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*In the following example of teacher research, Michael represents some of his thinking in excerpts from the research project.*

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# A Dialogue with the Shadows

**Isauro Michael Escamilla**

My teacher research was conducted with kindergarten-age children at an after-school and holiday care child development center and was sponsored by a California school district. The center primarily serves Chinese families and other recent immigrants.

Although I have also taught school-age children, I currently work with preschoolers. I use ideas from project approach theory and Reggio Emilia as the inspirational forces for my teaching. The ideas from these approaches not only strengthen my daily teaching, but also help me understand how and why children learn and I myself learn as a teacher.

We know that learning is based on a system of relationships and connections. Looking at my teaching and at children's learning helps me see those hidden connections and understand what goes on under the surface of our everyday interactions and projects.

Working on projects and documenting our learning is a form of research into understanding what the children and I are learning. In this article I discuss

one project on shadows that kindergarten-age children carried out with me and my assistant teacher.

## Teacher research focus

I used this project, in one way, as an assessment of my own teaching skills. I asked myself, How do I listen to children, and what do I learn about what is in their minds, how they think, and what skills they have? It was important to find the children's voices, because we were trying to create an atmosphere in which children's ideas are supported and heard without any judgment on my part.

Doing project work and understanding it really is about learning how ideas grow and develop and what they mean for children's learning and our own development as teachers. For instance, there are many ways for children (and for us) to express ideas. Many times children are not able to express their ideas with fluency, but this does not mean that they do not understand what is going on around them. Some children are very verbal and contribute to a discussion; some can't speak yet—maybe because they are shy or don't know the language—but they do understand and do have ideas.

In project work we observe and we listen. If not, we have no ideas. Beginning a project and researching our teaching might start in a subtle, quiet way for children and us. For example, if children are quietly playing with blocks and trying to make a car go from one place to another, we have only to look—there is an idea right there.

We ask children and look for ourselves to see if they have any problems. Maybe a bridge is too short or not strong enough. When that revelation happens, it is the moment we are looking for. And when there is a problem, there is an even bigger idea. If the bridge falls down or one car comes one way and the other comes the opposite way, we ask, "What would happen if...?" The answer to that question becomes a hypothesis to research and understand. So my own understanding and teacher research are really embedded in my children's research and learning. Our data collection included transcriptions of adult-child conversations, group discussions, observations, and documentation panels with children's drawings, photos, and quotes.

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## The shadows project emerges

When the children in our kindergarten class found a snail in the garden, we thought this small creature could be the springboard for our new class project (we adults had been paying close attention to children's conversations, and they seemed genuinely interested in this slow mover). We carried the snail inside the classroom and put it on a white sheet of paper on a table next to the windows. The children looked at the snail very carefully with magnifying glasses and made a few remarks about its slow, dragging motion. Seizing the opportunity, we teachers supplied the children with paper and pencils so they could draw a likeness of our visitor. Some of the children's representations follow.
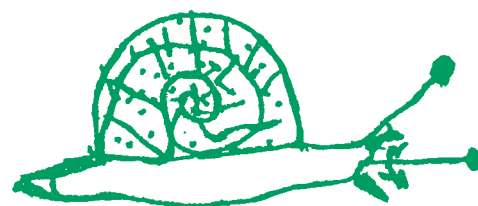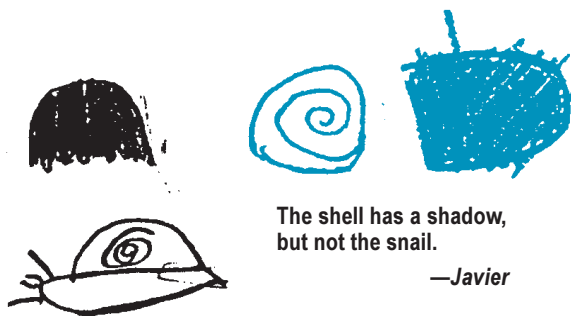
A snail out for a walk.
— *Francisco*

A snail in love.
— *Bryan*

As the children set about drawing the snail, sunlight came through the window and created the snail's shadow on the white paper. This led the children to try drawing the snail and its shadow. These are some of those drawings.

The shell has a shadow, but not the snail.
—*Javier*

A small snail has a small shadow.
— *Michelle*

**A big snail has a big shadow.**
*— Ernesto*

Later the same day, Annie presented a carefully drawn self-portrait of her new haircut. When she presented it to the class, the children couldn't decide if the dark-colored image they saw on the reverse side of the paper was a shadow of her head. What Annie had created was a back view of her head to fully show her new haircut.

This moment of debate provided a good opportunity to record the children's ideas to present them back to the children on another occasion. From then on, we tried to follow up on the children's interests in shadows. The project on snails that we thought might begin and the project on self-portraits begun several weeks before were shifting and merging.

This commingling marked the beginning of our project on shadows. In doing project-based work, I find this is often how projects develop. Projects are not linear processes. Sometimes we don't even know a project has started, but in this instance I could see that the shadows project had begun.

### Discussing our shadows project

In having a discussion with a group of 18 children, 10 felt confident enough to express their ideas to the group. In conversations like this, teachers are not making judgments; our role is to facilitate the dialogue with open-ended questions. All responses are accepted and written down on the board.

At the initial level of project work, it is not important whether children's answers are right or wrong. What is important is that they are expressing their thoughts and formulating theories. Children support their theories with explanations based on their own experiences.

Through children's explanations, as teachers we are able to see how the children perceive the world around them. When children try to make sense of their world, they are making connections. This is why it is important to ask meaningful open-ended questions and to take seriously the children's answers.

I began the conversation by asking, "Why do we have shadows?"

**Francisco:** I think because the sun is shining.

**Javier:** Because the sun makes shadows.

**Ernesto:** I know. Because the sun is bright. And the sun comes out and the shadows come out. And then, when the moon comes out, the shadows go away.

**Francisco:** When the sun follows you and the...

**Javier** (*interrupting Francisco):* The sun doesn't follow you. The shadows follow you. When it is very hot, the shadows follow you every place you go.

**Bryan** (*apparently still thinking about Ernesto's statement about the moon):* At nighttime we don't see the shadows.

**Michelle:** But if you come home and then you turn the lights on, then you have your shadow.

**Maria:** When it is nighttime, you can see a little bit of shadows.

**Michelle:** When you turn off the lights, then you don't see the shadows.

The conversation extended through three more questions, "When you don't see your shadow, where do the shadows go?" "Why do you like your shadow?" and "How many shadows do we have?" Maybe this last one was not a good question because nobody answered. But then after a few moments, Tony, who had been silent until then, spoke: "We have only one shadow because there is only one sun."

### Teachers reflect

As teachers we also need support—to develop a stronger sense of professionalism in the classroom. Besides the technical support (camera, tape recorder, film, and film development), we also need the collaborative support of not only our coworkers but also the administrators and children's families. I was able to do this project at my center because I knew that I could count on everyone's open-mindedness and flexibility. For example, there were times when I didn't take a break because something important was happening with the children, and I just couldn't leave. I coordinated with my co-workers to take my break at another time. I asked this of my staff as well so they could keep working on a particular activity. Our site manager made staffing arrangements for them to leave early another day.

At the end of each project, families made an effort to participate in a celebration of the project. They were invited to a slide presentation and review of the documentation of the children's work. Parents brought healthy snacks for the kids, and this turned into a family evening.

### Role of the teacher

We are working to find the role of the teacher. Some teachers are not comfortable writing or taking pictures, but we need to be empowered and to empower each other. Our site supervisor Lynne pushed a little as well. She was someone with a vision for what children can do, and we all have had open dialogues with her.

In all, this project worked because a whole system of relationships grew into place and provided support. My assistant teacher and I became a team, and we had great respect for one another. We blended the boundaries of the traditional hierarchy of assistant teacher and teacher, and that is how these projects took place. We listened to the tapes together and talked about what we heard.

We shared a close relationship. And for this to happen, we needed to talk about the children. The more we talked, the more we documented, and the more we came to realize that what we were doing was just a start. I thought, for example, that after we had been doing documentation for about a year, we had gotten it. But gotten what? There is just the experience. The more you experience, the richer you become as a teacher, a

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person, a professional. What we did was small in comparison to what is being done in the Reggio Emilia schools—which are our inspiration to actively listen to the children and to make their learning experiences visible through the art of documentation.

### Conclusion

This is how our projects go; layered into them are the words, drawings, gestures, and other ways of expression that the children have within them and that we try hard to document and reflect back to them. Children have a tendency to use the narrative to experience and to dream—everything becomes a story. As I record and document the children's drawings, conversations, and ideas, I then engage in my own research process of understanding the power of the children's learning and of my teaching.

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## Five Elements of Teacher Research in Michael's Project

**1. The teacher research focus**

Michael assesses his own teaching. He asks himself how well he listens to children to find out what they know and what they need.

**2. Background information about the children and the child care setting**

This project is on kindergarten-age children in a public, district-level after-school program. Most children are multilingual English-language learners.

**3. Process for collecting and understanding the data**

Michael's data includes transcripts of conversations, collections of children's work, photos, and the documentation panels created as the project evolved in the classroom. To analyze and understand the data, he refined his original question, Do I listen carefully enough to all of my students so that they see themselves as capable theory makers? Using criteria and in collaboration with colleagues he reviewed the data to find specific evidence that he had heard and honored both talkative and more silent children's theories about shadows.

**4. Reflection on the findings and learning**

• Strong projects arise in nonlinear ways when we are able to listen closely to children and follow up on their interests and excitement.

• Children have complex theories about how things work and fit together.

• Children who don't speak up often know a great deal; our openness and attentiveness is key.

**5. Recommendations for other teacher researchers**

Deepen your teaching and your own learning as a professional by making the children's voices visible through documentation. Experiment by working with your colleagues. See each teacher research project as improving and learning about yourself as a teacher researcher and as an early childhood professional.