Loving “Killdeer Pond”: The Multiple Signs of Children’s Inquiry

The story that follows is a love story. More specifically, it is a pedagogical love story. It situates us, as readers, in the midst of the excitement, curiosity, passion, movement, imaginative play, creative experimentation, and caring relationships of a class of six- to nine-year-old children, as they participate with their teacher, Chris, in literacy practices and inquiry processes that flourish in a supportive, reciprocal relationship. It is also a story that challenges us as educators and literacy researchers to rethink and revalue children’s literacy practices and inquiry processes.

Theoretically inspired by Leander and Boldt’s (2012) provocative article, “Rereading ‘A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies’: Bodies, Texts, and Emergence,” this story shifts our focus away from the future texts that may evolve out of children’s literacy practices and toward the children’s literacy practices themselves, as they arise “in the ongoing present, forming relations and connections across signs, objects, and bodies in often unexpected ways” (p. 26). Leander and Boldt argue that “texts are not ‘about’ the world; rather, they are participants in the world” (p. 25). In this story, the children use, invent, embody, and share texts—“signs and symbols”—as these texts feed into the excitement of their “spontaneous,” “emergent,” and often “surprising” inquiries (Leander & Boldt, 2012). If we view this story from the children’s perspective, it refutes any notions we might harbor that inquiry pedagogy can be scripted in advance, or that as teachers we can map predetermined learning outcomes onto children’s futures before an inquiry is actually afoot.

As readers of this story, we accompany Chris and the children as they engage in individual and shared inquiries that involve them in forming affective, aesthetic, intellectual, and ethical relationships with one another, with “expert” others (especially Michael, a retired biologist and frequent classroom volunteer), and with a local pond. We also learn how the children’s literacy practices and inquiry processes circulate in and through their encounters with “materials, time, space, experiences, movement, play, emotion, and desires” (Leander & Boldt, 2012, p. 43).

This is also a “social semiotic” story, because it closely attends to the children’s use of multiple sign systems—oral and written language, art, movement, drama, and music—as the children make and share meanings. (For conceptual elaboration and examples of children’s use of sign systems, see, for instance, Berghoff, 2007; Cowan & Albers, 2006; Harste, 2010; and Short & Kauffman, 2000).

Reading the story, we witness Chris’s pedagogical stance toward literacy learning, where the “whole child” is always foremost in her mind. Chris co-constructs literacy curriculum with the children in fluid and dynamic ways premised on her knowing and caring about who they are as individual literacy learners and inquirers (Johnston, 2004) as they bring their multiple identities, experiences, theories, passions, and affiliations with them into the classroom. Observing the responsive decisions she makes as a teacher, we understand Chris’s commitment to the social and collaborative nature of the children’s literacy learning as she supports them in identifying and exploring issues they care about, and as they draw varied and authentic literacy practices and materials into inquiries that have personal meaning for them. (For grounding in the theoretical constructs and practices of “literacy as inquiry,” see such foundational texts as Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, & Hoonan, 2000; Mills, O’Keefe, & Jennings, 2004; and Short, Harste & Burke, 1996). This is
also a multi-age class, where the children are supported in figuring out how to teach and learn with and from one another. It is important to note that this is a classroom where Chris purposefully makes time and space for the children’s play, confident in her theoretical and practical knowledge of how play has the potential to provide “rich opportunities for children to flexibly use language in a range of communicative events” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 140).

Similarly, over her many years as a teacher-researcher collaborating with children and teaching colleagues in pursuit of her wonderings about inquiry in the “lived world of real problems of practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 151), Chris’s ever-emerging “stance” toward inquiry is possibly best captured in Lysaker and Furuness’s (2011) terms as a “relational, dialogic approach to pedagogy” (p. 186). For Lysaker and Furuness, such pedagogy is theoretically grounded in the belief that:

All knowing and learning comes from our human need for connection with others and with the world … [and following this] our knowledge of the world is mediated by our relationships with those around us, particularly those to whom we are most attached. (p. 187)

Relationships are at the heart of this pedagogical love story. As a teacher, Chris is driven by her own moral imperative to co-create an educational “environment of trust and reciprocity” (Lysaker & Furuness, p. 189) with and among the children and with other life forms. But at the same time, she appreciates that if she and the children are to open themselves to alterity—valuing those who are not the same as we are—there can be no fixed certainty about how their individual and collaborative inquiries will unfold. Moreover, because Chris embraces particular ethical and semiotic perspectives that afford children opportunities to “find their own voice[s]” and to “constitute themselves as unique human beings” (Biesta, 2006, p. 70), she is conscious of the limitations of any single sign system (including oral and written language), and determined as the children’s teacher to invite and support their use of a rich palette of meaning making and sharing potentials.

This story belongs to Chris and the children in her multi-age (first through third grades) classroom, as their literacy practices and inquiry processes were interwoven in a pond study that took place in an urban center on the Canadian prairie in the spring of 2012.

Now, on with the story . . .

**Inquiry Takes Flight: Naming “Killdeer Pond”**

It was after one of their “Wednesday walks” in late May that Chris and the children decided as a class to name the pond near their school “Killdeer Pond.” From the very first Wednesday walk in mid-April, they had found themselves drawn to the pond (a suburban water impoundment with only a thin strip of reeds and rushes along one edge), even though at that time they “didn’t think it looked like much.” But this was before, as place studies scholar Margaret Somerville (2011) writes, they came to truly know their pond “in all its intimate detail as a place of inhabitation, a place where we dwell with other creatures” (p. 75). It is through this intimate knowing of a place, of which we become a part and which becomes part of us, Somerville continues, that we open ourselves compassionately and pedagogically to its changes, learn how to “read” it, feel how “well” it is, and come to “love” it, and to want to “care” for it and be cared for by it (p. 75).

On this memorable Wednesday in May, Chris and the children had stumbled upon a Killdeer bird family in the field just before they reached the pond. The adult bird stood in front, facing them, while three chicks ran in a row behind. Having spent considerable time over the previous number of weeks studying a range of authentic literacy resources—listening to online audio recordings of bird calls, browsing through birding field guides written for children, reading the print and images in nonfiction books and nature magazines, and viewing birding


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