Paths, Maps, and Pirates: How a Preschool Class Overcame Limits of the Pandemic Through Drama

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Abstract

This article spotlights the power of pushing limits and boundaries through emergent curriculum and process drama as told through the story of a preschool class's exploration of the topics of paths, maps, and pirates. The story is framed in terms of the three phases of the class's project adapted from the Project Approach (Katz et al., 2014), which started prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, but continued and concluded in the midst of it. Reflections and insight are provided by the classroom teacher including as she drew inspiration from the Reggio Emilia Approach and other professional development and experience.

"In our experience, it has been important to have what I call a 'transgressive attitude.' In Reggio Emilia, we have made many choices to transgress or go beyond arbitrary limits. " (Sergio Spaggiari, 2004, Former Director of the Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d' Infanzia - Municipality of Reggio Emilia)

Mrs. Sheil had come to embrace the expectation that with the start of each new school year, there would be new opportunities not only for the children in her classroom at the laboratory preschool where she taught, but also for her, to push limits in exploring and constructing understanding. However, like educators across the globe, she could not have anticipated the unique challenges that would be presented by the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020. In this paper, we share the story of how Mrs. Sheil, inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach (Edwards et al., 2012), and using emergent curriculum (Biermeier, 2015), listened to the interests of the children in her class and supported their exploration of paths, maps, and pirates, including by incorporating process drama (Brown, 2017). We explore how Mrs. Sheil continued to connect with children and families when the pandemic prevented the class from meeting in person and how she still offered children an opportunity to conclude their project. The story is framed in terms of the three phases of the project, adapted from the Project Approach (Katz et al., 2014). It is also considered in relation to the concept of pushing limits and boundaries and is paired with reflections and insight offered by Mrs. Sheil based on her professional development and experience.

Literature

Pushing Limits in the Preschool Setting

Sergio Spaggiari (2004), former Director of the Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d' Infanzia - Municipality of Reggio Emilia, reflected on the idea of limits and boundaries and young children's education. This included considering the perspective of Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach:

> The last centuries of our history have been obsessed with limits: geographical limits and borders, divisions in specific fields and disciplines, religious limits and limits to rationality. I think Malaguzzi's attitude was to see the limits and immediately go through them. The impulse of our experience has often taken us well over the limits. Many of you have seen the exhibition, 'The Hundred Languages of Children.' The original title of that exhibition was 'If the Eye Jumps Over the Wall.' It meant that the children's eyes and the adults' eyes must see beyond the wall. This is our aspiration . . . to be able to jump over walls. Children want to go over the wall . . . to go over the wall of banality, to go over the wall of established educational procedures. That is why we chose this title for our first exhibition. It is important to acquire the skill of going over walls, going beyond boundaries, seeing limits and passing through them because, in everyone's life, there are times when you will find barriers that seem impassable, when there are obstacles you feel you cannot overcome. To be able to go over the wall means you can topple cultural paradigms that seem fixed. It means you can turn things on their head. It means you can start with fresh eyes. (pp. 2–3)

Early childhood educators may perceive limits and boundaries imposed at different levels of their environments, ranging from the level of their society to the level of their specific school or center setting. Importantly, there are also limits and boundaries that the educators may impose upon themselves.

The very nature of emergent curriculum, in which "[...] learning is the product of the child's guided construction rather than simply the teacher's transmission and the child's absorption" (Biermeier, 2015, p. 73), sets the stage for pushing limits and boundaries. Biermeier explained:

> Emergent curriculum is not a free-for-all. It requires that teachers actively seek out and chase the interests of the children. This kind of teaching environment demands a high degree of trust in the teacher's creative abilities, and envisions an image of the child as someone actively seeking knowledge. (pp. 73–74)

This emphasizes the importance of trusting in the capabilities of the teacher and children. Administrators' and families' lack of trust in the abilities of teachers and children to engage in meaningful learning in the absence of a set curriculum may be a barrier for pursuing learning through emergent curriculum. Additionally, a teacher's lack of trust in her own abilities to effectively follow children's interests, or her lack of trust in the children to be able to actively seek out meaningful knowledge, is also a barrier.

Some teachers may be intimidated by the unpredictability associated with emergent curriculum. Having a set curriculum may feel like a "safe" option because the control is in the hands of the teacher. Chasing the interests of children may take the class into uncharted waters, perhaps forcing the teachers to navigate how to respond to children's interests, with which the teachers themselves may not be fully comfortable. One way teachers may accomplish this is through play and drama in the classroom.

Process Drama

Rigid, compartmentalized views about curriculum that separate subjects and concepts place limits and boundaries on the richness of learning in the preschool classroom. Alternatively, holistic, arts-based teaching helps break through such limits and boundaries. Cooper (2016) asserted:

> […] integrating the performance arts—music, drama, and dance—into core subjects helps young children learn better across the curriculum. Arts-integrated teaching taps into children's natural desire for active learning through the senses. By singing, dancing, imagining, and connecting their bodies and minds, children learn more deeply and meaningfully [...]. (p. 17)

One approach to integrating the arts into the curriculum is "process drama" (also called "creative drama," "child drama, and "drama-in education"; Brown & Pleydell, 1999). Brown and Pleydell defined and described process drama as "[...] process-oriented drama with children - not presentation, but exploration of ideas and situations through drama" (p. 4). Brown (2017) also explained:

> Process drama is a medium for learning: a dynamic teaching methodology in which teacher and children collaborate to create an imaginary dramatic world and work within that world to explore a problem, a situation, or a story, not for an audience, but for the benefit of the children themselves. (p. 165)

Process drama is an application of the arts that has the potential to provide meaningful experiences in early childhood classrooms. Process drama is especially relevant for young children because it aligns with how young children learn through dramatic play, which may involve pretending to be someone else and/or somewhere else (Brown, 2017). Teachers who engage the children from their early childhood classes in drama in the classroom support the children's social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and creative development, offering opportunities for children to gain experiences engaging in dialogue, empathy, collaboration, and creative problem-solving (Brown, 2017; Brown & Pleydell, 1999). Meta-analysis research demonstrated that using drama in the classroom has benefits for young children, including increasing achievement in the areas of story understanding, reading readiness and achievement, and writing (Podlozny, 2000).

Responding to Limits Imposed by the Pandemic

Starting in the early months of 2020, early childhood educators around the world were faced with new limitations and boundaries posed by the Coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic brought to the forefront and exacerbated existing issues in early care and education systems and created novel challenges, including in the United States (Hashikawa et al., 2020). There were concerns about the various ways that the pandemic could potentially affect children, including decreased social interaction with peers and loneliness (e.g., Ullah et al., 2021) and increased screen time associated with virtual learning (e.g., Wiederhold, 2020).

While the pandemic has created numerous and multifaceted challenges and hardships, it has also offered unique opportunities for providers of early care and education to adapt to meet the needs of children and families (Hashikawa et al., 2020). The National Association for Education of Young Children collected reflections and recommendations from directors, teachers, and other early childhood professionals in a feature titled, "What Has the Pandemic Taught You?" (NAEYC, 2021). Professionals focused on adaptability and resilience and emphasized the importance of maintaining relationships and connections.

The story of Mrs. Sheil and her preschool class presented in this paper captures how one teacher responded to the limits and boundaries presented by the pandemic, including through offering children opportunities to engage in drama. Staying true to her core beliefs about children and learning, she made adaptations that allowed her to continue to connect with families and provide meaningful experiences that were responsive to the children's interests after they moved to a virtual learning format.

Context

The Phyllis and Richard Leet Center for Children and Families (renamed in 2012 in honor of the generous donation from its namesakes; henceforth referred to as the Leet Center) originated in 1968 in a small house. In 1986, it moved to Brown Hall, which houses the university's School of Education, to serve as a laboratory preschool guided by a child-centered philosophy where professionals could collaborate and aid education students in developing skills in working with young children.

When creating the space that is currently the Leet Center, those involved considered if the preschool's child-centered philosophy was truly leading the direction of the work. This put the preschool on the path toward becoming a place where the administration and teachers explored and tested out progressive approaches consistent with a laboratory school setting. They began to study the Reggio Emilia Approach (Edwards et al., 2012) with Mrs. Rouner, the director, and Mrs. Sheil being part of the first Leet Center cohort to participate in a Study Group to Reggio Emilia. The director and teachers also worked together to develop a model to guide them in implementing the three phases of the Project Approach (adapted from Katz et al., 2014). This model, referred to throughout this paper, was informed by insight gained from their professional development experiences, including study tours to various schools, as well as their understanding and skills developed through their own practice. It reflected the common language they used in discussing their work with children. Additionally, at the time that the story featured in this paper took place, the director and teachers were facilitating a virtual book study group of *The Importance of Being Little* (Christakis, 2016). These professional experiences provided a foundation and inspiration for Mrs. Sheil as she navigated teaching through the pandemic.

An Exploration of Paths, Maps, and Pirates

Phase 1: Getting Started With the Project

About a month into the school year, practicum teacher Ms. Lauren, working alongside Mrs. Sheil, noticed children's interest in riding tricycles around the pea gravel path in the outdoor classroom. Ms. Lauren designed a sensory experience by adding bubble wrap, secured with large wooden blocks, to the path. Ms. Lauren was surprised to find that rather than riding tricycles over the bubble wrap as she had intended, the children instead used the wooden blocks to form new paths. She was initially disappointed that her idea did not "work." However, Mrs. Sheil helped her see the opportunity to truly follow the children's interests. The teachers offered additional materials including colorful dots, wooden planks, and hoops. The children enthusiastically used the materials to create paths (Figure 1) over the following

weeks. Children compared their paths to ones from the "Mario Brothers" video game and this inspired the design of their paths and dramatic play.

Fig. 1: The children create and navigate paths using materials in the outdoors classroom with support from Ms. Lauren.

Mrs. Sheil wanted to support the children's further exploration of paths. When the class gathered for a Family Meeting, Mrs. Sheil posed the journal prompt question, "Where can paths take you?" and provided the children with materials, including paper, markers, and dot stickers. She intentionally made the prompt and materials open-ended and avoided providing examples. The children used the materials to represent paths, with some children narrating how the paths could take them to different locations such as their houses. However, one child, Hans, described his path by saying, "I just drew a random path." (Figure 2). Later, the teachers came up with an idea of how to bring the path exploration to life. They used the large colorful dots from the outdoors classroom to make a path that led from the preschool to Mrs. Sheil's house, which was close to the campus. The children excitedly embarked on their journey of following the colorful dots without being told where the path led. (Figure 3). At the end of the dot path, they found Mrs. Sheil's house (and popsicles). The morning after the journey, one child, Hudsen, volunteered, "I live close to the school. I could draw a map to my house to see my chickens." Mrs. Sheil noticed that this marked the beginning of the children starting to use the words "map" and "path" interchangeably. She could also see children starting to more deeply grasp that maps serve as models that represent the real world.

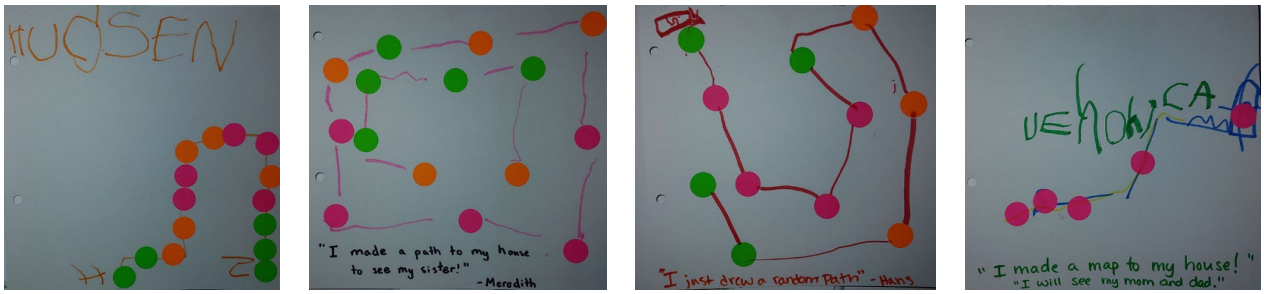


Fig. 2: Children's dot paths.


Fig. 3: The children create and follow a path to Mrs. Sheil's house adjacent to the university campus.

Interest in paths and maps continued to grow. Path work continued inside with a group of children making paths for their class pets, hermit crabs, to navigate. One child, George, explained the path they made for the hermit crabs, "It's Kansas City and the road to get there."

Fig. 4: George intently watches a hermit crab navigate a path.

Figure 5 shows the components of planning Phase 1 of project work from the Leet Center's adapted model while Figure 6 details how some components of the approach provided structure for Mrs. Sheil in this phase. Figure 7 includes Mrs. Sheil's connections to ideas presented in *The Importance of Being Little* book.

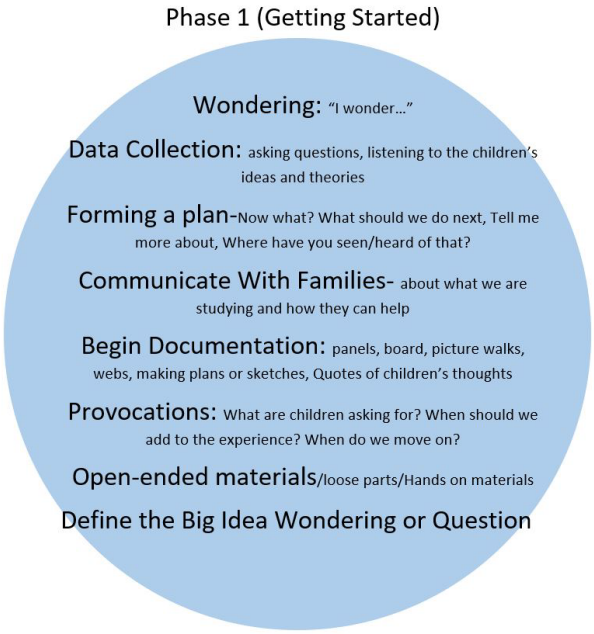


Fig. 5: Components of planning phase 1 of projects; Adapted from Katz et al. (2014) by the Leet Center director and teachers.

- Mrs. Sheil listened to and observed children to gain insight into their "wonderings." She embraced the view that children have unique perspectives that can take projects in new and unexpected directions.
- Mrs. Sheil collected data by observing children, asking them questions, and listening, recording, and reviewing their answers.
- Upon recognizing children's interest in paths and then maps, Mrs. Sheil formed a plan to provide materials to support the children's further exploration and introduced the activity of making a path to her house.
- Ms. Lauren communicated with families about the children's explorations through a communication binder including text and pictures. Mrs. Sheil used social media to share daily updates.
- The communication binder and social media also served to document children's learning and make it visible for children and families.
- Providing open-ended materials and helping the children follow the path to Mrs. Sheil's house served as provocations for new ideas that led from an interest in paths to an interest in maps.
- Children were offered open-ended materials in the outdoor classroom and indoors.
- The "big idea" wondering was focused on understanding and using paths and maps.

Fig. 6: Key features of planning phase 1 of project.

- Mrs. Sheil recognized that effectively identifying children's peak learning zones is dependent on children and adults having real connections and opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations. This guided her focusing on relationships and the social-emotional climate of her classroom.
- Mrs. Sheil attended to children's language and sought out ways to help them think out loud. Engaging children in drama in the classroom offered this opportunity.
- Mrs. Sheil embraced the idea that play is the most reliable and time-tested way to make learning visible. She intentionally ensured that children had ample opportunities to engage in dramatic play and she observed and interacted with children in play to gain insight into their learning.
- Mrs. Sheil understood that there is often an absence of recognition that young children are unique people with their own ideas, feelings, thoughts, tastes, and experiences. She worked to ensure that children and their ideas were respected and honored.

Fig. 7: Teacher reflections on phase 1 of project based on ideas presented in "The Importance of Being Little" (Christakis, 2016).

Phase 2: Rich Study Leading From Paths to Maps to Pirates

The children's interest in paths and maps continued to grow over the course of the fall and even after the children returned from the winter break. Mrs. Sheil recognized and followed this interest and also took the initiative to keep it "alive" by introducing new related provocations. The children became increasingly focused on the idea that maps could be used to find places of interest. In early February, Hudsen introduced a new facet to the exploration. Hudsen's strong interest in pirates inspired him to spend an entire morning creating a pirate treasure map. Mrs. Sheil recognized that this development appeared to be a new direction in the exploration that started with paths and then maps. With this in mind, she engaged Hudsen in a conversation about how the path work turned into his map idea, videotaping this conversation so that she could further analyze it.

> Hudsen wanted to share his creation with some of his friends. James and Charlie listened attentively as Hudsen showed them his pirate treasure map and provided a detailed explanation of its features, complete with an "X marks the spot" of where the long lost treasure was buried (Figure 8). The small group of children excitedly embraced this imaginative plot and determined that they needed a pirate ship to take them on their adventure. This new development introduced a new level of imagination and adventure into the exploration.

Fig. 8: Hudsen explains his pirate treasure map while other children attentively listen.

Mrs. Sheil considered that this could offer a rich opportunity for process drama focused on pirates, maps, and treasure, and she suggested inviting the other children in the class to take part in the exploration.

Following, at a Family Meeting, all children were invited to draw pirate ship plans in their journals (Figure 9). The planned ships reflected the children's unique personalities and interests. For example, one girl expressed her favorite color through her design that she labeled as "My pink ship." As another example, a boy who was a passionate fan of Batman drew this character aboard his ship. From these plans, the children discussed and made a list of what parts they would need to construct the pirate ship. Mrs. Sheil then accompanied the small group of children involved in creating the ship to the materials room (called the "treasure trash" room by the children) to find the parts. The children collected a large rectangular box, additional cardboard to make flags, a gold-colored fixture to serve as a wheel, and a rope.

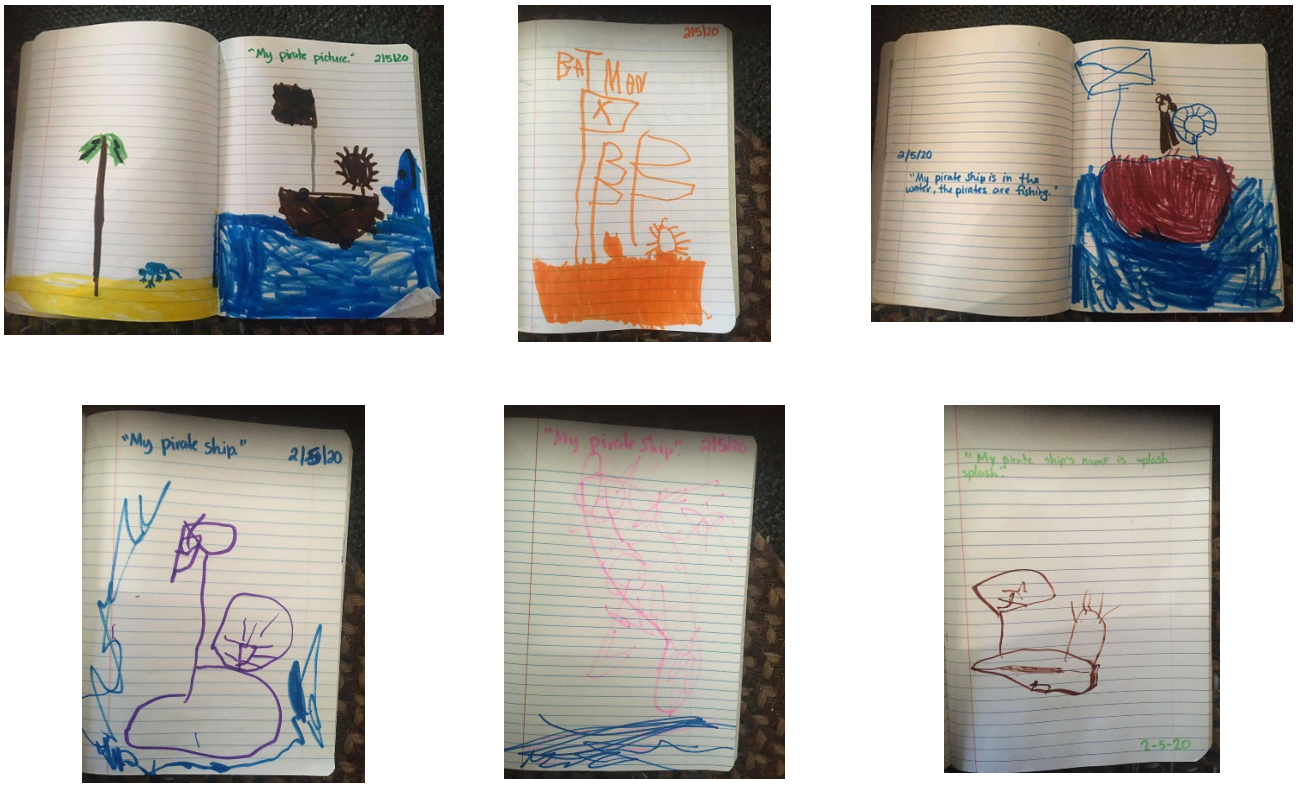


Fig. 9: Children's pirate ship plans in their journals.

After gathering parts, the children began the process of constructing and painting their ship. This work spanned across two weeks. Upon initiating the work, they made some modifications to their design. For one, they realized that they needed to add an anchor. Mrs. Sheil helped them get some Styrofoam to make the anchor. Also, as they were testing out their ship, the children discovered there was not enough room for all of their group members. To solve this problem, they decided to add a lifeboat attached with their rope to make more room (Figure 10).

Fig. 10: The children paint their pirate ship, create the anchor, and engage in dramatic play as they test out their pirate ship.

As the children continued daily work on the pirate ship, the topic of pirates was further integrated in class discussions. The class considered what they knew about pirates. While some children were highly engaged in this exploration, a couple of girls expressed that they did not want to learn about pirates because pirates are "bad guys" and that they wanted to learn about princesses instead. Mrs. Sheil reflected on this sentiment. This was not the first time that Mrs. Sheil had taken a pause to question whether she should be supporting the children's exploration of pirates. Was focusing on pirates celebrating the "bad guys?" Would families have concerns about this? Should Mrs. Sheil redirect children's focus to a different topic?

When reflecting on the above questions, Mrs. Sheil kept returning to insight she had gained during her participation in her study tour in Reggio Emilia. When visiting one of the Italian preschools, she was surprised to see children playing with plastic toy figurines depicting characters from a popular animated movie. Up to that point, she interpreted what constituted Reggio Emilia Approach practices to be relatively narrow and specific and she expected that plastic toys and movie characters would not be allowed to avoid a commercialized environment. When talking to the Italian teacher, Mrs. Sheil received the message that "nothing is off limits" in their classroom. Any materials could be on the table; it was how the materials were presented and used that mattered. This provoked Mrs. Sheil to question some of her previous assumptions and left a lasting imprint on her. She experienced a newfound freedom and sense of permission in knowing that she could find inspiration in the theories and values of the Reggio Emilia Approach without feeling limited by boundaries in regards to what topics the children might explore and what materials they might utilize.

The concern about pirates expressed by some of the children prompted Mrs. Sheil to ask the children, "Are pirates 'bad guys'?" As a class, they discussed that some pirates are indeed "bad guys," with children noting that some pirates steal, kill, and have bad teeth. However, the children playing leading roles in the exploration volunteered that this was not the "kind" of pirates that they were going to be in their class. Rather, they were going to be what Hudsen referred to as "treasure-looking" pirates. This seemed to comfort and appease the students who had been resistant to pursuing the exploration of pirates. With this shared understanding, the class proceeded with their project. Mrs. Sheil introduced resources about pirates, including a children's book, *Shiver Me Letters* by June Sobel. The class engaged in a game and dramatic play inspired by the book that involved groups of children hiding "pirate treasure" (i.e., large

wooden letters) around the classroom for their classmates to hunt. The children took turns hiding and hunting for the letters. Exploration and representation of pirates and related topics continued in other forms such as captured in Figure 11.

Fig. 11: Children get ready to hide letters like "pirate treasure" (left);
Charlie and Hudsen discuss as Hudsen represents Captain Blackbeard's ship in his drawing (right).

Figure 12 shows the components of planning Phase 2 of project work from the Leet Center's adapted model while Figure 13 details how some components of the approach provided structure for Mrs. Sheil in this phase. Figure 14 includes Mrs. Sheil's connections to ideas presented in *The Importance of Being Little* book.

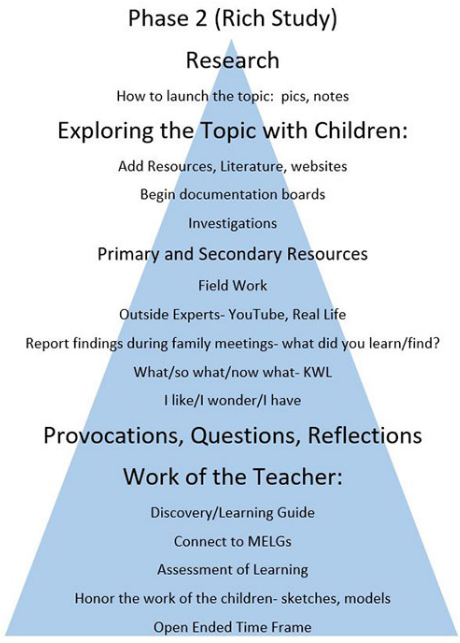


Fig. 12: Components of planning phase 1 of projects; Adapted from Katz et al. (2014) by the Leet Center director and teachers.

- Mrs. Sheil **explored the topic** of pirates with the children. This included discussions about what children already knew. One child was highly interested in the topic and contributed what he had learned through his exploration of pirates at home through books and movies.
- Mrs. Sheil **added new resources** including children's books about pirates.
- Mrs. Sheil facilitated a discussion in which the children reflected on the provocation, "I wonder if pirates are bad."
- Mrs. Sheil **honored the ideas and work** of the children by inviting them to sketch their pirate ship plans.
- Mrs. Sheil ensured that the children had an **open-ended time frame** for working on their project. The exploration that started with paths and then moved to maps and pirates spanned over months. Children were not limited in the time allotted for designing and constructing their pirate ship. Without time restrictions, the children continued to add to the complexity of their design, adding an anchor and a lifeboat.

Fig. 13: Key features of planning phase 2 of project.

- Mrs. Sheil reflected on the idea that preschool can be boring if teachers underestimate children's cognitive capacities and insult their intelligence with foolish and unimaginative curricula. She was attuned to children's potential and interests.
- Mrs. Sheil pondered on the question of, "What motivates children to learn?" She knew that children pay attention to letters that mean something to them. Children in her class were interested in pirates and treasure-hunting. Rather than using a traditional "letter of the week" approach, she integrated an alphabet book about pirates and provided a treasure-hunting game where letters were the treasure.
- Mrs. Sheil considered that if children are engaged in purposeful activities, it is the purposefulness, not the topic or kind of activity, that matters most. She asked herself, "Does it matter if pirates are good or bad, as long as the children are engaged in the exploration?"
- Mrs. Sheil was mindful about giving children space and time to enact their plans.

Fig. 14: Teacher reflections on phase 2 of project based on ideas presented in "The Importance of Being Little" (Christakis, 2016)

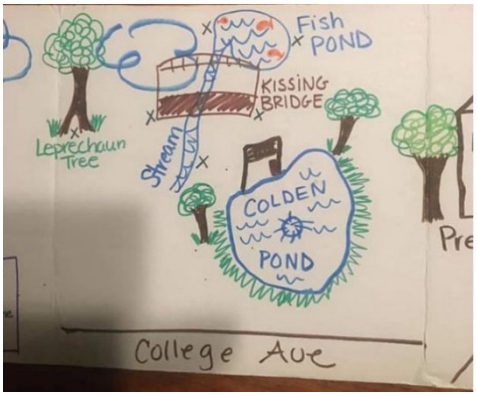
Phase 3: Adapting Process Drama to Find Treasure During the Pandemic

By March, the pirate ship had really come together. The children were engaging in dramatic play with it, and it just needed the last finishing touches to really be complete. The Leet Center was scheduled to have a one-week spring break aligning with the university schedule. Mrs. Sheil was excited to see the children truly "set sail" on their adventure when they returned from spring break. Corresponding with the concept of process drama, Mrs. Sheil intended to dedicate time over the break to move the children's pirate ship into the dramatic play area and to add a few props (e.g., a blue sheet to lay under the boat for water). She also planned to engage the children in discussion after the break to see what additional props they thought they needed and to then invite families to donate items. Props she had in mind included pirate dress-up clothes, bandanas, eye patches, binoculars, and a sand table where children could bury items; with emergent curriculum in mind, though, she wanted to see what ideas the children came up with before offering her own suggestions. However, as the pandemic's grip on the world tightened, a decision was made that the university (including the Leet Center) would not resume meeting on campus for the remainder of the spring semester. The preschool director and teachers decided that they would work to engage with children and family in a virtual format, though they were not sure exactly how they

would approach this. When Mrs. Sheil returned to her classroom to quickly gather a few teaching items she paused and took in the empty classroom. It pulled at her heartstrings as she reflected on how the school family would never again come together to sit on the carpet, and how the nearly finished pirate ship would never set sail.

Over the coming weeks, Mrs. Sheil and her fellow teachers and director strived to maintain connections with children and families and provide meaningful experiences and opportunities in a virtual format. As they experimented with different strategies, the teachers and director discovered it was important to keep school family traditions alive. Prior to the pandemic, children in Mrs. Sheil's class brought favorite items from home in the class "Share Bag" to show the other children. During the pandemic, Mrs. Sheil delivered "Share Bags" to the individual children's homes and invited them to talk about their special items in a virtual meeting with the class. Mrs. Sheil also moved the pre-pandemic school family tradition of the "Counting Jar" (where children guessed how many items are in a jar) to a virtual format during the pandemic. The teachers and director also noticed that children seemed to be more engaged when the teachers used familiar locations from campus as the backdrop for their virtual class meetings.

As the weeks of the pandemic passed, Mrs. Sheil continued to think about the children's pirate ship, anchored in the classroom, abandoned and empty. Was there a way for Mrs. Sheil to keep the magic going? How might she breathe life back into the project, and by doing so honor and celebrate the children's ideas and plan to follow their map to the buried pirate treasure? After much reflection, Mrs. Sheil came up with an idea. For the final virtual class meeting, Mrs. Sheil started out videotaping from a walking path on campus. She had with her a treasure map (modeled after the one created by Hudsen) and the children's pirate ship. She also had the book *The Lost Treasures of Skull Island* by Martin Taylor and Duncan Smith. She read the book to the children. She then "followed" the treasure map to the X's near Colden Pond (i.e., at the Leprechaun Tree, Fish Pond, Kissing Bridge). Here she found treasure (i.e., plastic jewels and gold painted shells that she previously planted). Mrs. Sheil encouraged children and families who were watching virtually to also follow the map to find the treasure at their convenience (Figure 15).



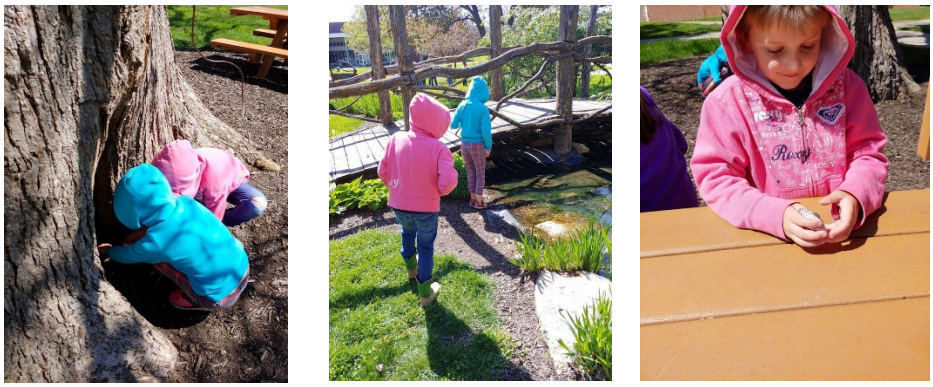


Fig. 15: Mrs. Sheil shares with the children (via the virtual class meeting and the class social media platform) her pirate treasure map, which according to August, looked like the one made by Hudsen (as communicated by August's mother via comments in the class social media platform) (top); Hudsen and his sister hunt for treasure around the pond after participating in the virtual class meeting (bottom).

Additionally, Mrs. Sheil planned a special surprise for Hudsen whose interest in maps and pirates had played a special role in the project. She coordinated with Hudsen's family so when Hudsen returned from searching for treasure at the pond, he would find the pirate ship (filled with the book about pirates and pirate-themed dramatic play materials) in his yard (Figure 16). Though this was not her original plan, through her adaptive approach, she was able to help the children conclude their project in the spirit of the concept of process drama.

Fig. 16: Upon returning from their treasure hunt at the pond, Hudsen and his sister discover that the pirate ship and other pirate materials have been planted in their yard.

Figure 17 shows the components of planning Phase 3 of project work from the Leet Center's adapted model while Figure 18 details how some components of the approach provided structure for Mrs. Sheil in this phase. Figure 19 includes Mrs. Sheil's connections to ideas presented in *The Importance of Being Little* book.

Fig. 17: Components of planning phase 3 of projects; Adapted from Katz et al. (2014) by the Leet Center director and teachers.

- Since the pandemic disrupted the plans for constructing a dramatic play area in the classroom where children could further carry out their process drama focused on pirates, Mrs. Sheil had to be adaptive to find an alternative way to **wrap up** the project.
- Mrs. Sheil came up with the idea of featuring the pirate ship in the final virtual class meeting as a way of **celebrating and sharing** the children's project work.
- While children could not **gather** together as a class to set sail in the pirate ship and hunt for treasure, the virtual class meeting, followed by the invitation for families to later come hunt for treasure at the pond, offered a socially distanced alternative that was in the spirit of process drama.
- Mrs. Sheil **made the children's project work public** for families in the final virtual class meeting by featuring the pirate ship in her dramatization of following the map to the treasure and inviting children to come find the treasure with their families.

Fig. 18: Key features of planning phase 3 of project.

- Mrs. Sheil embraced the idea that playing and laughing together can be more important and educational than drilling on numbers and letters in her virtual class meetings.
- Mrs. Sheil wanted children to have pride in the mastery of the complex skills that went into designing and creating their ship and ownership of the finished product. Even though the children could not all be together in one place to celebrate and engage in dramatic play/ process drama with the ship, Mrs. Sheil honored the children's work by integrating the ship into her final virtual class meeting and planting the ship in one child's yard.

Fig. 19: Teacher reflections on phase 3 of project based on ideas presented in "The Importance of Being Little" (Christakis, 2016).

The Rest of the Story

For Hudsen, the adventure did not end with finding the pirate treasure. As the pandemic continued through the summer months, the pirate ship that Hudsen constructed with his friends at school became an important prop in his dramatic play at home. As an incoming kindergartener, Hudsen participated in the virtual summer school program offered through the Horace Mann Laboratory School that collaborates with the Leet Center. A focus of the summer school program was movies and drama. Hudsen became interested in the idea of putting on plays with his siblings during this time. After watching a videotaped version of *The Pirates of Penzance* with his family, Hudsen wanted to act out the story of the opera (including the song "I Am the Pirate King") with his siblings. They used a recording of the song that they sang and danced to (in costumes) while using the pirate ship as a prop. Hudsen also had the idea of using a homemade "rainstick" (made with a paper towel roll, dried beans, tinfoil, and tape) constructed as part of the virtual summer school program to make the sound effects of the ocean while they engaged in the drama. Figure 20 shows Hudsen engaged in this play and drama, including with his siblings. At the time that this article was written, the pirate ship remains stored in Hudsen's garage and he periodically requests to get it out so he can play with it.

Fig. 20: Hudsen engages in dramatic play with his pirate ship at home.

Conclusion

The intentional choice to transgress and go beyond arbitrary limits is an important feature of the Reggio Emilia Approach (Spaggiari, 2004). Gandini (2006) reflected on the founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach, explaining:

> Malaguzzi loved to cross boundaries, he loved to inhabit the border areas. Not boundaries which have been established once and for all, or defined a priori; but boundaries perceived as places for meeting and exchange, where knowledge and action pursue and feed each other. (p. 170)

Mrs. Sheil had engaged in studies of the Reggio Emilia Approach, including in a Study Group to Reggio Emilia. This helped inspire her to appreciate inhabiting the "border areas" in her work. She had become reflective and intentional about asking herself "Why?" before she made decisions to say "no" to children's requests or to redirect their interests. This was evident in how she responded to the children's interest in

exploring the topic of pirates. Even though the idea of doing a project focused on "bad guys" gave her pause, she was reminded of her reflection that "nothing is off limits" and decided to support the children's exploration while being sure to monitor the directions of the project and to support children in framing topics appropriately. Appreciating how children learn through dramatic play, Mrs. Sheil envisioned how she could collaborate with the children through exploration, including by incorporating process drama (Brown, 2017).

When the pandemic hit, Mrs. Sheil, was faced with new challenges, limits, and boundaries. As she continued to teach through the pandemic, Mrs. Sheil drew on her years of teaching experience and her core beliefs about children and teaching informed by her studies of the Reggio Emilia approach.

When education was moved to a virtual format, Mrs. Sheil was sensitive to the children's loss of the physical environment of the classroom and the university campus on which the school was located. This relates to the concept of place-based education. According to Franz (2019):

> Place-based education uses local cultures, heritage, landscapes, opportunities, and experiences to create a curriculum in which literacy, mathematics, social studies, science, and arts learning occur in the context of place. That is, learning focuses on local themes, natural resources, and content; it is relevant to children's daily lives and experiences." (p. 4)

The pandemic prevented children from being together in the places that had become familiar and emotionally significant to them. Mrs. Sheil wanted to integrate a sense of place into her final virtual class meeting. As explained above, she used two familiar places from the university campus where the school is located (i.e., a campus walking trail and the pond adjacent to the preschool) as the backdrop for the virtual meeting. This offered children an opportunity to reconnect with significant places that had regularly been part of their lives and educational experiences prior to the pandemic. The excitement associated with Mrs. Sheil's invitation for children to engage in dramatic play (as treasure-hunters seeking "pirate treasure" around the pond) with their families was further enhanced by children's familiarity and prior experiences with the setting.

Mrs. Sheil's beliefs about children and teaching have been influenced by continued professional development and her teaching practices have been further cultivated by working in a laboratory preschool setting where administration and fellow teachers embrace questioning current practices and testing out progressive approaches. These experiences and supports provided a strong foundation as Mrs. Sheil's class (figuratively) set sail on their journey of exploring the topics of paths, maps, and pirates. The pandemic could have resulted in an abrupt end to the project, leaving the children feeling lost at sea or marooned on their own desert islands. However, Mrs. Sheil's creative approach, which was in the spirit of process drama (Brown, 2017), supported children in concluding the final phase of their project, giving them a path for discovering that the "X" on their maps indeed marked the spot where they would find treasure. However, we suggest that the true treasure was the rich experiences offered by the opportunity to engage in meaningful and authentic learning, even in the midst of the pandemic.

Note

Children's and teachers' actual names were used unless it was requested that a pseudonym be used in place of the actual name.

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Cindy Rouner, MS, works with the Regional Professional Development Center at Northwest Missouri State University. This position allows her to share the wealth of knowledge and experience with other professionals that she gained in her 11 years of serving as the director of the Phyllis and Richard Leet Center for Children and Families. Her professional interests revolve around inspiring teachers and families to honor children, including their abilities to think and learn. Rouner attributes her deeper understanding in honoring the intellectual and emotional integrity of children in part to the opportunity to participate in a study tour to Reggio Emilia.