent Form (Appendix D) were sent by mail to veteran parents who were recommended to me by the classroom teachers and administrators. A self-addressed stamped envelope was included for parents to return the form. As Eisner (1998) suggests, this is one way I could secure parents willingness to participate in a discrete way (p. 173). I followed-up on this initial contact by explaining the details of the study to the parents and gave them a photocopy of the signed Informed Consent form and the interview questions (Appendix E).

Data Collection

Data were collected during a five-week period of time from March through April 2004 from two sources: 1) semi-structured, in-depth interviews of the actors and 2) my personal research journal.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews

Parents participated in a semi-structured, in-depth interview. These interviews were conducted by me to inquire into the depth and breadth of the parents' perceptions
and understanding about the culture of the school. Questions that were used to guide the interviews are presented in Appendix E. Interviews were conducted at the lab school or in the participants’ homes. The participant’s chose where they were most comfortable meeting. The interview sessions were approximately 45 minutes to 90 minutes in length. The interviews were audiotaped with the participants’ permission and then transcribed verbatim in order to record complete and accurate responses to the interview questions.

Eisner (1998) believes that “conducting a good interview is, in some ways, like participating in a good conversation: listening intently and asking questions that focus on concrete examples rather than on abstract speculations, which are less likely to provide genuinely meaningful information” (p.183). Because I am familiar with most of the parents in the school and most of them know me, I hoped that parents would feel comfortable discussing their perspectives with me. My intent was to make the interviews feel more like an informal conversation and to let my participants know that what they were saying was important and that I was listening. “It is surprising how much people are willing to say to those whom they believe are really willing to listen” (Eisner, 1998, p. 183). However, I was aware of the potential harm this informality could cause. I walked a fine line between using questions to guide our conversation and asking questions that could lead the parents to give me the answers they think I wanted to hear.

I chose to conduct semi-structured, in-depth interviews with my participants rather than a focus group discussion because I wanted to make sure that each participant got an equal opportunity to share their perspectives in the safest, most comfortable way possible. My feeling was that participants who might be more vocal about their opinions
could overshadow the perspective of some of the other participants. Also, by conducting interviews, the anonymity of the participants is more likely to be maintained.

**Personal research journal**

I used my personal research journal to record my reflective thoughts whenever there were pivotal moments in my attempts to understand my participants’ beliefs and my own beliefs about the culture of our school. This journal was primarily used to record information that was descriptive and reflective in nature.

In late February, early March, I had the fortunate opportunity to go on my first trip to Reggio Emilia, Italy. I spent 10 days using this trip as an instrument in developing my understanding of school culture. I went on this trip with specific questions in mind that helped me explore and begin to further understand the way I see culture in schools. I used the research journal to document my experiences and thoughts while I was there.

**Confidentiality**

Pseudonyms were assigned to the names of the participants in this study in order to protect their confidentiality. Despite this effort and further efforts outlined in the Institutional Review Board protocol (Appendix F) confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Eisner (1998) notes that as qualitative research has evolved, participants “are no longer faceless abstractions, they are often identifiable, even with pseudonyms – hence they are at risk” (p. 171).

**Data Analysis**

Many educational researchers face a difficult dilemma when deciding on the best way to tell their “story” to readers (Eisner, 1989). Beyond wanting to make their work informative and valuable to the reader, educational researchers have to find a form that
will do justice to their research, giving it the meaning it deserves. As a result of this “interest in the possibilities of representation” researchers have begun to recognize “the limits of the forms of representation that are conventionally employed.” This recognition has led educational researchers to pursue “alternative forms of data representation” which essentially is the process researchers use to find other means, or forms, that will give meaning and bring understanding to their research (Eisner, 1997, p. 5).

Alternative forms of data representation (Eisner, 1997) provides the researcher with the opportunity to: 1) expand upon the large idea and enhance understanding, 2) convey a sense of “authenticity,” 3) provide “productive ambiguity” which encourages the reader to think beyond what they already know, 4) leave the reader with more, diverse questions than they came with, and 5) “exploit individual aptitudes” (p. 8).

Despite these benefits, Eisner (1997) discusses some of the risks of using alternative forms of data representation. Everyone interprets research from different perspectives and will “confer his or her own idiosyncratic meaning to the data” (p. 9). In the end, Eisner states that context is necessary when using alternative forms of data representation.

One way to provide a sense of context for the reader is to acknowledge, as Nespor (1997) did, that “schools have social histories” (p.23). Eisner (1998) acknowledges this same fact. He even extends it by saying that “human feeling does not pollute understanding. In fact, understanding others and the situations they face may well require it” (p. 8) thus supporting the need to create a contextual base for the reader and find a forum where my voice and the voices of my participants will be “heard.” Like Eisner (1998) I wanted the reader to know that this was a story about real people with
Keeping a “sense of voice present” is key to letting the reader know that the author is not some “disembodied abstraction who is depersonalized through linguistic conventions that hide his signature” (p. 4).

Study Confirmability

Reliability and validity are important to consider when conducting quantitative research. However, reliability and validity do not transcend into qualitative research. Because of this, “the ethnographer’s authority remains under assault today. A double crisis of representation and legitimation confronts qualitative researchers in the social sciences” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 10). Several alternatives to methods of achieving reliability and validity will be used to demonstrate the authenticity of this research. These include: 1) Eisner’s concept of social connoisseurship and criticism, 2) triangulation, 3) reflective analysis of the data.

As a researcher who wanted to conduct quality research that might inform the community and the literature through the use of “description, interpretation, and evaluation” (Eisner, 1998, p. 109), I chose to consider Eisner’s (1998) writing on about educational criticism and connoisseurship in qualitative research. He believes that this style of research has credibility despite claims that they do not. He goes on to reassuringly suggest that “quantitative studies are seldom replicable the way people often think they are, and even if they were, such replicability would be inappropriate for most qualitative studies” (p.241). One of the reasons such replicability would be inappropriate for this study is that trying to paint a portrait of schools and the people who inhabit them is a complex and contextually dynamic process. In a sense, Eisner (1998) argues that
those who seek complete truth and reality through reliability will be disappointed because
“reality…. is impossible to attain” (p. 109).

Triangulation

In qualitative study triangulation is a primary way for researchers to gain confirmability of the study. Triangulation reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objective reality can never be captured. Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.2). This study is triangulated in three ways. The first area of triangulation was of data collected through interviews and my personal research journal. The second area was conversations with my committee chair during data interpretation. Finally, theory was triangulated. As mentioned earlier, social constructivism, sociocultural perspective, Reggio Emilia philosophy, ecological systems, family-centered model, writings of the committee members on the history and practices at the lab school, and the study context are perspectives that contribute to interpreting the data.

Analyzing and Interpreting the Data

Analyses of the transcribed interviews were read three times. The first review of the interviews was to get a general sense of the content of the interviews. The second review was to search for threads or themes in the interviews. The final review of the transcriptions was used to select specific examples related to the cultural dimensions and understandings that comprised the framework used for organizing data from this study. After reading and reviewing the transcriptions it was evident that the data were saturated, i.e., complete (Charmaz, 2000).
I used topic-webs to organize the threads and themes that seemed to present themselves in the data. More information on how the topic-webs were specifically used is presented in Chapter Four.

*Revisiting the Past . . . Setting the Stage*

*The Amiable School Interactive Display – Revisited*

When I came back from my trip to Reggio Emilia there was an interactive documentation display in the lab school hallway (see Figure 2) for parents to share their feelings and opinions. This display was almost identical to the display put up in 1998 in the same location (see Figure 1). Figure 1 was used in the lab school during the 1998-99 school year to allow parents the opportunities to voice their opinions about the school. This was one of the first attempts to promote amiability within the culture of the school.

*Figure 1. First Amiable School Interactive Display (1998)*¹.

¹ Documentation Archive, Virginia Tech Child Development Laboratory School, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA.
Figure 2. Amiable School Interactive Display (2004).¹

Mirroring the purpose of the display years ago, the display was revived because we recognized the need to listen carefully to parents’ beliefs, values, and goals. This act of listening was also important because many of the parents’ who voiced opinions on the panel in the original display have long-since graduated or left the lab school. We realized that perhaps parental beliefs, values, goals, and needs changed as a result of many structural changes within the school. Similarly there was a need to listen to the voices of the new parents; thus, the new panel was thoughtfully and carefully erected. It was organized using a topic-web format with a major topic in the middle and four sub-topic branches. The topic question was “How can we create an amiable school which recognizes families as true partners and collaborators in the program?” The four sub-topic threads were community, curriculum, environment, and policies and procedures. Post-it® notes and pens were made available for parents and teachers to

¹ Documentation Archive, Virginia Tech Child Development Laboratory School, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA.
begin voicing their opinions regarding the school in an open-forum format.

Today the display is still in the hallway with a handful of Post-it® notes adorning it. Based upon the school’s previous experience with using this board, we prepared ourselves for the open criticism that could cause us pain. To our surprise, the criticism has remained constructive and has given us lots to think about. Not knowing that the display would be up when I returned from Reggio Emilia, I was pleasantly surprised. The timing could not have been better as I had recently received IRB approval and was ready to begin my interviews. I had the opportunity to read thoughts and opinions I might not have otherwise had the opportunity to hear during my interviews. Beyond the display being relevant to my interests then, the display influenced me in a way that I could not have expected.

*Sifting Through the Sand Looking for Treasure*

Surprisingly, I found that these threads were closely related to the categories or sub-topics on our Amiable School Interactive Display in the lab school hallway. As I began reading over my transcripts I felt like I was a child playing on the beach sifting through the sand looking for a special, hidden treasure. This process of sifting through the data (or sand) is common in qualitative studies and is done in an effort to truly understand the voices of the actors and their meaning. As I began reading over the transcripts for the first time, it did not take long to find some unique and special treasures. I found myself reading common threads that reappeared in each interview I read through.

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Well, I am not sure. I am not sure if the display caused me to look at the data with a new perspective or if the themes just
happened to fit with the Amiable Board themes? What I do know is that the display validated my own ideas and the voices of the parents.
CHAPTER FOUR
Voices of the Actors

Having the opportunity to visit and study in Reggio Emilia, Italy was something I had dreamed about for five years. As mentioned previously, I planned to go to Italy with specific questions in mind to help me explore the culture there, especially the culture of the schools in Reggio Emilia. One of the major questions I sought to explore was “what is culture?” I believe that my experiences there helped me explore this question and were fundamental in changing the way I see the role of culture in education. Not only was this my first trip to Reggio Emilia, this was the first time I had ever traveled to a place where I needed a passport. Consequently, this trip not only challenged my notions about culture and education, but also how I saw the greater Italian culture through the lenses of my own American culture and vice versa.

What follows are some excerpts from the observations and reflections I entered in the research journal I took along with me while I was traveling. I traveled with my mentor, friend, and committee chair, Vickie Fu. My friend and committee member, Lynn Hill, and her husband Scott also accompanied us for the first part of the trip. We flew into Rome early in the morning of February 23, 2004 and then drove a few hours north to the Tuscany region.

Within a few hours of my being in Italy, I had filled pages and pages of my journal and I was actually surprised by how much I was writing given the fact that I’m generally not as good about writing in journals as I intend to be. I guess I never expected that so much would be influencing my understanding culture in general and school culture in particular.
Studying culture in a different culture proved to be challenging, yet symbolism and metaphor took my hand and guided me to understanding the Italian culture one evening at dinner while we were in Montepulciano, Tuscany. What follows is one example of something I never thought would influence my understanding of culture, Italian culture at that. Perhaps this demonstrates that culture and its messages are omnipresent. If we take our blinders off and open ourselves to the possibilities of a culture, we have multiple opportunities to begin to understand it and our place within it.

.... At dinner tonight, we ordered a bottle of Nimbie di Montepulciano and the waiter gave the most special wine presentation I’ve ever seen to go along with the region’s very best red wine, a wine the natives in the area seem very proud of, as they should be. This wasn’t any ordinary wine pouring presentation. Every movement of this presentation was rich with symbolism and metaphor that gave me goose bumps and caused tears to well up in my eyes.

The waiter brought over a small table and set it next to ours. On the small table he set out four large, perfectly shaped wineglasses: one for me, one for Vickie, one for Lynn, and one for Scott. The waiter also set out a beautiful wine carafe, the bottle of Montepulciano Red, and another perfectly shaped wineglass. At first I couldn’t figure out who this fifth glass was for. There were only four people at our table. I soon found out.

In the fifth glass, the waiter poured a small bit of wine. He swirled it around with perfect precision, evenly coating the glass in a rich red color. He then took a large whiff and inhaled it as if to embody it in his
soul. He then took the wine that was in his glass and poured it into Scott’s
glass. Again, evenly coating it with the wine. From Scott’s glass, he
poured a small amount into Lynn’s glass and left a bit remaining in
Scott’s glass. He then took Lynn’s glass and swirled it around perfectly.
Then he took a bit of the wine in Lynn’s glass and poured it into Vickie’s
glass and swirled it around and then took some of that wine and poured it
into my glass and gently swirled it around. He poured the remaining wine
in his glass into the carafe. Then he poured the rest of the wine from the
bottle into the carafe and poured each of us a hearty glass of wine....

(February 23, 2004)

The moment was unbelievable. What follows is a reflection on what I
believe to be an important moment in my sampling, tasting, and savoring of the
Italian culture in order to gain some understanding of the culture and the
foundations upon which the culture exists. Although it does not directly relate to
school culture, I believe that so much of the Italian culture was represented here.
I also believe that it can be indirectly related to some of the same values I
observed on my visits to some of the municipal infant/toddler centers and
preschools in Reggio Emilia.

I didn’t feel the true meaning and value of this incredible ritual until I
realized that each subsequent glass that was being coated thinly with wine was
being cleansed by wine that had been in another person’s glass. It was then that I
thought we are all connected. When he took the remaining wine and poured it
into the carafe, I remember thinking that the carafe symbolized the larger
community, to which we all contributed individually. I believe this captured the essence of the Italian’s value of shared community and shared resources in which everyone plays a role. As a result of this presentation, I felt like I belonged and I was connected to each person at my table. I even felt connected to the waiter who shared something he took so much time and care in doing, something that seemed important to him, a wine that appeared he deeply respected and wanted to share its joy and perfection with us.

This wine ritual, something the waiter has probably done many times for patrons of the restaurant, reflects that culture and its multiple layers are permeated into the daily lives and experiences of the people within that culture. In essence, the wine ritual, was a reflection of the culture. If we think about our own daily interactions, much of what we do is a reflection of our larger culture. We are walking testimonies to who and what our culture is based on.

Just as Eisner (1998) talks about the “wine connoisseur” who has to be able to taste the most subtle detail of the wine to truly decipher what it is he is tasting, I considered the importance of organizing parents comments about the school culture at lab school so as if to truly listen to what they were trying to say. I had to open myself up to the subtle qualities of their words, just as with the hearty glass of Nimbie di Montepulciano. I also had to open myself up to the layers that permeated their thoughts and was a reflection of the lab school culture just as I had to do with the wine ritual. What follows is a description of the framework I used to help me organize their words, their meanings, and their understandings.
I used the Amiable School Interactive Display (see Figure 2) sub-topics of community, learning environment, curriculum, and policies and procedures as the major topics for topic webs which I developed to help organize the themes. I also found that there were a lot of themes and threads related to the community outside of the lab school so I developed a fifth topic web called “external community.” What follows is an in-depth description of each topic web and what the actors had to say related to each topic in an effort to make their voices heard. Eisner (1998) elaborates on the importance of “voice in text” and equates it with our signature because “our signature makes it clear that a person, not a machine, was behind the words” (p. 36).

Topics such as turnover, changes in the program, and ways the program could be improved were common threads throughout each “big idea” (Oken-Wright, 2002) and therefore will be summarized at the end of this chapter.

Curriculum

When asked about what they thought about the lab school program, many parents talked about the curriculum (see Figure 3.).

Multiple dimensions in the curriculum were discussed. Parents talked about emergent curriculum, the joy of learning, academics versus social skills, kindergarten readiness, learning through play, developmentally appropriate practice, change in the curriculum, turnover affecting the curriculum, multiculturalism in the school and its effect on the curriculum, centers and activities, and room for improvement in the curriculum.
Emergent Curriculum

Offering curriculum based upon the children’s interests is something that the lab school has continually strived to provide. It seemed that some parents see this as an important element of their child’s experience at the school that it has promoted building connections between home and school.

“I like the fact that there are so many different activities for him to explore and experience. The things like water, sand, music, light. The things he loves at home” (Ann, newer parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

Oh, so emergent curriculum, I like that. I personally really don’t want him doing much academic stuff...I like the philosophy of taking the lead...
from the kid. I like the program. I don’t feel any need for academic stuff, he’ll get that the rest of his life and what I want out of an early childhood program is foundation skills (Susan, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).

…When the garbage truck comes down the ally that you really allow him to explore that opportunity and to look and see. I like that it’s not, ‘oh we don’t have time to do that.’ I feel like you all really make time to pursue the children’s individual interests and that’s not something that you are going to get at a traditional preschool program (Ann, newer parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

Parents, like Ann, seemed to also value how the curriculum and even the schedule of the day followed the children’s interests and needs. Other parents, like Louise, liked the emergent curriculum but were unclear what their children were actually learning from the curriculum.

…It took me a long time, even with my degrees, um, to figure out what was being learned and for the first year we were there, there was a lot of discussion about color and light and materials and I saw that a lot in the studio work and the various explorations of textures and things like that, but then we got our portfolio and they have social, emotional, cognitive, language, physical, and different categories and that was the structure I
was used to thinking about and having the portfolios set up in that way 
made me think that maybe there was an agenda for each of the five items  
(Louise, veteran parent, personal communication, April 8, 2004).

Louise’s comments indicated that the portfolios helped her to understand what was being learned. It was almost as if this was her language for understanding how children developed. Knowing that parents only get the child’s portfolio twice a year from the teachers for their review suggest there seems to be a need to make integrative learning across the developmental domains more transparent to parents in many forms in order to help parents see what is being learned.

*Academics vs. Social Skills and Kindergarten Readiness*

Many parents talked about whether or not their child would be ready for kindergarten. They even talked about their opinions about the importance of academics or social skill foundations for kindergarten. There seemed to be a split between parents who wanted there to be more academic preparation for kindergarten included in the curriculum versus parents who wanted their child to be socially ready for kindergarten and have a genuine joy for learning.

*I like the creativity part and that they don’t have to conform, but at the same time that scares me because when Margaret went to kindergarten ...she had a hard time adjusting because she was really used to being in lab school where if you don’t like the group activity, you can choose to do something else and she couldn’t do that in kindergarten* (Karen, veteran parent, personal communication, March 8, 2004).
I did look at other programs when he (Michael) was moving from the toddler room to the preschool rooms because I was concerned he wouldn’t be ready for kindergarten....To be honest, having a child go through kindergarten, there was a huge variety in the children. Some had never even been to any sort of school so any sort of preschool helps...and by the time they reach first grade they are all caught up so it doesn’t matter (Nicole, veteran parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

Nicole and Karen seemed to have different experiences when their child went to public school. Karen’s daughter had difficulty adjusting because when the whole class was doing something she didn’t want to do and she tried to get involved in something else she was told by the teacher she couldn’t do that. In this way, Karen felt her daughter was not prepared for kindergarten because at lab school she was free to choose what activities she wanted to get involved in and she was free leave the activity when she was ready. This made Karen wonder how her children who are at the lab school now will adjust when it is time for them to go to kindergarten. Nicole was worried about how her son would do in kindergarten but he ended up doing just fine and was caught up with everyone else by first grade.

Other parent’s indicated that their hope for their child was beyond whether or not their child would be academically prepared for kindergarten. Rather, these parents stressed the importance of their child being a joyful learner and having a solid grounding in social skills before entering kindergarten.
... I worry a lot about this idea of young education being more like day care, more like babysitting, more like teaching your child how to become a good laborer as opposed to somebody who enjoys learning and is inquisitive about school... (Gail, veteran parent, personal communication, March 18, 2004).

... At this stage of development, quote unquote, academic things are just incredibly low on the priority scale. Just being able to learn how to interact in a group positively, to begin to use his imagination with other kids and teachers is just very high in terms of what we’d like to see him get out of lab school....what I would really like to see is that during his time at lab school, that he obtains the social skills that he’ll need for kindergarten (Bill, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).

Who knows what things are going to be 20-30 years from now and there is no way you can teach that now. But you can teach the love of learning and I believe that is the number one thing being taught at lab school...I think that is what it means to me, that it teaches the love of learning and discovery (Frank, newer parent, personal communication, March 12, 2004).

I think just getting them ready for school, you know, foster the love of learning is what’s most important to me and Sam has that and I think the
lab school does that really well...teaching them how to learn and to love learning is important (Cara, newer parent, personal communication, March 25, 2004).

Frank, Cara, and Gail are all examples of parents who not only want their child to have a genuine joy of learning, but also seem to understand how children learn best, through play, discovery, and curiosity. They seemed to feel that lab school cultivates this disposition for joyful learning, discovery, play, and wonder.

Based upon the statements above, it seemed like parents see the curriculum as fundamental to their child’s experience and parents like Nicole and Karen saw it as having an influence on their child's experience in kindergarten. In general, it appeared that the parents viewed lab school as much more than babysitting or day care.

Learning Environment

The teachers, the space, the location of the schools, the materials, the child to teacher ratio, multicultural influences on the environment, turnover, and change were some of the pieces of the lab school learning environment that parents discussed (see Figure 4.).
In the following statements, parents discuss how the undergraduate student teachers and graduate student head teachers bring a unique dynamic to the lab school learning environment. Some parents also felt their experience and their child’s experience each year at the lab school depended on who the classroom teacher and the undergraduate student teachers were in the classroom. For example,

…I think because the teachers, in particular the student teachers, but also the graduate student teachers, there is a lot of variability in the experience of the teachers. As the age changes too that becomes more or less of an issue. It varies quite a bit, but I think they are so related that what the children learn at the lab school depends very much on the classroom dynamic and then layered on top of that on what the teachers are planning and then layered top of that their confidence in their teaching. Usually they are very enthusiastic and usually they are very energetic and usually
they are very creative which is typical of the lab school, but it usually
takes a while for them to sink into their shoes… (Louise, veteran parent,
personal communication, April 8, 2004).

In Amy’s class, her last year’s teacher wasn’t as focused. Sometimes I like the fact that it’s totally child driven, but sometimes it’s frustrating that they aren’t going anywhere. It depends on that teacher and her current teacher is doing a better job on questioning the kids what can we do next? I wasn’t happy with last year’s classroom it didn’t seem to blow up the ideas….to extend the ideas the children had rather than just jumping to the next idea. They didn’t try to make it a project and get other people involved (Nicole, veteran parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

Louise and Nicole, veteran parents, had more experiences with different teachers and seemed to have higher expectations. They both felt that certain teachers their children had at lab school were better than others. They seemed to highlight things like the teacher’s willingness to take on projects, organize classroom involvement, and facilitate emergent curriculum as factors in their experiences with teachers.

Other factors that contributed to the variable experiences parents had in different classrooms could also have been influenced by the teacher’s disposition and his or her commitment to teaching both the Early Childhood Education undergraduate students and the children. The lab school graduate head teachers have multiple roles in the classroom. Another reason for this variety in the teachers could be due to how the teachers negotiate these multiple roles.
Despite trying to manage multiple roles and some variation in some teachers versus others, most parents felt the teachers genuinely cared about the children, were energetic, and enthusiastic about teaching.

*I feel like it’s a really good group of teachers and that they generally care for the kids and they have a sincere interest in their learning and their feelings and it’s not just an experience for them to learn how to teach. They’re trying to make the experience good for the kids* (Ann, newer parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

…They just add a lot of energy. Probably they feel they are somewhat inexperienced, but I don’t think that really makes all that much difference because they have so much energy so that is more than made up for by the energy and effort they put in…you get a sense that unlike the teachers who’ve been around for a long time, that they are, that the teachers are discovering things themselves so there is actually mutual learning going on and that is kind of interesting* (Frank, newer parent, personal communication, March 12, 2004).

*I really like the lab school. I like how the teachers are so open to ideas and topics and they are so excited about children. They aren’t just a responsibility, they’re excited about them…I think Sam really feels that* (Cara, newer parent, personal communication, March 25, 2004).

Cara, Frank, and Ann, all newer parents, seemed satisfied with their child’s teacher or teachers. However, veteran parents, Nicole and Louise, felt that the
curriculum of the classroom and their child’s experience depended on the teacher and that their experiences over the years indicated who the teacher was made a big difference. This teacher-dependent experience also seemed to influence how parents saw the curriculum in the classroom.

...With Monique, which we were so fortunate to have as our first teacher at the lab school, we definitely saw curriculum following the children and definitely saw new objects and activities that stimulated the kids and would do the next thing with their interest. We never saw that with Caroline so much and definitely thought the lack of that, if there had been a little more push from the teachers, I think the children would have been comfortable because they would have been drawn in. But we do see that in your class with the fish thing and the physical activities you’ve done to accommodate and provide opportunities for the more physically active kids in your class. All of those things together have really drawn in a lot of the children...and I think that’s the best version of emergent curriculum and it’s what I miss when I see what Jimmy is doing at Blacksburg Methodist Preschool (Louise, veteran parent, personal communication, April 8, 2004).

To be honest I like the idea of having a person that is hired in each classroom as opposed to what we have now. I dearly loved Roberta and one thing after having her I got spoiled and I did not know that in the preschool classrooms the head teacher was not the same five days a week,
because Roberta was (Nicole, veteran parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

As mentioned before, graduate teaching assistants serve as head teachers in the classrooms. The graduate assistants get 15 or 20-hour per week assistantships so they are unable to be in the morning preschool classroom all five days a week. Since 1997, there has been only one full-time professional teacher on staff at the lab school. Nicole seemed very happy when her child had the full-time professional teacher in the morning preschool program because that meant the head teacher was the same in the classroom all five days. When another one of her children was in the morning preschool classroom five mornings a week, the head teacher was a graduate student and subsequently was not in the classroom all five days. This lack of continuity seemed to displease Nicole.

This lack of continuity is also perpetuated, especially in the preschool classrooms, by the amount of undergraduate student teachers that are in the classroom. Although they are in the classrooms for a full academic year, parents still feel overwhelmed by the number of undergraduate teachers assisting in the classroom. As a result, parents tended to only make an effort to get to know the teacher who they observed spending the most time with their child. In other cases, parents’ relationships with the teachers were based on whether or not their child was that student teacher’s target child. Each student teacher picks two target children in the classroom to follow through the year and develop a developmental portfolio for each child. Because of the in-depth nature of this assignment, often times the undergraduate teachers would end up spending the majority of their practicum time with their “target” children. For example,
“I think if they were hanging out with him (Matthew) more, I would make more of an effort. I think it partially because there are so many that makes it hard” (Susan, newer parent).

While some parents seemed overwhelmed by the number of teachers in the classroom, other parents particularly liked the teacher to child ratio and saw that as a huge benefit to the program. As a result, they felt like their child got a lot more individual attention than if their child was at another program.

“And I like the ratio of teachers to kids because when somebody is having a rough day there usually there is one on one for that child and knowing that Ben is sometimes that child is helpful” (Ann, newer parent).

“We were particularly struck by the attention because there are so many student teachers there and they get a lot of attention, a lot more than if there was a class of twenty and one teacher there” (Frank, newer parent).

In summary, parents seemed to view teachers as very important components of the learning environment who by way of their role in the lab school, their disposition for teaching and juggling multiple roles, and their ability to connect with parents, were a strong influence on the parent’s experiences.

Classrooms & Curriculum

The classrooms and the curriculum were other important topics related to the learning environment that parents spent some time talking about.
There is a lot of happy activity...and there is just a lot of attention to
detail. Inside the classrooms and outside the classrooms with the little
books and the pictures and a tremendous attention to detail and I’ve read
some of the web pages and some of the philosophy of it and I think the lab
school is tremendous in making kids want to learn (Frank, newer parent,
personal communication, March 12, 2004).

...It’s magical, created by the children. The learning environment is open
and allows for possibility and creativity. I am so pleased that there isn’t
this idea of sitting down at a little desk and doing a worksheet. Instead the
kids are going to learn by experiences, touching, feeling, smelling,
playing, and working up their own stories (Gail, veteran parent, personal
communication, March 18, 2004).

If a colleague of mine were to ask me what is the lab school like, you know
in terms of if they were looking for something for their kids, I would
probably say that it’s a remarkable place in that the teacher to student
ratio is unbelievably low which is great and that there is a lot of individual
attention to various children’s needs and that it seems to be a very safe
and warm environment for the kids...it’s clear that on different days the
room will be organized differently which seems to indicate that there are
new things happening. It’s a changing environment, but relatively safe.
It’s not like he’s dropped off in a new room each time. I mean there is
clearly continuity there, but it seems to indicate that it’s a new and
interesting place. It isn’t stale. It isn’t the same thing day after day.

Although, from my understanding, there is internal structure. There’s a time for circle time, a time for snack, there does seem to be some continuity in scheduling which of course is important (Bill, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004)

Gail and Frank had an almost blissful view of the lab school learning environment. Bill seemed to appreciate that it is an ever-changing environment. He likes that there is some invisible structure, such as daily routines like snack and circle time that young children need. Although these newer parents acknowledged some of the strengths of the lab school program, some of the parents interviewed, like Louise, felt like that when it comes to issues of discipline, the lab school does not have a solid stance on this issue.

When I describe the lab school program to someone who’s newly moved to the area and is looking for child care, I usually talk a lot about what I feel like are really positive sides of the lab school such a emergent curriculum and the energy and enthusiasm of the teachers and the student teachers and the ratio of adults to children and the overall community atmosphere that I feel like is generally tried to be created there. I usually tell them that it’s not as structured a program as they might want and I try to say very carefully that if you have an issue with discipline, this is not your place. Because the bottom line is that it’s not. If you have any sort of ‘yes ma’am, yes sir’ at your house and that’s the way you want your child to
behave, than that’s just not the lab school at all. I do usually tell the parents that I’m talking to that it is very teacher dependent and that they should go and can always go watch and see what it’s like and decide if it’s right for their children (Louise, veteran parent, personal communication, April 8, 2004).

In 2003, a parent-initiated committee was formed to address the issue of discipline at the lab school. Concerned parents, teachers, and lab school administrators attended these biweekly committee meetings to engage in dialogue about how best to help teachers handle discipline problems in the classroom and how best for the school to approach this problem. I was one of the teachers who attended these meetings regularly. Much to surprise of many people, some parents said that the lab school has been viewed by some parents as not having sufficient discipline policy for years. While the lab school did have a position on how to deal with discipline, the issue at hand seemed to be that some parents didn’t approve of the way issues of discipline were being handled in the classrooms. This was such a sensitive subject that many parents pulled their child out of the program as a result of it.

The Challenging Behavior Committee worked hard and drafted up guidelines for helping teachers decide which actions to take first when and if a child physically hurts another child in the classroom. The committee meetings were lengthy and emotionally draining. After several meetings, the teachers, parents, and lab school administrators mutually decided not to pursue the topic further. However, at the meeting we decided to put discipline guidelines in the student-teacher handbook (Appendix G). These handbooks were placed on a table in the lab school hallway for parents to see. A letter
was put in parents’ mailboxes informing them of the changes made in the handbook and that they could review the handbooks out on the table in the hallway. The handbooks were available for parent review for several weeks. Copies of the student-teacher handbook were distributed to the undergraduate student teachers and head teachers at the beginning of the school year and the assistant director spoke directly to the teachers about the change and gave them recommendations for dealing with challenging behavior.

**Community**

Elements of the curriculum like discipline ultimately influenced the community. What follows are examples of how Louise’s investment in the community changed as a result of her participation in the discipline committee meetings. There are also more parent statements related to the larger community. It should come as no surprise that a school that constantly strives to build and sustain community, would have parents who had a lot to say about its community; both good and bad (see Figure 5.).

*Figure 5. Community Topic Web.*
Relationships & Communication

Parents seemed to see communication as very important in building and sustaining relationships in the school. Gail and Louise’s comments below conflict because although they would probably agree that the teachers and administration at lab school are willing to talk about things, they had different experiences when it came to reaching a group consensus.

*People talk about everything here, which is what I love. You know, if anything is on your mind…I love that fact that if something was wrong, you guys would go, ‘okay, let’s talk about it, let’s figure it out, let’s come together on this subject* (Gail, veteran parent, personal communication, March 18, 2004).

*I don’t know if ownership is the right word because when it comes right down to do it, I really just let stuff go like at the end of the committee last year, I really did feel like it had not accomplished what I had wanted it to accomplish, but it was time to let it go and let the administration take care of it the way they wanted to and I, um, so I don’t feel ownership in that sense* (Louise, veteran parent, personal communication, April 8, 2004).

Louise expressed that although she spent countless hours at the discipline committee meetings and that the committee’s work was distributed to the teachers and parents, she still did not feel her voice ultimately mattered and that the administration did what they wanted to do with the topic regardless of her
suggestions. This clearly demonstrates the parents’ varying experiences with how amiable our school is.

Parents want to know their voice is valued and want opportunities to be listened to and to talk with teachers about their child’s experiences in the classroom. Below is a conversation about this desire.

Mary: The only thing I miss last semester we were doing a notebook...it was like a report from the teacher.

Kate: Like a home-school journal?

Mary: Exactly. But this semester it’s more like this week we are doing such and such, next week we are doing such and such.

Kate: But it’s not specific to Jake?

Mary: Right. Right. That is something parents are eager to hear about their own kids...It’s kind of nice to have it.

Kate: Especially if you can’t be there often at drop-off and pick-up.

Frank: And actually that sparks one idea and this is just a thought...again it isn’t meant as a criticism.

Mary: It’s not.

Kate: No, that’s fine.

Frank: If I think back over since Jake started, most of the substantive conversations were when something bad happened so it’s almost like if you’ve met the average situation or you’re above average in dealing with whatever situation, then that kind of gets less attention and since these are just summary conversations then that kind of gets not mentioned. So let’s
say some kid is doing some extraordinary thing. Let’s say you’ve got a little Picasso in the class. You get a sense that you’d never really hear about that.

Mary: How about before Jake started, teacher came to have a meeting. How about for the other semester is that too much more for teacher to do? Like right now I get to talk to you and I get to discuss things and it is kind of wonderful.

Kate: It is a really nice opportunity.

Mary: I wonder if teachers have time to do that or if not some kind of conversation?

Kate: Right. Communication is really important.

Mary: Yeah, but it is also time consuming when teachers have to deal with so many children at the same times and parents are eager to hear about that. That is why that book, home-school journal, is so nice when I get to see what they are doing (Mary and Frank, newer parents, personal communication, March 12, 2004).

Mary recognizes this need for the importance of communication and both Mary and Frank felt it was helpful for them to know more specific things about what their son was doing in the lab school. They want to hear about his special moments at school. They realize the lack of time many teachers have but suggested that even if teachers would be willing to meet occasionally for 10-15 minutes after school, when everyone has gone for the day would be helpful. They seemed to feel that the parent-teacher-child
conferences that are held twice a year are not enough and that home-school journals should be written in more frequently.

_Familiarity_

Familiarity with the program or the type of program seemed to influence parent’s ties to the lab school community or feelings of comfort with the missions of the lab school and their willingness to send their child there.

_Because I was educated there, I knew that the program was great and I knew that it had an infant program and I wanted to get him in there as soon as I could knowing that he would be able to go to preschool there…that’s what being in that program has taught me is that other people can love your kids and other people can take care of your kids and they may do it differently but it doesn’t mean they don’t do it as well. So I really like that aspect. I knew that if there was a developmental delay, that you all would pick up on it very quickly and that helped knowing Vickie and Andy were there and all the people who educated me, who I have so much respect for…_ (Ann, newer parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

_I have a philosophical vested interest in child development programs and lab school in general. I think it is a really under-utilized as a research facility. I do wish there was more research going on_ (Susan, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).
When I worked at the University of Washington, they had a lab school and it was also the most sort of creative and forward thinking program in the town, very highly desired by many people. And we got, there was a lot of observation booths there, so we did a lot of observation of those kids in those programs and I just had a sense that it would be the right kind of program for my kids (Louise, veteran parent, personal

Parent Involvement & Events

Parents are seen as an important part of the lab school community and are strongly encouraged to get involved at lab school. In fact, one parent said that she wasn’t prepared for the guilt she was going to feel when her child began going to lab school and she got all sorts of requests to get involved. Because of her schedule, there was a lot she wasn’t able to do at the school and so she ended up feeling guilty. Below are other comments parents had to say related to parent involvement and events.

“I think what you all have done with the classroom potlucks is better than the overall huge potluck. You know, Ben doesn’t function well in those kinds of situations” (Ann, newer parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

I wish there was some way to get more parents at the Parent Advisory Committee meetings...because with all those children, the fact that there was only like 20 at the one I came to in the fall...I personally don’t know how to increase that. Maybe people don’t take is as seriously because it is
a preschool and not elementary or high school...I think the newsletters are
great though so we are kept abreast of what sorts of things are going on
(Ann, newer parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

Cara: I was surprised to see so few people at the parent advisory
meeting.

Kate: Yeah. Why do you think that is?

Cara: I’m not sure. I mean coming from the New School where there is a
lot of parent participation and there are always parents and teachers at
every meeting whether it was a personnel meeting and they were hiring
someone or whether it was a board meeting, people came because they
cared and they were interested, not because they were required. But
that’s just the type of school they chose for that reason and it’s so hard for
me to judge what is normal and what’s not because I’m not familiar with
how many people would show up at a public school gathering.

Kate: How did you feel when you showed up at the Parent Advisory
Committee meeting and there weren’t very many parents there?

Cara: I guess I wasn’t that surprised because a lot of people just don’t
have the time or energy. They work and do other things (Cara, newer
parent, personal communication, March 25, 2004).

I think it’s extremely difficult to build and facilitate a real sense of
community amongst people who are the participants. Where I have seen it
work effectively is when people come, essentially looking for that...that isn’t necessarily something I feel that I bring or look strongly towards in this program. I think when it does tend to happen is when you have, you know, several parents and families who just seem to gel well together (Bill, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).

Cara and Ann, newer parents, found it discouraging to see so few parents at the Parent Advisory Committee meetings and were frankly surprised by the low numbers in attendance considering the lab school serves approximately 80 families. Bill, a newer parent, acknowledges challenges of building community in general and seemed to think that community building can only work if the other parent’s in the lab school come looking for that and hope to feel a strong sense of community from their school. Bill also acknowledges the need for a goodness of fit between parents and the school in order for community building to work.

I think different parents need to get involved instead of it always being the same ones...it takes effort from everybody and I think that’s what gets frustrating for the people who do everything and I see the same and I’ve only been there for a year and a half and I see the same faces over and over and I wonder where the rest of them are (Ann, newer parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

Some times it feels like it is just a matter of being there long enough to be invested. I feel more invested this year than I did last year. I have more
of an attachment to it (Susan, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).

*The first year I was more engaged in participating in terms of interacting with the other teachers and helping get Matthew situated and comfortable and feeling safe. Whereas this year, just because of the continuity of having you and Kathleen there, most of his transitions are pretty easy* (Bill, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).

Parents seemed to feel that the factors that influenced parent involvement are the age of their child, their child’s teacher and their own comfort with their child’s teacher, the length of time that they have been enrolled at the lab school, the type of event and how it’s organized and promoted, and parent’s busy schedules as factors that could influence parental involvement. Ann primarily felt discouraged with seeing the same parents at every event and meeting. She wanted to see more parents and families participating at these events as a group effort. I wondered how we can work with the parents like Ann to play an important role in engaging other parents to be more active in the life of the school.

*The New Parent*

Because lab school is not simply a place where children are dropped off for babysitting, there is a lot to know about what goes on in the school. Although there is documentation throughout the school telling about the school’s journey and process of evolution over the past several years, parents don’t always take the time to read that and
end up feeling a little “out of the loop!” Below is a dialogue about one parent’s feelings regarding being a new parent in the school.

Frank: We try to go to as many meetings as we can go to and it seems like there are some old hands there and they know the school and they know all these different things so we are still getting our feet wet.

Kate: Tell me a little bit more about how you feel as a new parent in the school, what you do, how you feel, and things that might help?

Frank: The only time we feel like a new parent is when we are those meetings and not to take away from anyone because who would want to stop the people who know what is going on because I think it is wonderful. We feel from the standpoint, not feeling bad that we are new, but just taking that we have a lot to learn to try and be helpful.

Kate: Can you give me an example?

Frank: Like the different kinds of projects. Some people know the different histories of certain kinds of projects. Different parents have gotten involved and that kind of thing. But you know, when we go everyday we never have a sense of being new or being outside. Even from the first day, we just never got that sense at all (Frank, newer parent, personal communication, March 12, 2004).

The reasons why parents do not read the documentation panels and Identity Card Booklets throughout the school telling about the schools history, mission, philosophy, and project work, or if they aren’t aware that those stories
are on the walls throughout our school is not known. What we know is that
parents, like Frank, sometimes feel like the new kid on the block. How can we
think of ways to make them feel more comfortable and knowledgeable about our
unique community?

External Community

Parent perceptions on linkages between the lab school and the larger, external
community, are ultimately influenced by how parents feel about the community within
lab school. When asked about connections between the lab school and the town or
perceptions of the lab school held in the surrounding community (see Figure 6.), parents
had a variety of things to say. Parents discussed the lab schools’ connections with
Virginia Tech, the town of Blacksburg, and the public schools.
Figure 6. External Community Topic Web.

*Virginia Tech*

When asked what they see as the connection between lab school and Virginia Tech, parents had the following things to say:

*It looks pretty strong because there is a lot of visiting things, going around the school, the building that is going on, the ducks, the duck pond, so I think a lot of walks around the school* (Frank, newer parent, personal communication, March 12, 2004).

*There’s something about, because I’m a faculty member there, there’s something about just having my kid nearby or nextdoor that feels...it has a*
very different qualitative feel from if I were bringing them across town to some highly ranked, prestigious whatever type of program. In that regards, it does have a kind of small town feel, or community feel, that is valuable to me. It’s quite tangible. I think it’s important. I think there may be opportunities within the larger Virginia Tech community, the issue of day care or schooling of pre-primary age children, is of huge concern, particularly to junior faculty, people who are starting families and this notion of having your child close and nearby is really valuable you know for a woman faculty member who is trying to be productive in her career and wanting to nurse or something, you know, having your kid nearby is a big deal...Again, just that feeling of having Matthew nearby means a great deal more to men than if it was an identical program that was five miles away (Bill, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).

In the comments above, Bill and Frank seemed to think that the lab school’s location on main campus was a nice benefit. For Frank, he saw that lab school was able to benefit from being on-campus and affiliated with Tech so it could take field trips around campus and utilize the resources. For Bill, just the nearness of the lab school to his office made him feel good. He really liked having his son Matthew nearby.

Other parents’ comments about the connection between lab school and Virginia Tech were not as positive as the comments above. For the most part parents saw a large gap between the University and the lab school. In February 2004, Virginia Tech sent out an email survey to all its staff and faculty to gather their thoughts about child care needs on campus.
My impression again is that people aren’t really sure what to do with it, that um, that there’s a lot of ambivalence about it and that in some ways, I have this feeling, and I’m not really sure why, maybe because of them cutting the early ed program, but that Tech sees it as this Albatross that they don’t know what to do with (Susan, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).

Well, obviously from the email survey they sent out, if they know it exists, I don’t think they respect it for some reason. I don’t know why. I don’t know if it’s the department not representing it at larger university functions or whatever. I don’t know if there is incoming faculty who have young children if they even mention it as a possibility. They should say ‘here’s your insurance, here’s the possibility!’ (Nicole, veteran parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

But you’re not getting support from the school and that’s my problem. That’s my biggest problem there is that the University has this great program and they don’t even know it and that breaks my heart to think that they have this fabulous program that they should be bragging about and then instead because it doesn’t make money, generate money, um it gets shoved under the carpet (Ann, newer parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).
And ironically at the University they are doing this great big survey, just got the email, about child care options and what the University could do to make things more friendly for families by providing more child care options and my response to survey was you’ve spent the last five years gutting the lab school program which was really dumb (Wayne, veteran parent, personal communication, March 8, 2004).

In terms of the University, I think it’s a really bad decision to gut the Early Childhood Education program. One reason is because it was rated highly and it’s silly to eliminate a center of excellence when there are other programs that you are putting money into that aren’t so highly rated. Another one is, it really is aligned with the missions of a land grant university…one of the things the state of Virginia needs is trained child care providers and saying, “well we’re not going to do that because it’s not academic enough” is not such a great idea. A third reason that it is a problem to cut the ECE is that teachers are one of the things that raise the profile of the University…because when people are thinking about going to Tech they come because they’ve heard of it and they may have had several teachers along the way that are from Virginia Tech. It kind of sustains the support of University on a broadly based basis. Throughout the state, not just throughout Southwest Virginia. And the fourth reason…is in some ways it is almost sexist to take a profession that tends to be dominated by women and devalue them as saying their not sufficiently academic enough, that child care which is a big part of the
human endeavor and it’s too important of a human endeavor to say ‘that’s not academic enough to be a part of our research interest’ (Wayne, veteran parent, personal communication, March 8, 2004).

Both newer and veteran parents were clearly frustrated with the lack of recognition the lab school gets from the University. They tended to think that the lab school is great place and could not understand why the University does not seem to appreciate it the way that they do. Despite the fact that the lab school functions to fulfill the University’s missions of teaching, research, and outreach, one reason the University may not appreciate the lab school the way that it is not a full time day care center and therefore it only serves a certain clientele. On the other hand, the University wants the lab school to be more visible in its research function. This dilemma of balancing the three missions is something the lab school consistently strives to achieve.

What is pretty clear about lab school is that quote un-quote; it is not a daycare solution. Which in fact, it doesn’t profess to be. Um, so I think it’s kind of on people’s radar screens that there is a place you could go, but it really doesn’t suit the needs of people who are full time in terms of having day care opportunities (Bill, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).

There’s a certain clientele that can only use the lab school. There are certain people who cannot because they can’t have childcare for only 3 hours a day (Nicole, veteran parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).
Another possible reason for the lab school not being more respected in the University community may be a function of visibility. Although the lab school is nationally and internationally recognized for its wonderful program the parents felt that not enough has not been done to make the lab school more visible to the immediate University community. It seems that some of these parents are interested in doing something to make this visibility happened in community. I wonder how we can capture this interest and engage the parents as “ambassadors” that represent the voices of the lab school?

The Town

Connections

Similarly to the University, there were limited acknowledgements of a connection between the lab school and the town. A couple of parents mentioned that the only connection they saw with the town was the occasional field trips the classrooms went on. Another parent, Cara, saw a connection between the lab school and the town because lab school provided a service for the community.

“I think the lab school definitely serves the community because it’s not just limited to faculty” (Cara, newer parent, personal communication, March 25, 2004).

Gail, a veteran parent, suggested ways we could become more visible in the town and build connections.

My classes did some service learning projects…I wish I could do that again where students from other fields across the curriculum could come
and work with you guys and the children so that students could see what a young architect is doing or what a young poet is doing or what a young engineer is doing...and that would also expand out into the community a little bit more...What about documentation elsewhere besides here? Like doing some sort of display like what is it, hundred years of our thousand years of the child thing? What about doing something like that at the community center or Smithfield or some place so people could see what cool stuff you are doing? (Gail, veteran parent, personal communication, March 18, 2004).

Perhaps increasing the visibility of the lab school within the town would educate the town more about who we are and what we do and would inform the town’s perceptions of lab school. How can we make our documentation of the life in the lab school visible in the town? How can the parents and the lab school work together to accomplish this goal? How can parents serve as lab school “ambassadors?”

Blacksburg has a small-town feel and inevitably in a small town, talk gets around. Talk has informed how people perceive the lab school. Below are some of the perceptions parents have about the town and some of the perceptions they believe the town has about lab school.

Town perceptions

I think most people think it’s a positive opportunity. I hear people talking about, ‘oh are you on the waiting list?’ (Cara, newer parent, personal communication, March 25, 2004).
When we arrived here we heard that the lab school was one of the best programs in town...I think it is perceived by young families, especially families who are seeking an alternative to the public mainstream as a wonderful place, fabulous, very much like a home-school away from home and I know that many families who have home-schooled their children have pretty much said those sorts of things. I think the lab school has changed a lot over the years and the perceptions may or may not have changed with the shifts that have happened inside (Louise, veteran parent, personal communication, April 8, 2004).

Well this would probably be different if I hadn’t been at those [discipline] meetings. I was shocked quite frankly. So I started asking people what they thought. Most people at our stage don’t have an opinion, they don’t know much about it. People who were around during those times in the program, a lot of them confirmed what was said in that meeting, that there was a kind of bundle of discontent about um, I guess discipline. I guess there was a notorious year where one kid was really out of control. I don’t mean last year, I mean another year. And so I think a lot of discontent stemmed from that and I don’t know the ins and outs, but I do think that established a stereotype of lab school as hippies. Another general thing is that it is a really great place that you couldn’t possibly get into (Susan, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).
In general, the parents seemed to believe that the town thinks that lab school is a good place for children, but how some parents talked about their perception of discipline in the lab school has tainted some rose-colored perceptions of the lab school in the larger community. It seems that parents who have left the lab school because of this discipline issue have shared their disappointment with others outside the immediate lab school community. Louise and Susan’s comments about the lab school’s lack of a clear position on handling discipline seem hurt the image of the lab school, not only within our immediate community, but also in the external community.

Public Schools

Overall, parents felt a strong disconnection between lab school and the public schools. Some parents seemed to feel a disconnection in the curriculum and expectations of lab school versus the public schools. Other parents, like Gail, had a personal and philosophical disconnection with the public school system.

I went to the first parent-teacher open house um for students that were going to become Kindergartner’s and it was all about when you better have their kids on the bus and exactly how they better come to school.... So I was very disturbed that everything was about the rules as opposed to the children and the ways that they learn and that disturbed me that nobody said, this is what we are excited about and this .... It was all about these rules and you will do this and you will do that and I thought forget it we’re not going there. And we moved and we went to go look at the school in Christiansburg and it was the same thing except when I went to talk to his teacher and I found out that she can’t stand the worksheet stuff and she
knows about Emilia Reggio and she’s very, very into that and she was excited to see his portfolio (Gail, veteran parent, personal communication, March 18, 2004).

Oh I could change public schools (laughs); I think there is so much wrong with public schools why I don’t want my children in public schools. I wish there were no such thing as worksheets, I wish that there was more experiential learning, I wish that there was more outside of the classroom learning, and I wish that public school wasn’t so institutionalized. I wish that they weren’t like these big meat-grinding machines where you come in and then you go… I think it is ridiculous. I don’t think its fun at all. Luckily I think a lot of it’s changing, but at the same time I think the public school has too much on its shoulders in terms of babysitting, in terms of this unfortunate stuff people are going through. Um, I think public schools are pretty unfortunate (Gail, veteran parent, personal communication, March 18, 2004).

... I think what’s going to help him in Kindergarten is being able to pay attention and learn strategies to help him pay attention. .... Being able to get beyond his shyness and do that in a way that is self-respecting (Susan, newer parent, personal communication, April 1, 2004).

The biggest thing that I hear, I haven’t experienced this yet because my child is not this age, is that maybe there needs to be some coordination
between the milestones and the curriculum from the kindergarten program
for the older children because I know there have been some concerns that
because lab school is less structured, that children are not going into
kindergarten knowing their letters, knowing their numbers. Maybe not so
much their numbers, but being able to write the alphabet...And the things
that you think you learn in kindergarten which people more than likely
already know in kindergarten. Personally, I also believe that that’s part of
your responsibility as a parent at home in addition to you know you can’t
lay it all on the school. But I think if people pull their kids out before they
go to kindergarten, like you know, in the last year that they could be there
and put them in another program I would say that would be the biggest
reason. And they feel like they need to learn, have a year of more structure
before they go on to kindergarten which we know is structured. I think
maybe there could be a happy medium there and I would most certainly not
consider pulling Ben out of the lab school unless I saw that he was not
going to be ready to go to kindergarten. Just because he thinks at lab
school I can do whatever I want (Ann, newer parent, personal
communication, March 9, 2004).

These parents’ comments demonstrate a need for more opportunities for dialogue
between the lab school, area preschools, and the public schools, particularly kindergarten.
Kindergarten readiness seems to be a topic of concern for many parents. Ann, a newer
parent who throughout her whole interview generally seemed to have very positive things
to say about the lab school and seemed to be a good advocate for the lab school. Yet, in
the statement above she expressed concern that her son might not be ready for kindergarten and she would consider taking him out. This sentiment demonstrates the need for the lab school to consider ways to make visible to parents and the public schools how its curriculum and practices prepare children for kindergarten. There is also a need to work with the schools to find ways to help parents understand what “readiness” of kindergarten entails.

When asked how public schools perceived the lab school, Louise replied, ...I know for a fact that the kindergarten teachers around town have a very clear ideas that lab school kids are a pain and that they need more reigning in, in a way that kids from more structured preschools don’t. They call them wild children. That may be because of the kind of children who decide to go there or some it may because of the discipline issue we talked about before.

When I asked her how it made her feel to know that her children would be perceived by the public schools like that she responded, I guess I’m not a home-schooler but I come from the side of that sort of home environment that I don’t give a crap. But it is also hard to know that your child is walking in with a little less edge than the other kids are and they kind of have to win the teachers over... (Louise, veteran parent, personal communication, April 8, 2004).

Preschool-Kindergarten Connections

What Louise described is seemingly a “stigma” lab school children take into the public school system is a troubling perception. This stigma leads us to think
about creating more connections between the lab school and the kindergartens to bridge differences in perceptions about mutual expectations and the experiences.

What about having some kind of open house where kindergarten and first grade teachers from local school systems could come here and look at what you guys are doing? ...I think it would be really cool for you guys to do, if it’s possible and I know you are already overworked anyway, but to do some sort of presentation to kindergarten classes and first grade classes so that there might be more of a knowledge of what’s going on in the lab school since so many of our kids do have to go out into the public school system around here. Wouldn’t it be neat if you could invite those teachers...? What about having some kind of open house where kindergarten and first grade teachers from local school systems could come here and look at what you guys are doing (Gail, veteran parent, personal communication, March 18, 2004).

When he first went to lab school he was mildly distressed that he wasn’t going to go to playgroup anymore because he wanted to go to playgroup and so during the breaks in the lab school he has been able to go to playgroup and that’s been enough. So now he has a linkage between them and I don’t think he, he hasn’t expressed any kind of disappointment by not being able to do playgroup and he does that on occasion and that is enough. Like he is there today. Um, so, I don’t know if there is anything like that that could be possible where you can still link between
them...maybe if there is a day, like a teacher work day or a break like that, if the kids who have gone to lab school could be invited to go back to lab school for a little while and maybe they could even teach the younger kids some of what they've learned from kindergarten. (Frank, newer parent).

These parents saw the value in creating connections between the lab school and public schools and even go so far as to suggest some very creative ways for how to begin forming these connections. For example, having a day where lab school alumni could come back to the lab school to tell the children about their kindergarten experiences.

Policies and Procedures

Much of what has been discussed in the curriculum, learning environment, community, and external community sections has implications for this policies and procedures section. Beyond some of the obvious implications for practice that the parents mentioned, parents indicated how the policies and procedures (see Figure 7.) dimension of our school could be improved. Some of them suggested that they would like to see the lab school provide more resources to parents like a school calendar and an electronic library of articles that would be helpful for parents to read about the lab school philosophy. Other suggestions included creating more opportunities for communication, ideas for community building, and to consider changing procedures related to home visits and planning of events.
Figure 7. Policies and Procedures Topic Web.

Resources and Planning of Events

Most parents are very eager to get involved in the lab school community, but voiced some obstacles they face as a result of changing times, their daily schedules and demands.

One thing that could be done at the beginning of the year, for everyone, but it would be especially useful for the new people, is just to list the things that go on that parents can get involved in at the beginning of the year...but that could be something that then you’d at least have a scope of things and you might say, ‘if I want to get involved, maybe these are some of the things I can get involved in’ and you would know the time frame and if you had to plan other activities around that time (Frank, newer parent).
Have the stuff out well ahead of time and have the guidelines for whatever we want to do well ahead of time and then that way people can know on this date I’ve already signed up for this and I need to make sure I’ve got this block of time open…I just think most people operate today on a six to eight week schedule…I think that it would be helpful to have things you want to do planned out well ahead of time, not so much planned out, but the idea. You know that in October you are going to visit the pumpkin patch…and just to have that on the calendar at the beginning of the year and I think that would help and people would know well ahead of time…

(Ann, newer parent).

Because of the nature of the lab school, how it is staffed and implementing emergent curriculum, it is difficult to plan out many activities and field trips far in advance because often the plans are revised daily based upon the children’s ongoing and emergent interests. However, there are some activities and events in the school that occur every year. For example, making bird feeders in the spring for Love and Free, the ducks that come back each year. Most likely, teachers arrange classrooms try and arrange for a field trip to a local pumpkin patch in October. Knowing that these events always happen around the same time of year, a tentative school calendar could be made to include these dates in order to prepare parents to make plans to attend these functions.

**Turnover, Change, and Room for Improvement**

As mentioned before, turnover and change have been characteristic of this program for a long time, particularly in the past three years. Some view these changes as bad; others view them as not so bad. In the end, I felt they had left with many more
thoughts and ideas about ways the program can be improved. In my mind, there is always room for improvement.

As far as turnover, I don’t see a lot of turnover there. I look at Vickie still being there and I think, well she was there 15 years ago when I was there. Andy was there when I was there. Janet was there when I was there...So I look at the people who are still teaching teachers, they’re still the ones that are there. If you send your child to any other preschool or day school or whatever, you are going to have a lot more turnover there than you are going to have over here. And I know that Lynn left and that there have been some changes but that the same time you can’t look at those changes as a bad thing. I mean the program is very different from when I was in the school, but I don’t see that as a bad thing, just different (Ann, newer parent).

It’s been hard seeing people go, people who I know were a real key part of the lab school. Even losing the person whose whole job was just being the cook. She seemed to lessen the load of the people in the school and she had a good rapport with the kids too (Nicole, veteran parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

There seemed to be a difference in how Nicole, a veteran parent, and Ann, a newer parent, perceived staff turnover and changes in the school. Perhaps this was because Nicole had children enrolled in the lab school over a period of eight years and
experienced some of the major change and turnover that occurred first hand. Ann had only been at the lab school for a year and a half so her experiences with change and turnover might not be as plentiful as those of Nicole.

Nicole was also around in the years when the University was restructuring and going through budget cuts. These changes resulted in positions being taken out of the lab school. She believed that the reduction of staff had a negative impact on the culture and community of the school. Below are her thoughts on this matter.

*Lab school needs more resources. I’ve been on that Parent Advisory Committee last year and including this year, and people have mentioned the face that when I first started lab school it was the cheapest day care in town...and in the time we’ve been there the tuition has gone up and I don’t know because I’m not in the office, but I think there are many people who would pay even more to have the staffing correct* (Nicole, veteran parent, personal communication, March 9, 2004).

When I asked Nicole to be more specific about her idea of “correct” staffing, she said she felt that having full-time professional teachers in the classroom would be better and that having the cook there was helpful. Additionally, she thought having someone in the curriculum coordinator’s position would be ideal.

*Newer Parents vs. Veteran Parents*

The above statements of Ann and Nicole on their respective perceptions regarding changes in the school are examples of how newer parents and veteran parents seemed to view the school culture differently. Overall, veteran parents had been around longer, had a longer history in the lab school, and thus, had more lab schools experiences to reflect on how different changes
had impacted the lab school. Most importantly they had seen teachers, administrators, families, and children had come and go for various circumstances. These parents had more to say about the difficulties of turnover and change than the newer parents. Newer parents seemed to be more interested in making connections. They offered more ideas for creating connections between home and school. Perhaps this is because the experience of coming into a new place and trying to establish relationships with other parents and teachers is fresher in their minds than veteran parents.

When asked how they would describe their lab school experiences, newer parents generally replied with more positive comments. Wayne, a veteran parents said,

*Michael’s was really good. There was just a huge sense of community and he made so many friends there, many of whom he still keeps in touch with today even though they don’t go to the same school and the parents got involved. There tended to be a lot of interactive social activities that the parents kind of created a community when they were on breaks and they would certain summers or during the winter break, they’d get together several times to play together. Oh, they had projects; the whole class would do these projects. In Michael’s class in the Maroon room one year they decided that they needed to improve the duck pond to make things nicer for the ducks and the thought of all these ideas and there were like Saturday clean up projects for the duck pond and they built a little house for those two ducks Free and Love and uh, there was a lot going on. With Amy, it’s been good for her and she enjoys playing with people, she enjoys all the teachers. There are lots of nice people involved at the lab school,*
but it seems to be there is less sense of community. We’ve met a lot of people we get together with outside of lab school who feel like maybe there is less unified focus then there was and the reason is largely is they’ve cut back and they’ve had so much change and turnover and so many cut backs in terms of the staff they had that it’s hard to maintain the same kind of program..... (Wayne, veteran parent).

“Well, it’s been up and down and I don’t know if some it’s because we’ve been there a while and we expect more?” (Karen, veteran parent, personal communication, March 8, 2004).

Similar to Nicole, Wayne and Karen definitely felt that the quality of their experience had changed over time. They felt that their experience this year was not what it used to be for a variety of factors. Wayne mentioned the staff and budget cut backs as being a large factor. He and his family felt less connected with the lab school and with the families and teachers in their daughter’s classroom.

_Eisner’s Major Dimensions of Schooling and Educational Criticism_

As mentioned before, Eisner’s (1998) major dimensions of schooling (intentional, structural, curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative) were also used as a framework for me to organize the relative thoughts and perceptions of parents that presented themselves in the data analysis process. By using Eisner’s major dimensions, I allowed myself to understand and critique my practices at the lab school and “consider other ways of doing things” (p.75).
The *intentional dimension* included things like the lab school’s missions and declaration of intent statement that is basically the purpose by which the school operates. Eisner points out that “there is often a discrepancy between what educators say they want to achieve and what they do…” (p. 73).

The *structural dimension* included how the daily schedule of the school and the lab school’s operating hours influence the participants and their families. “Because the structure people operate within influence many aspects of their lives, their importance can be profound” (p. 74). Ann, a newer parent, touched upon components of the structural dimension when she expressed a preference for the teacher’s being sensitive to the children’s needs and formulating a daily schedule around them. Bill, a newer parent, also highlighted upon this dimension when he talked about how the Virginia Tech faculty community does not see the lab school as a very good resource because they do not offer full-time day care.

The *curricular dimension* examines the “quality of the curriculum’s content and the goals and the activities employed to engage students in it” (p.75). For example, many parents who were interviewed mentioned how much they liked the emergent curriculum practices that occur in the lab school. Another contrary example was when Louise (veteran parent) and Susan (newer parent) discussed the lack of a visible stance on handing discipline in the classrooms.

The *pedagogical dimension* examines ways the curriculum and classroom are mediated by the teacher and the variable ways teachers approach their classroom instruction and curriculum. Parents talked a lot about variations in their lab school experiences based upon individual teacher’s practices in the classroom, commitment to
teaching, personality, disposition, and understanding of the lab school philosophy. Items in this pedagogical dimension seem to be interrelated with the curricular dimension in that the parents’ perceptions about the teachers, instruction and curriculum are also reflected in that dimension.

The *evaluative dimension*, included ways “value judgments about the quality of some object, situation, and process” (Eisner, 1997, p.80). The parents’ perceptions of the lab school and are based on their own values, understanding of the philosophy of the lab school and their perceptions of the curriculum and pedagogical dimensions. The evaluative dimension illustrates an overall perception of the intentional, structural, curricular, and pedagogical dimensions.

*Connecting Cultures Across the Ocean*

*More Reflections from Italy and Reggio Emilia*

Vickie, Lynn, Scott, and I spent our first day and night in Montepulciano. Before I went to Italy I had heard how the children in the schools in Reggio Emilia engage in dialogue with one another that is quite often around and issue of conflict for them. I remember hearing about children doing this and thinking how many of the young children I know here in the United States need an adult to intervene and help them solve the problem. Below is a journal entry that demonstrates how children are prepared for conflict and dialogue from an early age.

*I saw a young boy, around 5 years old, and his mother today in the airport in Rome and I was struck by the unfamiliar way in which they interacted with one another. She was loudly and passionately discussing something with him. Because she was speaking to him in Italian, I wasn’t sure what*
they were saying, but I remember feeling like they were almost arguing rather than discussing. It seemed she wanted him to do something with the luggage cart that he wasn’t doing. What surprised me was his reply to her after she spoke to him. Without any hesitation or ounce of fear, he spoke up and seemed to defend himself and his actions in the same passionate, loud, tone of voice she used with him. I was surprised by his mother’s reaction. Unlike how my mother would have reacted, this mother didn’t seem to get angry with her son for “mouthing off” to her. The mother and son simply went on with their day and their business and seamlessly left room for both their voices and opinions to be listened to...

(February 23, 2004)

My first impression of this interaction was the dynamics between the mother and the child. Each listened to the other’s voice with respect. The child seemed secure in voicing his opinion just as passionately as his mother. In retrospect, I wonder how my reaction to the same type of situation in the same context might be different as a result of my trip to Italy. Dialogue and listening to the voices of all the protagonists seems to be an important part of the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia. Italians talk about discussione. According to Corsaro (1997) discussione is the art of negotiation and debate that is valued in Italian society. It’s a part of their life and occurs everywhere in the society. So that children and adults really engage in discussione from an early age. When I observed this it brought to mind Carsaro’s discussion on this and I wonder how this value and practice would work in our American society. In a later excerpt, I acknowledge my own discomfort with this type of dialogue.
Next, my questions shifted as I tried to understand the people’s every day ways of being and the pace at which they live.

...I’m so curious about the people here and their way of life. I can’t stop thinking about the four women I saw today sitting in the laundry cleaners’ shop visiting with one another. Through the large store window I could see them sitting down. This wasn’t a Laundromat so it didn’t appear that they just all happened to be there at the same time doing their laundry and I assume it wouldn’t take four, clearly domestic women to run such a small shop, so I can only assume they were causally visiting. They didn’t look in any rush to run off somewhere. I tried to picture what a day in their life might look like and I found myself wishing I could be a fly buzzing around each of them around for the day. Instead, I was left with these questions. How do these habits and way of life come to be? How do people learn to slow down and savor our time together? What implication does this have for education and the larger society? ... (February 23, 2004).

I’m still not sure how we in the United States could begin to learn to slow down and savor our time together with our family and friends. My assumption about these habits and ways of life is that they are deeply embedded in the culture and are learned over time. In our culture, we are taught not to waste time, to compete with one another, and to excel. Many educators of young children talk about play as child’s work. This notion seems to imply play, even in childhood, has implications for work like in
adulthood. Hence, we are told to work more and play less and leave no room for both to be intertwined. Reflecting on this moment of a slower pace of life, I felt a sense of guilt and longing to regain all the special moments I had lost as a result of my constant and daily race to get as much done in a day as possible. I thought of all the rushed I conversations I had with my children’s parents that have been rushed as a result of our daily schedules and busy lives. I thought of all the “ordinary moments” (Shafer, 2002) with children that I had let pass by because we needed to get on with our day and our busy schedule. Perhaps this is because I am still struggling to embrace the notion of children’s play as work because I put so much emphasis in my own life on achieving through hard work, and leave little room for play? Ultimately, when we slow the clock down, there is more time and opportunity for “ordinary moments” to become “extraordinary possibilities” (Shafer, 2002, p. 185) in our schools and daily lives outside of school.

Just as the glorious wine was loved and embraced for all its subtle character, I felt that every person in the schools I visited in Reggio Emilia were embraced and valued. When we went to visit the schools we were given the opportunity to interact in a large group in a question and answer forum. I was so surprised at the first school I visited because it wasn’t just the teachers and administrators telling us about their school. Parents, children, and even the school cooks had been invited to speak at the question and answer forum. They were valued and embraced in a way much different from anything I’d ever seen in our school.
While visiting the Neruda Preschool, Mara Davoli (the school's atelierista) made a beautiful comment about how everyone in the school enters through different doors and that there needs to be enough doors in the school for everyone to walk through to embrace everyone’s diverse perspectives. At another venue that week, Carlina Rinaldi stated:

‘difference is the most important value we may offer’ (Rinaldi, conference presentation, February 26, 2004). These are such powerful statements and demonstrated so much of what the schools of Reggio Emilia strive to be, do, say, think, act, and mean. I’m not sure I truly valued different perspectives the way the schools and people of Reggio Emilia do and I’m not sure that the lab school had been able to fully come to these conclusions and furthermore, make them a visible reality.

For some reason we (the lab school, the larger American culture, and I) are threatened by differences. Perhaps these are learned societal values? It seems we take a person’s challenges towards us as disapproval of what we already do, as an assault on our notions and ways of being. How did we become so closed and afraid? How did I become so closed and afraid of letting other perspectives in? How do I overcome this and embrace the differences and see the value they can bring to a program? I wonder if I have or will be able to participate in truly socially-constructed practices and I wonder what this really means to me? How does my rethinking of these notions contribute to my attempts and investment in recreating an amiable school? (March 3, 2004).
I want to be able to embrace differences in thoughts, beliefs, values, and goals. The schools in Reggio Emilia and what I learned while visiting there assisted my efforts as I make attempts to bring their value system to our own culture. Concepts from Reggio Emilia cannot be applied directly to our own contexts, but need to be used as a consideration for transformation within our own culture. I do not want parents on a discipline committee to get discouraged and call an end to collaboration because they think that their voices do not truly matter in the end. When people tour our school I want to invite children and parents to come and to share their understanding of the lab school with our visitors. Based on the data collected by parents, it is clear they have values and opinions too. These ideas need to be embraced if we are to come to a point of true shared understanding about our school culture.

Visiting Italy made me long for a more solid community in the lab school with a shared sense of understanding and commitment among all the actors. My trip also helped me realize some of the necessary components of making my dreams for the lab school possible. Not only did I discover much about Italian culture, but I discovered just how special our own culture is and can be when we allow ourselves to open up to it. I realized that when we open ourselves up to what is around us, there are actually many shared understandings, we just need to be willing to listen.

....Not long ago, Vickie and I landed in Philadelphia. Even though I'd never considered Philadelphia my “home” before today, I felt myself thinking, “Man, it’s good to be home!” as we walked off the airplane. Although I greatly enjoyed my time in Italy, I missed “home” and the comforts of a familiar place. Undoubtedly, this trip influenced my
thinking about what culture means. Walking around the airport I felt much more safe, competent, and secure. The whole time I was in Italy, I longed for a sense of belongingness. My sense of place and belongingness to a larger cultural identity was restored once we began walking around the Philadelphia Airport.

My spirits were lifted. I noticed that my ability to interact and communicate, both verbally and nonverbally, with the environment and the people were key to my sense of renewed spirit. I was able to understand what people were saying to me and where the signs were leading me. The people seemed familiar to me. I couldn’t stop looking at people’s feet as they walked by. They almost grounded me. I felt secure, as if I knew their walk and the shoes they were walking in. I recognized the names of the stores and the restaurants in the airport. When Vickie and I had a craving for a big, juicy hamburger, I knew right where we could go to find one and satisfy our intense craving. I didn’t have to ask directions and have someone look at me like I had three heads because they couldn’t understand me... (March 4, 2004).

The airport is a place of culture. It is a space of shared understandings, meanings, and relationships. I realized the night and day contrast between my experiences in Italy and my experience in the Philadelphia Airport. I realized that once I was in the airport where things were familiar that I felt connected with the culture. I felt safe, secure, welcomed, competent, and happy. I remember being so happy to a place that felt familiar and I was giddy with laughter and delight. Traveling to far away places and experiencing
different cultures might have highlighted my awareness and valuing of my own culture. It is wonderful to learn about other cultures but it is always good to be home.

Like the airport, schools are places of culture (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001, p. 38). Schools are contextual places where a shared understanding is fundamental to the well being of the actors within that school. This experience and my discomfort with being out of my element in Italy led me to see the importance of shared understanding in schools where a sense of place, belongingness, and familiarity is present for children, parents, and teachers. Furthermore, it led me to see that families in our school may often feel this same sense of disconnect and discomfort in understanding the school. It led me to wonder how we can help everyone achieve a sense of shared understanding about the culture of our school?
CHAPTER FIVE
Where Do We Go From Here?

In order to understand our identity as a school, we must first understand the culture within which our identity is shaped. Even if we come to an understanding of our collective culture and identity, we can be sure it will change! However, this does not undermine the need to understand parents’ perceptions of the cultural practices and activities of the school and to examine how parent’s understandings of the culture of the school influence the culture of our lab school community at large. Underlying this matter of concerns is the importance to scaffold parents and new staff to gain an understanding of the basic tenants of our culture upon which a foundation of change is possible.

Furthermore, how can we make communication among the protagonists more possible and meaningful? Trying to find ways to communicate effectively has been an ongoing challenge through the years.

It is clear from some of the parent’s comments reported in Chapter Four, we need to better inform them about daily practices involving the curriculum, community, environment, and policies and procedures. With this understanding, they may be better prepared to be partners with us in the care and education of their children. Additionally, they can help us improve the lab school’s connections with Virginia Tech and the surrounding community.

How can we develop a culture of listening and talking across differences, discussion? How can we transform dialogue into action? Where do we go from here? By carefully listening to what parents have to say, we uncovered some helpful hints about how we can transform good practice into best practice.
**Implications for Future Practice**

For various reasons, the level of participation in the lab school differed greatly among the families. For the most part, newer parents and veteran parents had different understandings of the lab school culture and the lab school meant different things to them. Parent expectations, personality, dispositions, and values all seemed to come into play and influenced the way they see the lab school culture and even the way they saw their children’s participations and interactions.

**Intentional Dimension**

There seemed to be a discrepant understanding among these parents about the purpose of the lab school. It seemed that we needed to make the missions of the lab school, i.e., teaching, research and service; better understood by parents and members of the external community. The lab school exists to support the three-fold University mission of teaching, research, and service (outreach). Additionally, intentional items in our lab school practices need to be revisited and reconstructed to make our position on discipline more transparent to parents and working towards making them feel their voices do count across all areas of practice and curriculum.

**Structural Dimension**

Structural considerations for improving continuity of care and education for children include finding a way to staff each classroom with a full-time professional teacher. In this way, frequency of teacher turnover will decrease and there will be more consistency in practice across the classrooms and from one year to another.

Despite sharing information with parents in multiple ways, such as, the numerous documentation displays around the school that present our history, mission, philosophy,
and various ongoing projects and our Identity Card Booklet, parents still commented about wanting to be more informed about lab school practices and events. To meet this need and to minimize discrepant understandings, it is recommended that an in-depth parent orientation be conducted at the beginning of each school year.

Prior to the beginning of the school year each classroom teacher hosts an open house in the school. This time is primarily a time for the children to visit the school and for parents to ask any questions they might have. However, this time has been primarily used to tell parents where their child’s belongings can be stored, to tell them to bring in an extra change of clothes, and when to drop off and pick up their child, as well as to give parents information about the daily structure of the school. Thus, there are not many opportunities for parents to understand the school and what happens in the school throughout the year.

It is proposed that the school would conduct an in-depth parent orientation for the new parents to learn about the missions, history, philosophy and practice of the lab school. With this knowledge they could make better decision regarding whether this school would be a good fit for their family belief system regarding preschool education. They would also have an opportunity to learn more about the influences of the Reggio Emilia philosophy on our inquiry based teaching and learning. Parents would be informed about how documentation in our classrooms and throughout our school is connected to the curriculum. Additionally, parents could gain an understanding of and ways of participate in their children’s education as one of the protagonists in learning.

Other topics to be covered might include, for example, how we handle discipline in the classrooms as well the kind of projects and events that families can get involved in
during the school year. They would have an opportunity to ask questions about the school and get to know their fellow parents. Veteran parents could be invited to be at this orientation to share their experiences with the new parents. Additionally, veteran parents could serve as “Mentor Parents” to help the new parents and children transition into the school. The idea of mentor parents was implemented at one time at the lab school with varying success. Maybe we can ask veteran parents to take a more active role in organizing and implement this process, since this is definitely an initiative that is deeply dependent on parents. The lab school will support their initiative in ways they deem useful and relevant.

Most of the parents expressed an interest to experience in and contribute to a greater sense of community; in particular, they wanted to know how they could be involved in the life of the school. One parent suggested conducting a parent survey at the beginning of the year asking what parents enjoy doing and if they have any particular skills or hobbies they could share as resources to the school. Although these kinds of parent surveys are conducted early we have not been very effectively in using these parent resources. There is a need for us to make these talents and resources visible to all the parents and teachers so we can work together to plan ways to invited parents to share their expertise in the classrooms.

Other parents thought it would be nice to have more potlucks during the school year, possibly during lunch time when the morning children are leaving school and the afternoon children are arriving so that parents and children from both programs could interact with one another while they are already on campus. These suggestions for
community building provide a basis for future recommendations and implementation of activities that could enhance community building.

*The Curricular Dimension*

Parents felt that there is a need for more dialogue with the public schools, especially kindergarten teachers. It is believed that these communications could enhance discussion of mutual expectations for each child’s transition from preschool to kindergarten. It is recommended that one way to facilitate this dialogue is to encourage the New River Valley Association for Early Childhood Education, Virginia Tech Education Association, and Virginia Tech Association for Early Childhood Education to provide opportunities for preschool teachers and parents to dialogue with public school educators in an effort to bridge transition from one program to another.

The above recommendations could help the lab school educators and the children’s parents develop a shared understanding about the practices and expectations of preschool and kindergarten classrooms. This understanding could promote positive transitions from preschool to kindergarten as well as alleviate parent’s concerns about whether their children are prepared for kindergarten.

*Pedagogical Dimension*

The lab school may want to also rethink the way children and their families are transitioned from home to school. Inspired by “Inserimento” practices in Pistoia, Italy (Bove, 2001), we may want to transition children and their families from home to school more gradually. Inserimento practices typically transition infants and families gradually from home to school, and it seems logical that this could be transferred to all classrooms and age groups.
One possible way to facilitate a gradual transition into our school context would be to ask a group of two to three parents and children to come into the classroom for an hour a day for three days prior to their child’s first full day of attendance at the school. This process would give parents, teachers, and children opportunities to get to know one another to become familiar with the classroom and school environment. In small groups, teachers can also use these times to observe and assess each child’s interest and needs. Parents would have the opportunity to interact with other parents to begin the formation of relationships.

Currently, at the beginning of each year teachers conduct home-visits with families. These times are usually helpful for the teachers, children, and the families as they begin the process of getting to know each other. However, since these visits are conducted before the school year, a child’s undergraduate target teacher is unable to go on the visit because the undergraduate students do not come back to campus until the beginning of the academic year. Parents have expressed concern that the undergraduate target teachers are not involved in home visits. They would like to see this situation remedied.

If a period of gradual transition into the classroom is adopted, home visits could be moved to a few weeks into the semester after children have been assigned to their respective undergraduate target teachers. Home visits could be attended by both the head teacher and target teacher.

Knowing that parents had difficulty translating what they were seeing in the classrooms as learning, the lab school needs to work to better inform parents about the essence of an integrative, inquiry based, emergent curriculum and how such a curriculum
can foster a joy of learning and promote positive social-emotional development of children, while preparing them both socially and academically for kindergarten. Engaging parents in dialogue about the lab school’s image of the child as capable, competent, curious, and having unlimited potential would be helpful for the parents, teachers, and school administrators to come to a collective understanding and interpretation of the child.

**Implications for Future Research**

Findings from this research illustrate that there are many contextual factors that influence practice at lab school and how the culture is defined by parents. Further research should examine how these contextual factors and the lab school culture change over time. How implementation of new procedures and programs, such as, gradual transition from home to school, family orientation sessions, and family “mentor systems” might improve parent’s understanding of the lab school culture. How might these changes promote dialogue between parents and school personnel? In what ways would dialogue lead to a shared understanding that might contribute to the ever-changing, ever-constructing culture of the lab school?

More research needs to be conducted to examine how teachers, parents, and children come to understand the philosophy and practices of the lab school. Future research also needs to be done on a larger scale, especially to get perspectives from more parents in the afternoon preschool program at the lab school. There are a much greater number of international families in the afternoon program. The need for multiple perspectives about parent understanding of the lab school is needed. If these things were done then a more representative understanding of the lab school might be achieved.
between parents and teachers regarding practice and best practice. Also, if a shared understanding about school culture is to be achieved, the lab school, and schools in general, need to learn to listen more carefully to all the actors within the school.

Reflecting and Re-Projecting: Lessons Learned

The lab school accepts and embraces an inquiry-based, social constructivist, and sociocultural perspective that informs us of the need to continue trying to understand our culture and all the actors in the midst of change. The lab school’s philosophy of inquiry and social constructivism provide the structure for continuing inquiry, reconstructing, and transforming itself and serves as a foundation for dialogue and interactions among all the protagonists of the school. Practice in the schools of Reggio Emilia informs us of the importance of listening to parents, children, and each other to understand, to reconstruct, and raise more questions for inquiry. Parents and teachers need to learn to listen, to develop a sense of trust and to continue to talk constructively across differences.

Essentially we need to learn to engage in discussione (Corsaro, 1997) as mentioned in Chapter Four. How can we encourage discussione among all the protagonists so it will become one of the cultural values embraced at the lab school?
References


Appendix A

Timeline: The Process of Transformation

1995 - April: Sharma appointed Director of the Lab School
   
1995 - June: Adoption of collaborative work with colleagues; see no need for congregational philosophy & practice
   
1996 - Summer: In-depth analysis of the program
   
1996 - Fall: Recognition of obstacles such as staff turnover, staff experience, and unavailable funds to hire professional lecturers
   
1996 - Fall: Curriculum Department hired as 'catalysts' for change
   
1997 - Fall: Curriculum and professional classroom teacher, head of department
   
1997 - Fall: Small family-centered school, includes: family relationships
   

Significant changes:
- New curriculum taken
- New assistant director
- New professional consultant
- New director
- No curriculum director
- New professional teacher
- New curriculum teacher
- New school
Appendix B
University IRB Permission to Conduct Study

MEMORANDUM

TO: Victoria R. Fu Human Development 0416
    Kathryn Mosher Nursery School 0416

FROM: David Moore

SUBJECT: IRB Expedited Approval: “A Narrative Inquiry of Parent Understanding of School Culture” IRB # 04-040

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective February 4, 2004.

cc: File
    Department Reviewer Joyce Arditti HD 0416
Appendix C
Letter to the Parents

Dear Parent,

My name is Kate Mosher. Many of you might know me as the Blue/Green Room Toddler Teacher. Not only am I a teacher in the Lab School, but I am also working on my masters thesis. I would like to invite you to participate in research I will be conducting at the Child Development Laboratory School (CDLS).

The purpose of my study is two-fold: 1) to gain knowledge of parent’s ideas about the lab school; and 2) to describe what makes the CDLS a meaningful place for them and their family. For example, to discern the topics that seem to be most important for parents to share and understand, and to provide the school with strategies for creating amiable partnerships with parents.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate in this study I will be interviewing you about your beliefs and feelings about your experience as a parent at the Lab School. These interviews can take place at the CDLS, your home, or wherever you are most comfortable meeting. These interviews will be audio taped, and later transcribed, to facilitate the data compilation and analysis of this descriptive study. The audiotapes and transcriptions will be kept strictly confidential. Consent forms will be signed to ensure confidentiality. My co-investigator, Dr. Victoria R. Fu, and myself will be the only people reviewing transcribed interviews. I will be the only person transcribing the audiotapes. The length of the interviews is expected to be approximately sixty to ninety minutes.

The benefits of the study will be to gain an understanding of home-school relationships. I believe the study will provide teachers, parents, and schools additional information in engaging families in the learning community.

Please read and fill out the attached informed consent form stating whether or not you wish to participate in this study. Should you choose to participate in this study, please enclose your signed informed consent form in the self-addressed, postage paid envelope included in this mailing. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kate Mosher
Appendix D

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of the Project: A Narrative Inquiry of Parent Understanding of Their School
Principal Investigator: Kathryn T. Mosher
IRB Approval: #04-040

I. Purpose of this Research/Project

The purpose of this research is two-fold: 1) to illuminate ways parents articulate their understanding of the CDLS and 2) to describe what makes the CDLS a meaningful place for them and their family. For example, to discern the topics that seem to be most important for parents to share and understand, and to provide the school with strategies for creating amiable partnerships with parents.

II. Procedures

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Two semi-structured interviews will be conducted between February 16, 2004 and March 19, 2004. Interviews can be conducted at the CDLS, in your home, or wherever else you would feel comfortable meeting. Interviews will be audio taped in order to record complete and accurate responses to the interview questions. If you consent to participate, you will sign the attached Informed Consent Form. You will be given a copy of the interview questions and a Xerox copy of this informed consent form. The interview sessions will last no longer than one hour.

III. Risks

No more than minimal risk exists for all participants.
IV. Benefits

The benefits will be to gain understanding of multiple perspectives parents held about the school and the meanings of early childhood programs to them and their children. I believe this study will provide teachers, parents and schools additional information about parental perspectives on school culture and ways to enhance home-school partnerships. The finding of this study will further inform early childhood educators and parents in understanding the importance of partnership and collaboration in enriching their children's care and education.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

The names of the parents will be kept strictly confidential. Any information reported in the final written report will use pseudonyms rather than the names of the specific participants. All interview tapes and transcriptions will be secured in a locked filing cabinet in my office in Wallace Hall. Only the co-investigators will have access to the actual original data. All interview tapes will be destroyed one year after completion of the study.

VI. Compensation

Participants’ will not be provided with any financial incentive or other compensation for their participation in this research.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from participation in this research, you may do so without prejudice, penalty, or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled.
VIII. Subject's Responsibilities

You are responsible for meeting with the principal investigator for your interview at your mutually scheduled time.

X. Subject's Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

_______________________________________________ Date__________
Subject signature

Should I have any pertinent questions about this research or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, I may contact:

Kate Mosher 540-231-1863/kmosher@vt.edu
Investigator(s) Telephone/e-mail

Vickie Fu, Ph.D. 540-231-4697/vfu@vt.edu
Faculty Advisor Telephone/e-mail

Joyce Arditti, Ph.D. 540-231-5758/arditti@vt.edu
Departmental Reviewer Telephone/e-mail

David M. Moore 540-231-4491/moored@vt.edu
Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects Office of Research Compliance – CVM Phase II (0442) Research Division Telephone/e-mail

This Informed Consent is valid from February 4, 2004 to February 4, 2005.
Appendix E
Parent Interview

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. What early childhood program(s) have you experienced?
2. How would you describe your experiences?
3. How long has your child been coming to the lab school?
4. How would you describe your experience at lab school?
5. How would you describe your child's lab school experience?
6. What does the lab school mean to you?
7. How would you describe the lab school program?
8. How would you describe the learning environment at the lab school?
9. How would you describe your relationship with the teachers, other lab school personnel, and the other parents?
10. What do you think the perceptions are about the lab school in the outside community? For example, in Blacksburg and Montgomery County?
11. What do you see as the connection between the town and lab school? What would you like to see as the connection between lab school and public school?
12. What is your perception about the communities’ values about the care and education of young children?
13. In what ways do you think the community supports the care and education of young children?
14. How do you think parents can support building a community in the lab school?
15. Do you have any suggestions for the school and the teachers? What are they?
Appendix F

Outline of Protocol for IRB Request for Expedited Research

Title of the Project: A Narrative Inquiry of Parent Understanding of School Culture
Investigators: Kathryn Mosher; Victoria Fu, Ph.D.

I. Justification/Purpose of the Project

Parents are a crucial element in schools. This fact is becoming more widely recognized by the early childhood education field as there is a push to promote and sustain relationships with parents and families based on “partnership, equality, and genuine collaboration” (National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education [NIECDE], 2000, p. 62). Despite this fact, many parents are not actively involved in their young children’s care and education. Bowman (2003) stated that “parental expectations, poor program conceptualization and implementation, parental reluctance to participate, and insufficient public support” (p. 129) as some of the reasons why parents aren’t involved in their child’s school.

The Virginia Tech Child Development Laboratory School (CDLS) has a continuous staff turnover due to the fact that it is a teaching laboratory and the classroom teachers are graduate teaching assistants. Thus, the teachers leave upon completing their graduate studies. This turnover, to some extent, mirrors the reality in most early childhood programs where frequent staff turnovers are due to other reasons. A strong sense of community and partnerships with parents and families may have been compromised due to this phenomenon. Bruner (1990) helps us understand that we cannot move forward with school change and improve partnerships with the stakeholders within
a school until we seek to understand the “collective culture” of our schools and the “shared meanings and values” that exist in the school.

The primary purpose of this research is to examine how parents at the CDLS come to understand and attempt to define their school culture. Specifically, the purpose of this research is two-fold: 1) to illuminate ways parents articulate their understanding of the CDLS and 2) to describe what makes the CDLS a meaningful place for them and their family. For example, to discern the topics that seem to be most important for parents to share and understand, and to provide the school with strategies for creating amiable partnerships with parents.

II. Procedures

a. Setting and Participants

Participants’ in this research will be parents of young children who are currently or previously enrolled at the CDLS in Blacksburg, Virginia. The CDLS is a NAEYC accredited and licensed school, which provides part-time care and education to approximately 80 children age infancy through kindergarten. There are a total of five classrooms at the CDLS. Participants from this study will be three parents (single or couples) of young children from each classroom at the CDLS. Because participation will be open to both the mother and father, there could be a total of 15-30 parents in this study.

The teachers in each of the five classrooms will be briefed about the study at a staff meeting and then asked to recommend parents who they think would be most willing to participate in this study. I will ask teachers to recommend three types of parents for this sample. These include: 1) veteran parents – those
parents whose children have been at the school for three to five years, 2) newer parents – those parents whose children have been at the school for less than three years and 3) past-parents – those parents whose children were previously enrolled at the lab school in the past three years. Participants’ will be selected using these categories in order to try and get a more holistic representation of parents’ perceptions about the culture of the school.

b. Protocols

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted by me to inquire into the depth and breadth of the parents' perceptions and understanding about the culture of the school. Questions to be used to guide the interviews are presented in Appendix A. Interviews will be conducted at the CDLS, in participants’ homes, or wherever else they feel comfortable meeting. Parents of children enrolled in the lab school will be contacted through a written letter (see Appendix B) explaining to them about the nature of this research initiative and inviting them to participate. I will follow-up by contacting the parents to explain the details of the study and will give them a copy of the interview questions and the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C). Parents who consent to be interviewed will sign the Informed Consent Form and will be given a photocopy of their completed consent form. We anticipate 15 parents will participate in this study. The interview sessions will last no longer than one hour. Interviews will be conducted in February and March 2004.

I will be audio taping the interview sessions in order to record complete and accurate responses to the interview questions. I will also keep a research
journal to record my impressions and reflections of the sessions. I will be
transcribing the audiotapes. Audiotapes will be destroyed one year after
completion of data collection.

III. Risks and Benefits

No more than minimal risk exists for all participants. The benefits will be
to gain understanding of multiple perspectives parents held about the school and
the meanings of early childhood programs to them and their children. I believe
this study will provide teachers, parents and schools additional information about
parental perspectives on school culture and ways to enhance home-school
partnerships. The finding of this study will further inform early childhood
educators and parents in understanding the importance of partnership and
collaboration in enriching their children's care and education.

IV. Confidentiality/Anonymity

The names of the parents will be kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms will be
used rather than the names of specific participants will be used in the final written
report. All interview tapes and transcriptions will be secured in a locked filing
cabinet in my office in Wallace Hall. Only the co-investigators will have access
to the actual original data. All interview tapes will be destroyed one year after
completion of the study.

V. Compensation

Participants’ will not be provided with any financial incentive or other
compensation for their participation in this research.

VI. References

See attached.

VII. Informed Consent

A copy of the Informed Consent Form is enclosed (see Appendix C)

VIII. Biographical Sketch

Kathryn T. Mosher is an instructor of human development and a mentor teacher at the Child Development Lab School at Virginia Tech. She has experience working with parents in this setting. She also has some previous experience conducting research similar to the proposed study by conducting a small, qualitative study on how families transition their infants from home to school.

Victoria R. Fu is a professor of human development and Director of the Child Development Lab School at Virginia Tech. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in child development and early childhood education. She has directed over 24 doctoral dissertations and over 30 master’s thesis. She is actively engaged in research that makes visible the role of the teachers as inquirers who in turn support their students’ inquiry in the classrooms. She has published extensively in professional journals and books, including *Affirming Diversity Through Democratic Conversations*, co-edited with A. Stremmel and *Teaching and Learning: Collaborative Exploration of the Reggio Emilia Approach*, co-edited with L. Hill and A. Stremmel.
References


Rinaldi, C. (unknown). The pedagogy of listening: the listening perspective from
Appendix G
Recommended Guidelines for Challenging Behavior

Dealing with Altercations between children
SHORT TERM

When children have a serious conflict that may or has turned physical, such as hitting or biting each other, an adult must intervene and treat the situation differently than when children have a simple disagreement. There are goals that we need to try to achieve when dealing with such a situation and there are means that we try to use to achieve these goals:

**GOAL:** Be proactive. Try to understand the each situation and what is happening with the children. Be aware of what is happening around you.
**PROCEDURE:** Get close to the scenario; assess the level of frustration by listening to the children’s words, shouting, banging, etc.

**GOAL:** Stop any dangerous behavior. Use the least amount of intervention needed. Try to allow the children to handle as much as they can, but get between the children if you have to.
**PROCEDURE:** Assume you saw it first and go over to the children. Ideally there should be one teacher per child to help them understand what they feel and how they are treating each other. Stay together if possible.

**GOAL:** Comfort the children. Both children are hurt, whether physically or emotionally. They all need help to calm down and relax. A child that is bitten or hit is often overwhelmed with emotion, as is a child that hurts another.
**PROCEDURE:** Recognize and validate the feelings of both children. Assist the children in returning to a sense of security in an appropriate way. Place a hand on their shoulder, hug them, and get down to their level of sight.

**GOAL:** Help children to gain perspective on the situation and what happened.
**PROCEDURE:** Direct both children’s attention to the other child’s feelings and help them to recognize that both their feelings are valid. Make sure they understand what is acceptable behavior and what is not.

**GOAL:** Help the children calm down. Give them as much power as you can to self-regulate.
**PROCEDURE:** Suggest some “alone time” (not “time out”) or a walk. Stay with them and protect them in their calming down.
Appendix H

Vita

Kathryn Teresa Mosher

Mentor Teacher/Instructor
Department of Human Development
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia

**Education**

M.S., Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, 2004
B.S., Family Studies/Young Child Program, University of New Hampshire, 2002

**Professional Experience**

**Mentor Teacher & Instructor, Virginia** Tech Child Development Laboratory School (CDLS), Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA, August 2002-present

- Co-teach an undergraduate Curriculum and Assessment course in the Department of Human Development.
- Serve as mentor teacher to head teachers and undergraduate student teachers in the CDLS.
- Serve as head teacher of a model classroom in the CDLS.
- Assist the Director in professional development, implementation and documentation of inquiry-based, negotiate curriculum and research.
- Collaborate and support amiable partnerships among faculty, teachers, staff, parents, and the University community.

**Research Assistantship, Center for Innovation in Learning (CIL), Ethics and Privacy Issues Related to the use of Technology in Qualitative and Ethnographic Research, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA, Spring 2003**

- Review possible grant and foundation resources to continue funding for the project.
- Compile legislative chart on legislation affecting the privacy of children using the Internet.
- Review literature related to the research topic.
- Assist in the development of AAFCS and NAEYC conference presentations.

**Teaching Assistantship, Virginia Tech Child Development Laboratory School at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, Fall 2002 – present**

- Serve as head teacher in the infant classroom fifteen hours per week.
- Facilitate the learning and development of children six months to eighteen months old.
- Plan and implement curriculum based upon children’s interest and developmental readiness.
• Implement a social constructivist, inquiry-based approach to education, particularly the Reggio Emilia Approach
• Develop documentation to show the process and progress of projects explored collaboratively with children
• Supervise and facilitate five undergraduate student teachers development in the classroom
• Host parent/teacher/family socials
• Conduct parent/teacher conferences
• Develop portfolios to document the children’s development in the classroom
• Use *Home-School Journals* to communicate with families about children’s development
• Facilitate *teacher talks*, a one-hour per week meeting with student teachers to guide them in their practice and development as young teachers

**Research Fellowship**, Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) at the University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, Summer 2001
• Wrote grant proposal and received funding ($2500.00) to conduct a cross-cultural, descriptive research project on how infants and their families transition from home to center-based care.
• Examined the processes associated with the typical *American-immersion* approach and the *Italian-adaptation* approach. Both these approached are being used by some centers to transition infants from home into center based care.
• Developed and distributed consent forms and obtained approval from the UNH Institutional Review Board to observe, videotape, and audiotape participants.
• Conducted interviews with parent and teacher participants.
• Transcribed and coded interviews.
• Wrote a thesis identifying the current finding from this study.

**Student Teacher/Intern**, Child Study and Development Center (CSDC) at the University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, Fall 2000 - Spring 2001
• Planned and implemented lessons based upon student interest and relevance to their lives. This is known as the emergent curriculum.
• Designed and taught a three-week unit on seeds and plants collaboratively with two other student teacher/interns.
• Facilitated the learning of children age infancy through four years.
• Implemented a social constructivist, inquiry-based approach to education, particularly the Reggio Emilia Approach
• Developed documentation panels with fellow student teacher/interns to show the process and progress of projects explored collaboratively with students.
• Conducted performance-based progress reports, developmental profiles, and participated in parent/teacher conferences with classroom head-teacher.

**Student Teacher**, Maplewood Elementary School, Somersworth, NH, Fall 1999
• Planned and implemented lessons for first grade students in accordance with NH State Standards
• Conducted "running records" reading evaluation with students

• Observed infant surgery due to complication caused by retinopathy of prematurity (ROP).
• Interviewed physicians, nurses, and healthcare professionals regarding standards of care for ROP patients.
• Consulted in the writing up of medical product preparation instructions used in pediatric ophthalmology.
• Developed a mailing database of approximately 2,000 contacts using MS Access.
• Collaborated with coworkers on the development of a company website.

**Invited Presentations**


**Activities/Memberships**

- Member, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2001 to present
- Peer elected co-president, UNH Family Studies Organization (FSO), 2000-2001
  • Participated in the coordination of fundraisers, guest speakers, and student/faculty activities to promote social, educational, and professional development opportunities for Family Studies students.
- Member, UNH Alpha Epsilon Delta Honor Society, 1999 – 2001
  • Participated in community involvement such as community clean-ups and working with underprivileged children through a local program called "Friendship Express'd"
- Member, Golden Key National Honor Society, 2001