Introduction

It is the second morning of the big sale. A blustery wind prepares to challenge the placement of every item on the table, as determined vendors—three- and four-year-olds and their first- and second-grade buddies—hustle around the playground searching for river rocks to hold down the tablecloth. Once the rocks are at their corner stations, the merchandise is carefully transported from the classroom and placed on the table for display. Children hover around, many vying for position as a helper authority to arrange the stationery, bookmarks, and baked treats they have worked so hard to produce during the past several weeks. When the first customers approach the table, they can barely reach the goods, there are so many sellers on hand. Sellers soon become customers as the older children buy many of the items, some of which they have made themselves.

By the end of the first sale day, most of the baked goods and note cards are sold and sales have surpassed the $60.00 mark. The sale could end now, except the sellers are relentless in their eagerness to see that every last item finds a home. By the second afternoon, after additional baked goods miraculously appear to be sold as well, just a few bookmarks remain. Toward the end, as the sale is winding down, Tati, one of the second graders, notices seven of the smaller bookmarks remaining on the table. She turns to her dad and asks, “Can I borrow some money so there won’t be any little bookmarks left over?” Her dad hands over the money and she makes one of the sale’s final purchases. Tati then turns to hand out the bookmarks to her friends. Whales, bookmarks, and children all find a place to belong.

The idea for the sale emerged from the preschoolers’ ocean study. After learning about different species of whales, an interest grew in helping study and save whales in emergencies. Once the idea of adopting a whale was presented, there was no turning back. Website information from the chosen organization revealed it took $60.00 to adopt a whale, so four discussions later, the sale seemed like the perfect fund-raising solution. The children decided two days would be necessary to raise enough money, and they set the date based on when they thought enough products could be made to sell.
For the next several Tuesday mornings, when the two classes joined for their “buddy study” time, an altruistic spirit pervaded the room, with saving the whales in mind. The older buddies took on the project as if it were their own. While they set to work at their tables, balancing full containers of paint water and finding just the right size brushes, they filled blank paper with watercolor designs to be transformed into note cards and bookmarks. The community of buddy readers became a community of inspired entrepreneurs.

A Bit of History

The sale was one of many events that occurred during the course of a year when our two classes found their way to each other. It happened at Awakening Seed, a small alternative school in Arizona founded in 1977, where working with possibilities is a primary focus. Literacy, both in the traditional meaning of the word and in a broader, more human sense, lies at the heart of daily living at the Seed. An emphasis on nurturing humanitarian qualities such as respectfulness, kindness, and compassion pervades every aspect of the school and teachers’ philosophy. What happened with this preschool class and their first- and second-grade buddies exemplifies the rich learning that has gone on at Awakening Seed since its beginning.

As part of the work in possibilities, a buddy reading program was established in the 1980s. Essentially, each class in the school teams up with another class to do weekly reading together. Each younger child is paired up with an older child, usually for an entire school year or longer. The original intent of buddy reading was to promote a love for reading, to model good reading behaviors, and to give older children experience reading authentic texts to an authentic audience. Throughout the course of a year, some buddy groups extend their relationship beyond the weekly reading sessions for activities such as exchanging valentines or taking picnics to a nearby park. Others just read.

At Awakening Seed, an emergent curriculum model is used. What we do each day, each week, each month, and each year is highly dependent on what appears before us in books, in children’s everyday experiences, and in life in general (see Glover 1997). Curriculum decisions are often made in response to children’s interests and passions and sometimes even in response to the personality of the class itself. Thus was the case with these two remarkable classes of children, who ended up being buddies in greater ways than any of us ever envisioned.

Our work was full of surprises. Although we carefully planned how we wanted to go about learning together, inevitably something came up that we hadn’t anticipated. It felt a bit like having a birthday every day. We chose to call the book Surprising Destinations for this reason, as a reminder of the spontaneous and joyful places learners can arrive at when the curriculum and teaching practices support this kind of learning.
Our Decision to Collaborate

We began, as most buddy groups have at the Seed, with a plan to read together on Friday mornings. This initially involved fifteen minutes of reading in pairs or threesomes sprawled all over the floor with piles of books around, or trying out chairs and tables to see if this arrangement enhanced concentration. After some reading, many trips to get drinks or use the restroom, and frequent spontaneous wrestling matches in the library area, we came together as a whole group to read a story. When the book was finished, a discussion always followed with comments like three-year-old Michael’s “That was a great book!” We anticipated the usual adjustments related to learning how to be good readers and listeners; what we didn’t anticipate was the extraordinary passion for life both groups exhibited.

When Hopefulness Is Necessary

Yes, there were a lot of days when we both wondered, Why do we subject ourselves to this every day? On a regular basis we deal with biting, unfocused energy, arguing, and all the normal stresses all teachers face. We’ve tried not to sugarcoat this story and instead just tell it to you straight. But we also wanted it to have a positive tone, to be a story that is true to our view of schooling. We love teaching and being teachers. We get excited going to work each day, wondering what will happen next. Although our students often exasperate us, we appreciate the antics as much as the accomplishments. It is our hope that our appreciation shines forth.

Early on, we noticed that the two classes, both highly energetic, somehow had a calming effect on each other. Once the initial settling occurred, the children were able to stay focused on their reading with great concentration and enthusiasm. We discovered that both groups loved to sing and shared some similar interests. A few weeks into the school year, the first and second graders were in the midst of a science study of bubbles and invited their buddies to join them for “buddy bubbles.” The two groups of scientists used large hoops to make gigantic bubbles, as well as smaller plastic bubble makers and other apparatuses made of wire, straws, yarn, and paper clips to send off a wide range of bubbles into the air. Children who were timid became bold risk takers. Bubble experts initiated the less experienced into the ways of bubble making.
The interaction was so successful that we wanted to try bringing the groups together one other time during the week, apart from the regularly scheduled buddy reading time. This occurred on Tuesday mornings for the remainder of the year, and much of what follows happened on Tuesdays. A more detailed description of this work is provided in Chapter 1.

Sure Signs of a Research Study Brewing

- Children change while engaged in a particular activity.
- Children talk enthusiastically about an event after it has happened.
- Children request further related or similar experiences.
- Your experience as a teacher was different (you think about the event afterward; you’re excited about further possibilities to expand or develop it).
- Your practice as a teacher changes as a result of the event.
- Intuition tells you something deeper is happening.
- You find yourself telling stories to others about the event.
- Everyone has learned something from the event.

We also chose to collaborate because of our unique relationship as teachers. For one of us (Beth), it was the first year as a classroom teacher. For the other (Mary), it was the twenty-second year. Similar interests in reflective teaching, emergent curriculum, critical pedagogy, and teacher research made the collaborative possibilities too tempting to pass up. As notes accumulated on yellow sticky notes, we were in awe of the complexity we observed in the relationship between our two classes. It was evident immediately from our conversations about our work together that we had an opportunity for personal and professional growth that would never be available in the same way again. We had a chance to learn a great deal about ourselves as teachers, as well as about our students.

The Train Study

After the bubble success, other work naturally followed. Three-year-old Antonio was a train enthusiast, and his passion soon spread to many of his classmates as they followed him around the playground making train sounds, picking up and dropping off passengers at various climbing structures, and trading places to be the caboose (see Chapter 5). Mike, one of the second-grade boys, was also a train buff, so we thought a collaborative study of trains might be a good place to start.
We made an ABC book about trains (see Chapter 1) and began a yearlong effort to learn as many train songs as we could. We found books about the orphan trains and factual books about the types and history of trains. A video of Mary’s dad’s model train layout fueled the fires of interest, and from there we were off to new destinations as learners.

As work together progressed, we saw how appropriately the train metaphor fit for much of what we did. We began to see ourselves as teachers, students, and learners on a journey that was new and surprising. We arrived at one point of understanding to be greeted by yet another whole set of questions and wonderings.

One of the songs we learned was “Morningtown Ride,” a delightful lullaby about children riding along on a train full of sleeper cars. The last verse goes like this:

Maybe it is raining
where our train will ride,
But all the little travelers
are snug and warm inside.
Somewhere there is sunshine,
somewhere there is day,
Somewhere there is Morningtown,
many miles away.

One day after we sang the song, we talked about the meaning of its words. Seven-year-old Anna said, “Somebody’s always waking up on this train.” As we thought about our study and our work with the buddies, we realized that, like the children on the train, we were also always in the process of waking up. Each new station at which we arrived broadened our understanding as teachers and at the same time gave us greater awareness of our journey as human beings.

Multiple Literacies

We began looking at literacy and how it comes into play in learning situations in which children of different ages are involved. We observed numerous examples of how children were becoming more literate with print just through the weekly buddy reading. However, the term literacy quickly took on a more expansive definition for us. We came to define it not just as the ability to read and write or be educated but more as “having knowledge or competence” (Merriam-Webster OnLine Dictionary 1999), knowing a way to be in a variety of circumstances. Literacy, in our minds, has to do with a deeper understanding of whatever it is we are knowing. We noticed multiple literacies at work and named the following categories, which were sometimes separate and other times significantly interconnected:

- Content: Content literacy includes factual and practical information about the world. It contains general knowledge about specific topics, such as different
kinds of train cars or how certain animals behave in the wild. Content literacy also involves the learning skills necessary for becoming literate in a more traditional sense of the word, such as learning letters of the alphabet or how to hold a book. When we speak of a content study, it is everything that encompasses the process of inquiry, as well as the actual information itself. It involves learning to review information, solve problems, think deeply and understand, and make connections in the world. In essence, content literacy is the scaffold upon which all other literacies are built.

• Social: Our second literacy category has to do with learning how to behave in acceptable and appropriate ways within a group setting. It includes both learning to be a role model and also following the example of one. Social literacy is an ongoing process that involves a complex set of behaviors, ranging from how to listen to a story attentively to learning how to take turns when two children want the same book. A big part of social literacy is learning to take on the perspectives of others.

• Community: We identify the next level of literacy as community literacy. It is closely tied to social literacy and occurs when a group makes a commitment to becoming a community. It is an extension of social literacy in that the emphasis is placed on the group as a whole, rather than on individual needs or interests. Community literacy enables the individual to see his or her place in the world, and there is a strong emphasis on belonging and being a productive community member.

• Humanitarian: The fourth literacy we have identified is humanitarian literacy. It is a more subtle kind of literacy and deals with aspects of human development that are connected to spirituality, morality, and the inner life. Humanitarian literacy often springs forth from community literacy and is also a highly personal experience for some. It is a literacy that helps us understand our interrelatedness to others in a more universal sense.

• Pedagogical: Although our literacy focus began by looking at what happened with the children, we realized rather early that our collaborative work also enabled us to become more literate in our teaching practices. Through observations, dialogue, reflection, and critical thinking as teacher researchers, we experienced firsthand what we have named pedagogical literacy. Our different perspectives as a first-year teacher and a veteran teacher added a unique quality to this kind of literacy development. Pedagogical literacy is a process by which teachers learn to perfect their craft as educators.

In the pages that follow, we will describe each of these literacies and how they manifested themselves in our buddy work. As we reveal our own pedagogical journey, we hope that somehow it will be inspiring for others eager to venture out on travels of their own to destinations unknown.
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