Teacher Research as a Practical Tool for Learning to Teach

Many children come into American classrooms speaking languages other than English. In fact, recent statistics indicate approximately five million children annually enroll in American schools as English learners (National Clearinghouse of English Language Acquisition, 2011). These children find themselves having to navigate the new and sometimes vastly different cultural and linguistic environments of English-dominant classrooms. Finding ways to help English learners with this navigation has been pushed to the foreground of my work as a teacher educator.

In this article, Becky and I tell the story of her semester-long teacher-research project during which she learned about the role of inquiry in responding to the instructional needs of a young English learner. It is a story in which thinking about teaching and learning as inquiry emerges as a powerful guide in finding one’s way as a preservice teacher on unfamiliar ground, and one in which the practice of teacher research becomes a practical tool for learning to teach.

Context and Perspective

Like many teacher preparation programs, the junior-year methods courses are structured in developmentally defined blocks, including 15 semester hours focused on early childhood and 13 semester hours focused on middle childhood. Within the early childhood block, 6 hours are devoted to early literacy theory and practice. During this block of courses, preservice teachers are also placed in K–2 classrooms for one full day in each of the 14 weeks, where they are supervised by university faculty teaching in the block.

Literacy as Relational, Meaning-Making Experience

In the early literacy course, I guide preservice teachers to think about literacy as a set of meaning-making activities that are socially and culturally situated. As a reflection of this sociocultural view, I posit teaching as relational rather than didactic, and strive to help preservice teachers understand that it is through mediating relationships that teachers construct the intellectual and emotional scaffolds that create a child’s “relational zone” for learning (Goldstein, 1999).

The idea of the “relational zone” expands the largely cognitive view of scaffolding (Stone, 1993) by emphasizing emotion and caring. Teachers work with a set of relationships, including relationships with children and relationships with curriculum (Skolnick, 2000), as well as a set of instructional scaffolds that support these relationships. Common scaffolding practices include the language experience approach (Ashton-Warner, 1986) and interactive writing (McCarrier, Pinnel, & Fountas, 1999). I emphasize aspects of these practices, such as proximity, eye contact, establishing rapport, reciprocity of tasks, and shared understandings. Such aspects build caring relationships in which understanding the other is definitional (Lysaker, McCormick, & Brunette, 2005; Lysaker & Furuness, 2012; Noddings, 1984).

This emphasis on relationship brings the child clearly to the foreground, and makes the child’s approximations a source of inquiry. An inquiry stance toward children’s approximations promotes instruction that affirms and extends children’s meaning making, rather than imposing curriculum
from the “outside.” In the case of English learners, such affirmation and extension of children’s meaning making consists of responding in ways that uphold their original language identities, rather than only fostering competence in the new, emerging language of English. This approach to English learners is concurrent with research that suggests that children need personally relevant curriculum and sensitively scaffolded instruction based in their own languages and backgrounds (Freeman & Freeman, 2002; Krashen, 1992).

Inquiry as Relational Stance

Inquiry is both the framework for my own instruction and a perspective I teach preservice teachers. Grounded in the work of Short (2009) and Short, Harste, and Burke (1996), I view inquiry as a relational stance of outward motion—a seeking of understandings, both of the world and of other people. For preservice teachers, this means actively reaching out, adopting a stance of curiosity, and questioning their assumptions about teaching and learning. To support this stance, I use a modification of the inquiry cycle (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) as a heuristic for understanding teaching and learning. This inquiry cycle is nonlinear and recursive, consisting of 1) provocations; 2) personal and social engagement in pursuing questions that arise from provocations; 3) a process of revisiting, reflecting, and revising both thinking and practice; 4) assessment and reporting; and 5) new inquiry. This inquiry cycle is introduced to preservice teachers during the first days of the semester as a conceptual framework for the early literacy theory and practice course.

The inquiry cycle begins with a provocation—a term used by the early childhood educators of Reggio Emilia to describe something in the environment that arouses interest or curiosity, and which may create discomfort or a sense of disequilibrium (Rinaldi, 2006). Provocation is a moment of not knowing, a feeling of uncertainty that is embraced.

ALL EDUCATORS CAN BENEFIT FROM A TEACHING NOTEBOOK

Teaching notebooks clearly benefit preservice teachers as they collect and reflect on classroom experiences. However, such a notebook can benefit educators at any level. Even veteran teachers can continue improving with the holistic, reflective view of their teaching that the notebook offers.

Choose a process. Some teachers prefer to jot down brief reflections at the end of every day. Others might find daily journals burdensome and would prefer a once-a-week journal. Whatever your process, be consistent: change strategies next year, if necessary.

Choose a focus. Do you want your journal to focus on your teaching strategies and general outcomes, or would you prefer to track the progress of specific focus students through which you evaluate your teaching effectiveness as a whole?

Use specific details. If your purpose is to evaluate your teaching strategies, be sure to include specific details about your lesson plans, how students responded to them, and what you might change in the future. If you’re tracking focus students, provide some measurable data against which you can compare at “checkpoints” throughout the year.

Use your data. While the act of journaling has intrinsic benefit, it is ideally a tool by which you can evaluate your effectiveness as a teacher. Give yourself some distance from the journals—i.e., summer break—then revisit them as you begin a new school year. Reading your journals may help you identify and emphasize your strengths and recognize and improve your weaknesses as a teacher.

—Michelle Golden
Doctoral student, Department of English
Georgia State University

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and explored as a point of departure for learning. In teacher research, these provocations often come from children and lead to classroom investigations. Preservice teachers learn to view their own interests, questions, and discomforts in and around teaching as provocations for their learning. Through the personal and social engagements of teacher research, they systematically work at pursuing these provocations, continually revisit and reflect on their experiences through discussion and writing, and finally assess and report on the outcomes of their inquiry.

Of course, teacher research has a long and substantial history. For decades, classroom teachers have been studying their own classrooms and constructing personal knowledge that they share with their communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Teachers’ personal knowing is valued as legitimate, considered essential to good teaching, and recognized as a vital form of professional development. When teachers ask questions that come from their own teaching and collect data that informs those questions, local teaching and learning challenges are overcome through non-neutral, learner-driven, relevant curriculum (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001). A spirit of inquiry permeates the classroom, empowering teachers and students alike (Kincheloe, 2003).

However, teacher research as structured practical activity is often limited to professional development of practicing teachers and those pursuing graduate education (Topping & Hoffman, 2002), and is only beginning to be used as means of understanding the instructional needs of English learners at the preservice level. Like others (Harste, 2001; Postholm, 2009), I wanted to bring the pursuit of inquiry and the practice of teacher research into the teacher preparation program as preservice teachers encountered cultural and linguistic difference.

**The Teacher-Research Project**

**The Design**

This teacher-research project was designed to provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of young children’s literacy learning through inquiry. As the instructor, I found that providing time, guidance, and structure was critical to their engagement and success with the project.

To accomplish this, I developed a teacher-research project guide that helped preservice teachers organize the tasks of the project across the semester as they worked within the inquiry cycle. This guide included a list of data-gathering tools, assessments, and instructional practices. Preservice teachers understood that the guide was not to be used prescriptively, but rather as a resource for engaging in inquiry as their projects unfolded.

The first data collection instrument in the project was an adaptation of Stephens’s observation form (Stephens & Story, 1999), which preservice teachers used to systematically observe and generate interpretations about their focal child (see Appendix A). In addition to this form, I created open-ended working guides for each kind of data being collected (Hubbard & Power, 2003). Recording what data they had collected and when, as well as generating possible interpretations on these working guides, was critical to helping preservice teachers manage data, allowing them to see their focal child’s growth over time. As a part of the teacher-research project, preservice teachers also reflected weekly in teaching notebooks, which I responded to in writing or brief conferences.

Every week, an hour of class time was devoted to the teacher-research project. Preservice teachers met in small groups to discuss the evolution of research questions, data, and the meaning of that data for children’s learning. During these discussions, each group created artifacts such as charts of their teacher-research projects. As they posted research questions, they also discussed the insights and dilemmas that arose through their analysis. This promoted revisiting of ideas and insights, and gave them a collaborative view of the work and what they were learning about teaching through research. Finally, each week I observed the preservice teachers in schools. This allowed me to meet each of the...
focal children, see the preservice teachers interact with them, and provide feedback on the teacher-research projects as they evolved.

**Finding a Focal Child**

During their first few days in the K–2 practicum setting, the preservice teachers observed several children. Mentor teachers were asked to point out those who might benefit from one-on-one interactions with preservice teachers during literacy-focused parts of the day, such as readers and writers workshops. At the same time, preservice teachers were asked to identify a child whose literacy learning was interesting or puzzling; in other words, one that provided a provocation for inquiry. The preservice and mentor teachers then discussed these possibilities and came to a joint decision.

The teacher-research project provided many opportunities for personal and social engagement in inquiry at various points in the research. Preservice teachers first observed their focal child during classroom literacy events. Initially, these observations were made using the Teacher-Research Data Form (see Appendix A) and later recorded in their teaching notebooks. After these observations were gathered and interpreted, preservice teachers completed a set of literacy assessments to add to their knowledge of the child's language and literacy use, and did “free-writes” about children during class time. These brief, informal writings gave preservice teachers space to articulate what they knew, saw, felt, and believed based on their observations and assessments. Free-writes were then discussed in class with peers to refine insights and hear alternative perspectives. As a result of these personal and social opportunities, preservice teachers generated research questions that framed their work with the focal child.

**The Project Begins**

Becky entered the early childhood methods block following a semester abroad in Spain to further her study of the Spanish language. This concurrence meant that she was learning about the teaching of early literacy with recent memories of feeling disoriented in an unfamiliar language environment. Becky was placed in a kindergarten classroom in a local early learning center. She reflected on this placement in her teaching notebook.

> When I first discovered that my practicum work was going to be in a kindergarten classroom, I was plagued with feelings of uneasiness and nervousness. I had no idea what to expect or how to prepare. But the inviting classroom environment and my wonderful mentor teacher began to change my mind. My first impression of the class was that it was completely different from anything I had seen before. Everything about it invited learning. It had stations that stimulated students’ interests. There was time for readers and writers workshops, Project Approach, and free choice. It was very student centered.

Becky’s inquiry into literacy teaching began with this experience of a new classroom. Both the physical and social environment prompted her to think differently about the relationship between children and curriculum. In this teaching notebook entry, she used language like “inviting learning,” “stimulating interests,” “very student centered,” and described the use of time, choice, projects, and workshop as “completely different” from anything she had ever seen. Her previous exposure to kindergarten classrooms had reflected a more teacher-centered, structured approach. Becky’s recognition of the importance of children’s interests and learning styles were important conceptual beginnings for revising her thinking about literacy curriculum.

**Week One: Provocation, Observations, and Hypotheses**

In this learner-centered environment, Becky met Elsa and was drawn to her because her native language was Spanish. Becky began her observations using the Teacher-Research Data Form, generated multiple hypotheses about what she observed, and then thought through curricular approaches compatible with her hypotheses.

For example, in Becky’s first observations recorded on her Teacher-Research Data Form (dated September 21), she noted that Elsa sat draw-
ing quietly during much of her “free play” time and did not interact often in her English-dominant classroom (see Appendix A). Becky interpreted these observations by hypothesizing that Elsa “may be too shy to speak if she is unsure of the words.” Here Becky was referring to Elsa’s use of English words and her apparent shyness at trying them out in her classroom.

Later, Becky reflected on these early observations, and recalled her own experience as a language learner during a semester abroad.

Working with Elsa brought back so many memories from my study abroad experience in Granada, Spain. I had an insight into her world of not understanding a second language and being lost in her surroundings. In my initial observations of Elsa, I would see her excitingly raise her hand during group time, but when she was called on, she would not answer because she did not have the English words to express herself. When I first moved to Spain, I would be asked questions that would seem to be coming at me at warp speed, and I only understand a few words or phrases of their quick-fire questioning. I remember feeling lost or embarrassed because I could not answer the questions of my host family and Spanish professors. I can only imagine how a little five-year-old girl felt when she is in a class of twenty-five kindergartners.

Becky’s brief encounter with being a non-native language speaker gave her the experience of “outsider” status and the disorienting feeling of being somewhere where her own language was not dominant (Trilokekar & Kukar, 2011). This “outsider” status and inability to effectively use the privileged discourse of Spain gave Becky a point of connection, a glimpse into what it might be like to be Elsa. Nel Noddings (1984) defines caring as “apprehending the reality of the other” (p. 14). Here, Becky did just that by using her own past experience, and she was launched into a caring relationship with Elsa.

In the same observation, Becky noticed that Elsa’s drawings were primarily of her family. From this, she hypothesized that “they are important to her support system,” and that the use of both languages would allow Elsa to communicate and sustain this connection to her family during school. Becky generated the following teaching guidelines (as noted on Appendix A) for her own interactions with Elsa:

- Give directions in Spanish and English.
- Allow her to make use of both languages.
- Learning community would be important.

Through her active hypothesizing, Becky exhibited an inquiring stance, drew tentative conclusions based on her observations, and initiated action to further understand and connect to Elsa. These initial observations served as a provocation and led Becky to her first series of questions about Elsa and her learning needs, which she recorded in her teaching notebook on September 21st:

- How can I make her [Elsa] more comfortable about using English in the classroom? How can I make her more comfortable in her classroom environment? Would encouraging her to use both English and Spanish in the classroom improve her participation in class? Observing Elsa in her environment led me to assessments and lessons that would help integrate her language into the curriculum. Becky’s notebook entry further demonstrates an inquiring stance in which she explored ideas about the classroom environment as a place for Elsa’s language learning. The teacher-research project provided Becky with opportunity for this personal engagement in inquiry. Rather than being assigned to a child and given a set of assessments and lessons to implement, Becky first worked hard to formulate a question that would guide her work as she observed Elsa and thought about her needs. Then Becky considered these needs and made decisions about instruction, assessment, and how to make her teacher research productive and rewarding for Elsa. In this way, authentic inquiry became the basis for instruction.

**Week Two: Getting to Know Elsa**

A week later, Becky spent more time observing Elsa during literacy events. She noticed again that at story time, Elsa raised her hand when the teacher asked children for ideas, but didn’t respond when called on. As before, Becky hypothesized that Elsa was uncomfortable with English, or shy, or both. In addition, Becky confirmed her earlier observation that Elsa often wrote about her family, and then went further by investigating Elsa’s writing.

Using what she had learned in class about the importance of drawing in emergent writing (Ray
Here, Becky noticed for a second time that Elsa was comfortable with the alphabet. Chanting the alphabet chart was a daily routine in Elsa’s kindergarten classroom, one that she could participate in without having to use English words or sentences. Becky saw Elsa’s use of this classroom chant as powerful because she hypothesized that Elsa was using the alphabet as a way into the English language. Becky also learned that when working one-on-one, Elsa had a greater sense of agency as a learner. While working in whole-group settings, Elsa was quiet. In this setting, however, she did not hesitate to show what she was learning in the larger classroom context and use it in her writing. Becky returned to her research question in her teaching notebook:

From this experience, I have thought more about my research question, which I would like more help with. My question now is: “How do I help Elsa develop a relationship with English text as well as find her voice in class?”

Becky’s research question evolved and became clearer, while staying consistently focused on issues of learning English and having a sense of agency as a learner. Becky’s questions reflected her work with Elsa and continued to lead Becky toward personally relevant curriculum. Meanwhile, she was also learning about the relationship between assessment and instruction and, of course, getting to know Elsa. Inquiry as lived practice was creating the contours of this developing teacher/learner relationship.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s language experience approach (Ashton-Warner, 1986) was used as Becky’s next assessment. In this approach, children are encouraged to orally generate their own text, which teachers write down and children read later. It is a way of creating both personally relevant, as well as syntactically and semantically accessible texts for young readers. In this iteration of the strategy, preservice teachers are instructed to scribe children’s words verbatim.

Becky decided to take Elsa for a “photo hunt” around the school, in order to provide an immediate experience for this assessment. She asked Elsa to tell the story she had written in her book. Becky made note of the fact that Elsa labeled each picture using English approximations rather than narrating a story, but she explained these labels in Spanish. Becky’s affirmation of her hypotheses about the importance of family to Elsa and her writing, as well as this new knowledge about her written and oral language use, led Becky to revise her research question. The practice of revisiting and revising is important to the cycle of inquiry and to maintaining an open stance toward knowing. Becky does this through writing on September 28th:

Noticing that Elsa would raise her hand during group discussion and then would not answer helped me to continue my initial research and ultimately lead to my current questions, “How can I help Elsa develop a relationship with the English language through print and text, and also how can I help her feel more comfortable in class?”

Week Three: Assessment and Instruction

Becky conducted an emergent literacy assessment called “Drawing and Dictation” (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993). In this assessment, the child draws a picture and tells the story behind the picture. This assessment once again allowed Becky to see Elsa’s meaning making in both drawing and speaking, as she described in her teaching notebook on October 12th:

I asked Elsa if she would draw me a picture. The first thing she started writing was the alphabet that she had just been reciting. When I asked her what she was writing, she responded with “A a Apple,” which mimics the alphabet chart. She proceeded to do this for about five or six letters; some letters she would write, but not say the correct thing. I loved seeing her do this because she was developing a relationship with text through the alphabet.

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was interested in those aspects of the school environment that reflect major parts of her kindergarten curriculum. She noticed and asked for photos of letters, numbers, and colors. Elsa also continued to seem uncomfortable with generating her own thoughts in English; hence the disengagement with creating captions for the photos. This assessment adds significance to Becky’s research question about helping Elsa build a relationship with the English language as well as helping her achieve agency as a learner.

Scaffolding in the Relational Zone

With the reaffirmation of her research question and her developing knowledge of Elsa, Becky began instruction that day in writers workshop. Because of her observations, Becky knew that she wanted to use both English and Spanish in her work with Elsa and to make sure Elsa’s voice was honored and nurtured.

Becky sat alongside Elsa during the writers workshop. Her mentor teacher had previously taught mini-lessons around the idea that writers write about a book. Once back in the classroom, Becky asked Elsa to dictate her thinking about the photos. Becky reflected on this experience in her teaching notebook on October 12th:

Another powerful experience that I had with my focal child was when we went on a photo hunt around the school. During this activity, she would point to letters, words, or different colors of what she wanted to take a picture of. I found it very interesting that when she saw colors, she would only point and not say the color, but when she saw letters, she would say the letters. In one part of the school, there are some metal letters on the wall that form a quote. She wanted to take a picture of these letters because they represented letters as well as the color red. After taking the picture, she began reading all of the letters that she could recognize. Elsa had shown an interest in the alphabet before, so I thought my whole focus would be the alphabet, and I knew that my writing the book in front of her as she talked about each picture would be an opportunity for her to think about letters. However, when we went to write captions for our photo walk pictures, I noticed she was not engaged.

Becky learned a great deal about teaching and language learning from this assessment. First, Elsa

ENGLISH LEARNERS AND INQUIRY

This article talks about English learners and inquiry. The following resources from ReadWriteThink.org can be used to further support English Learners:

**Nature Reflections: Interactive Language Practice for English-Language Learners**

Students whose first language is not English reflect on nature through readings, a visit to a green area, and bookmaking using the writing process and peer feedback.


**Examining Island of the Blue Dolphins through a Literary Lens**

After a discussion about courage and adversity and reading Scott O’Dell’s *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, students examine Karana’s character development and look for examples of courage in their community.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/examining-island-blue-dolphins-1068.html

**Let’s Read It Again: Comprehension Strategies for English-Language Learners**

This resource offers suggestions for how teachers can support Spanish-speaking English language learners to unlock the mysteries of their new language by using a bilingual book to recognize unfamiliar words and construct meaning from the text.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/read-again-comprehension-strategies-1045.html

—Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org
one thing when they make books (Ray & Cleave-
lond, 2004). These lessons are geared toward helping
children sustain meaning across their “little books,”
rather than filling separate pages with distinct mean-
ings. Children were scattered around the room writ-
ing independently after this lesson. Becky worked
with Elsa and recorded it in her teaching notebook
on October 19th:

Elsa was doing her writers workshop work. I knew that
she needed help planning out her stories, since most of
her previous books were made of pictures without any
consistent meaning. So I started planning a book with
her. I would ask her a series of questions or prompt her,
and she would look at me with those big brown eyes
wondering what I was saying. I decided to try a new
route. I asked her the same things in my best Spanish.
Instantly it clicked, and we planned out her entire book.
Becky: OK let’s write a book together.
Elsa: I want to write a book about pumpkins.
Becky: OK. Let’s talk about what we are going to write
before we write, like good writers do. We can plan it
in Spanish.
Elsa: OK.
Becky: What should we do first? / ¿Qué hacemos
primero?
Elsa: Lesly, y tú y yo vamos al pumpkin patch. / Lesly,
you and I go to the pumpkin patch.
Becky: Bien, ¿qué piensas hacer después? / Very good,
what do you plan to do next?
Elsa: Nos vamos en un carro. / We go in a car.
Becky: Sí, ¿qué más? / Yes, What else?
Elsa: Encontramos pumpkins in a pumpkin patch. / We
find pumpkins in the pumpkin patch.
Becky: Bien, ve a tú escritorio y escribele en la misma
manera que lo hablamos. / Good, go to your desk and
write about it just like we said.
Wow, I thought. She is so smart. All I had to do
was adapt my language. This happened about mid-
way through our time together, and I knew from that
point on that our focus would be using Spanish to help
develop a meaningful relationship with the English
language.

Becky responded to Elsa’s language needs by
planning the book in Spanish. This move was not
merely a linguistic one; it also promoted shared
meaning making, made infinitely more possible
through shared language. As Becky abandoned
English in favor of Spanish and shared meaning
was established, their relationship became more
symmetrical.

Becky drew on this successful experience
with Elsa to plan the next project. As a preservice
teacher, she was learning important lessons about
personally relevant, coherent curriculum. She
understood that Elsa’s developing relationship with
English required another carefully scaffolded and
carefully orchestrated writing experience in which
she could integrate both Spanish and English into
instruction. Becky’s research question supported
this instructional decision. Because her focus was
on building Elsa’s relationship with the English
language, rather than teaching her a particular skill,
Becky chose a bilingual writing project using simi-
lar instructional strategies, this time adding written
English. By bringing two languages in both written
and spoken form into another personally relevant
context, Becky built on her new symmetrical rela-
tionship with Elsa in which two languages were
meaningfully used. She explained this decision in
her teaching notebook on November 3rd:

[Elsa] was trying to communicate with me about her
hands, and I realized that she did not know that word
[in English]. So I decided to try making a book that has
pictures of her, and we will write the English words and
the Spanish words. I want to write the Spanish word so
that she will not have to leave her native language when
learning these words and so that she can make a visual
connection to what the words she can speak look like.

The book Becky planned came directly from
what she observed about Elsa’s language, her learn-
ing needs, and Elsa’s curiosity about her own hands.
She did not assume unilateral authority; rather, she
took Elsa’s perspective—enacting a caring rela-
tionship—and pursued shared meaning making, in
which both languages were used to support learn-
ing. In addition, because Becky was following her
own question (how to build Elsa’s relationship with
the English language), she was deeply invested in
the project with Elsa and carefully considered how
the new book should unfold in order to best support
Elsa’s learning.

Becky decided to use photos of Elsa for the
book, rather than clip art or other facsimiles, in order
to capture Elsa’s features exactly. Personal photos
would provide unambiguous visual information
directly connected to Elsa, which they could then use for writing. Becky used a variation of interactive writing to work with Elsa on creating a text from the photos. Consistent with the theoretical perspective of the course, she enacted the idea of reciprocity as she and Elsa worked together, each in their less familiar language, and she described this approach in her teaching notebook on November 3rd:

I would write the Spanish word and she would write the English word. For example, when we were making a page of her book, she wrote the word “face” under her picture, and I asked if I could write the Spanish word, which is “cara.” She noticed that the words looked different but understood that the meaning of the words were the same. During this process, I realized that Elsa was learning how to read and write in English and making connections to those words in Spanish, which I hoped would help her read in both languages. I am learning so much from this project with Elsa. I can see myself beginning to think like a teacher and ask questions that promote inquiry.

Through the work with one focal child, Becky made a breakthrough in both her understanding of teaching young English learners and in her sense of who she was becoming as a teacher. Becky came to know in an experiential way that adopting an inquiry stance could open the way to learning for both teachers and children. Elsa’s interest in the alphabet, choice of photos, and desire to tell Becky about her hands were all expressions of Elsa’s inquiry as she sought understandings of the English language within her school context. Becky also seemed proud to notice that she was “beginning to think like a teacher and ask questions that promote inquiry.” She had begun to see the rewards of teaching as inquiry—a relational quest to know, understand, and seek the growth of children. She continued this view of teaching as inquiry as she described her observation of Elsa’s interest in words and her own teaching response in this excerpt from her teaching notebook on November 9th:

Today we continued working on our parts of the body book with words in both Spanish and English. We added two new pages to our book using the words nose and ears to our vocabulary list. I continued to show her how the English words were written; then she would write them in her book and I would write the Spanish words for her. Something that I thought was very interest-
Becky regarded Elsa’s enchantment with the alphabet with curiosity in order to discover the meanings it had for her and to view her language learning from this position. She then allowed herself to teach from this position using Elsa’s meanings for the alphabet to support her emerging literacy. One could imagine that in a skills approach, Elsa’s chanting of the alphabet would have been seen as an opportunity for the practice of letters and sounds using even more generic anchors: “A a apple” would be expanded to include other A words.

Becky hypothesized something slightly different. She interpreted Elsa’s fascination with the alphabet as something that grew from her ability to participate in an important kindergarten ritual with her peers, and a place where she could feel competence as an English user. The alphabet was Elsa’s way to build a relationship with English. For Becky, it was a provocation for inquiry, one in which she interpreted the meanings that the alphabet had for Elsa and then worked with those meanings, rather than merely the alphabet itself.

Becky also moved to using Spanish in her writing conference and in the interactive writing of their “Face Book.” She did this because she noticed that Elsa was quiet in her classroom and wondered if she could help Elsa build a relationship with English and have a more active voice. This became her research question. Becky’s teaching decisions reflected her desire to connect more effectively with Elsa, to nurture the possibility of shared meaning making, and to build Elsa’s confidence by making her participation in literacy learning easier through a more symmetrical, more caring relationship.

This work of inquiry is the work of teaching, and the structure of a teacher-research project made this work particularly profound for both the preservice teacher and the child. By making, recording, and writing observations, Becky generated artifacts of her work that then prompted reflection and action. The Teacher-Research Data Form supported her in moving beyond the obvious, taking the risk of making her own interpretations, and looking for the deeper meanings that ultimately guided her work. Ongoing conversation with others created an open discursive climate necessary for inquiry. For Becky, teacher research made her teaching personally relevant, intellectually stimulating, and relationally rewarding. For Elsa, it meant a new, less confusing, less distant relationship to her literacy curriculum, and the experience of being an active, successful learner of two languages.

References

Appendix A: Teacher-Research Data Form (adapted from Stephens & Story, 1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Becky</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Focal Observation</th>
<th>Working Hypothesis</th>
<th>Teaching Response /Curricular Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations of Elsa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(What I observed)</td>
<td>(What I think it could mean)</td>
<td>(Relational, Environmental, Instructional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle Time: Sat on pockets cross-legged. Kept hands to herself. Participated when saying ABCs and calendar.</td>
<td>She may not be comfortable interacting with others? She may be too shy to speak English much if she’s unsure of the words?</td>
<td>Give directions in Spanish and English, make her comfortable. Allow her to use both languages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa: During free play, she sat quietly. Not much interaction with others. Speaks English and Spanish.</td>
<td>They may be important to her support system.</td>
<td>Learning community would be important, but linked to family.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In writers workshop, draws pictures of family.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Judith Lysaker is an associate professor of Literacy and Language Education at Purdue University and can be reached at jlysaker@purdue.edu. Becky Thompson is a second-grade teacher at Northwood Elementary in Franklin, Indiana, and can be reached at blthompson10@gmail.com.