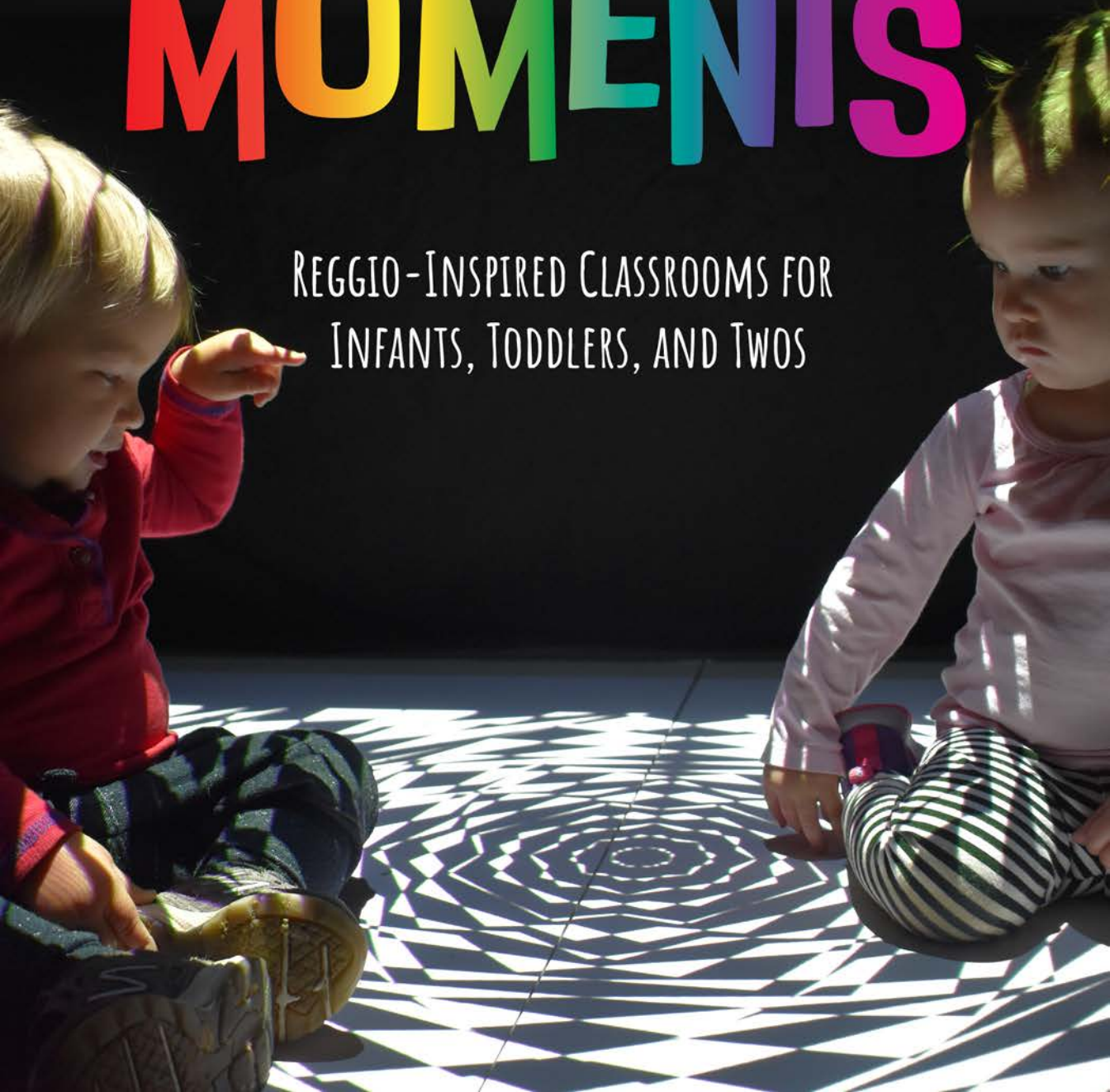


JENNIFER KESSELRING, MEd • WHITNEY DICKINSON • ASHLEY STEWART • JERRY BATES, MEd

# CURATED MOMENTS

REGGIO-INSPIRED CLASSROOMS FOR  
INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND TWOS



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# Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the educators and visionaries who have contributed to the ongoing evolution and innovation at Riverfield. We express our gratitude for your unwavering commitment to the highest quality learning experiences for young children.







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# Foreword

Dear Readers:


Welcome to your participation in this book, which has developed from many enjoyable moments that have taken place at Riverfield Country Day School in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The projects, experiences, explorations, experiments, and values are inspired by the Reggio approach, from Reggio Emilia, Italy. I am Amelia Gambetti, and I started to collaborate with Riverfield Country Day School in 2008, before the exhibit “The Wonder of Learning—The Hundred Languages of Children” went to Tulsa. I am referring to a dialogue between two different educational experiences that have different origins, different contexts, different cultures, a different history, and that are located on different continents. They have, though, something really important in common: they share the same commitment to invest in early childhood and in enhancing the value of education and its quality. Has this dialogue perhaps created another educational experience? Could this commitment, this investment in education, offer a contribution to a better present and future society? Personally, I think so.

Nice meeting you all, dear readers, who have chosen to read this book because you believe in the importance of an education that has the aim to “start strong” from an early age, when children, full of potentialities, have many interests and curiosities. Children ask the adults to listen to and participate with them in the construction of learning processes, but then, are children always listened to?

When I visited Riverfield for the first time, I walked the classrooms of children from a few months to five years old, and although children were not present, I could definitely feel that they were there because I could “hear” their voices, and I could picture them in the different areas full of engaging, attractive provocations, materials, techniques, and media. I felt I could participate in the life of the school with them, their educators, and their families. Even though only two administrators took me around, I had the impression I was surrounded by a complex educational context full of life, pleasure, experiences, challenges, and excitement, and most of all, full of the joy of learning made visible through documentation panels telling the stories of many activities and projects.

My collaboration with Riverfield has continued to the present day. I would like to share with you that when I sometimes hear educators elsewhere saying it is more difficult to be with young children because they do not talk, I am perplexed and even a little sad. While they don’t speak with words, even very young children talk and communicate in many ways.





This book offers evidence of many young children's deep dialogues with their peers, with the adults, with the environment, with materials, and through the "hundred languages of children." Very young children like talking; they like to express themselves. My question is whether the adults available are able to hear what they say. Are the adults paying attention to what they do? Are they paying attention to their expressions, their gestures, their movements, the ways in which they build relationships? Do the adults have the capability to interpret children's "languages" that don't necessarily have words as a component?

This book gives visibility to a strong image of the child, of the school, and of the educators who, through theory and practice intertwined and through professional development and research, are part of complex explorations, full of analysis and reflections. The educators are seen as builders of attitudes based on listening, observing, interpreting, and documenting in partnership with children. Cameras and other technology are tools in the hands of children and adults who have the goal to capture details of different experiences and aim to give evidence to the way in which knowledge is built, through the value of collaboration and the value of different perspectives.

Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio approach, used to say, "Nothing without joy," a joy that asks to be interpreted also as an effort in succeeding complex and meaningful results through challenges, problem solving, and creative and cognitive processes of learning. This applies to children, educators, and parents.

Throughout this book, we see educators who have an image of a child who has rights instead of needs, a child who has been competent since birth, a child full of potentialities, resources, and capabilities, and a child who has the right to learn with joy. I think that this is a wonderful and thoughtful disposition for all adults, as it lends hope and space for looking at children from a new point of view. I invite all of you as readers to also include in your thinking and in your vision a stronger image of a competent child who never stops amazing us.

With affection, my best wishes for your life,

**Amelia Gambetti**

EDUCATOR, FORMER REGGIO EMILIA LIAISON, AND CONSULTANT OF THE REGGIO APPROACH

# Preface

*“Nothing without joy.”*

—LORIS MALAGUZZI

What does it mean to us to be inspired by the Reggio approach? Rooted in progressive ideas and always evolving, Riverfield has remained committed to the highest quality learning for children since its inception in 1984. Thus, it was no surprise when an encounter with the Reggio approach through the “Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit in Oklahoma City was both fascinating and enticing. The Reggio approach, founded in Reggio Emilia, Italy, by Loris Malaguzzi, has been touted as the world’s best example of the highest quality early childhood learning environments in the world. Although Riverfield and the municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools of Reggio Emilia are each born and steeped in their own strong and unique stories and identities, both contexts are committed to high-quality education and to viewing school as an ongoing place of research.

Many avenues have supported the ongoing conversation between Riverfield and the Reggio Children organization over twenty-five years. We have read and “unpacked” the many publications of Reggio Children. We have attended presentations at the conferences of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance. We have participated in study groups in Reggio Emilia and started a collaboration and consultancy with Amelia Gambetti, a former educator in Reggio Emilia. We serve on boards and committees that share the inspiration from the educational experience in Reggio Emilia.

One of the most powerful sources of exchange and understanding came from supporting the “Wonder of Learning: The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit in our community. Housed in Tulsa for six months, the exhibit and its many panel discussions shared the foundational

values of the educational philosophy and told the story of how it has changed and evolved and how the philosophy and commitment to quality came to life through the joyful actions and thinking of children, educators, and families. This exhibit became a powerful tool for reflection and advocacy for quality in education within our school, our community, and the many out-of-state learning communities that traveled to see and study it. It also served as a strong reminder that with great effort comes great joy.

For more on the Reggio approach, visit the Reggio Children website at <https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/>

It is important to note that the experience of the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia is not one that can be copied or adopted. It is, instead, a philosophy, a unique experience, a way of being in and thinking about school, children, and adults learning together. It is an educational experience born in the context of Reggio Emilia and its history. We think that it demands that each individual and program take into consideration their own identities, experiences, and beliefs and then gain inspiration for deepening their commitment and work through the educational principles of the Reggio approach. Again, these principles are not a recipe or a boxed curriculum but are a compass that helps orient thinking, weaving theory and practice together.

We remain committed to advocacy for this way of thinking about and living education. As we heard in our study group in Reggio Emilia in March 2023, “Education remains the first line of defense in a tumultuous world.”

### **Resources on Reggio Emilia**

Ceppi, Giulio, and Michele Zini, eds. 1998. *Children, Spaces, Relations: Metaproject for an Environment for Young Children*. Reggio Emilia, IT: Reggio Children.

Edwards, Carolyn, Lella Gandini, and George Forman, eds. 2011. *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation*. 3rd ed. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Malaguzzi, Loris, and Paola Cagliari. 2018. *Brick by Brick: History of the XXV April People’s Nursery School of Villa Cella*. Reggio Emilia, IT: Reggio Children.

Municipality of Reggio Emilia. 2010. *Indications: Preschools and Infant-Toddler Centres of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia*. English ed. Reggio Emilia, IT: Reggio Children.

Reggio Children. 2011. *The Wonder of Learning*. Reggio Emilia, IT: Reggio Children.

Rinaldi, Carlina. 2006. *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching, and Learning*. London, UK: Routledge.

Vecchi, Vea. 2010. *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia: Exploring the Role and Potential of Ateliers in Early Childhood Education*. London, UK: Routledge.



# Introduction

Through interpretations at Riverfield Country Day School, an independent school in Tulsa, Oklahoma, this book makes visible the premise that environments and the experiences within them have the potential to serve as catalysts for multifaceted play and learning. Positioned within infant and toddler classrooms, the stories of rich inquiry, robust environments, intelligent materials, and complex experiences accentuate the many creative, cognitive, and joyful discoveries of very young children. Inspired by the experiences of the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, the authors encourage educators to reimagine school as a place of research. Imagine school as a place where environments and the materials that fill the shelves are curated to create innovative occasions for exploration and learning. Readers will find pages filled with photographic essays and narration of children and teachers from two infant classrooms, three one-to-two-year-old classrooms, and three two-to-three-year-old classrooms. The children are immersed in interesting scenarios that emphasize the ongoing reciprocal relationships between theory and practice, inquiry and learning, observation, analysis, and action, and joy and work.

## How This Book Is Organized

In the first section, we focus on research in action, introducing readers to curated macro- and microenvironments found throughout Riverfield's preschool. We unpack the permeating philosophy, mindsets, dispositions, thinking, and systems that inform and inspire action. We examine how these perspectives translate into ways in which creative, cognitive, and joyful experiences support children in uncovering big ideas. Readers will encounter Riverfield's interpretation of a cycle of inquiry, a knowledge-building process that intertwines observation, documentation, analysis, design, curation, and action to deepen the children's unfolding action research. In this cycle of inquiry, theory and practice walk hand in hand as educators and children explore the role the environment, materials, and curated experiences have in learning scenarios. In this way of thinking and learning, the cycle is continuous, as one inquiry leads to the uncovering of the next big idea.

Readers can delve into the thinking and process of designing and creating environments and installations that are intentional and responsive to children's curiosities, development, and the social nature of learning.

The second section of the book represents a visual odyssey, a diary of experiences within eight infant and toddler classrooms. Through photography, teacher narratives, and reflections, readers are invited into the thinking, processes, and analysis of curated microenvironments and occasions for discovery. The snapshots are windows into the realm of intelligence, curiosity, experimentation, discovery, and the social construction of knowledge. These moments encapsulate the natural fascination, boundless creativity, and unbridled joy that unfold when young children navigate inviting and complex environments with agency and confidence.

Instead of focusing on the series of occasions that thread themselves through one year in one classroom, we organized the book in a way that shares a variety of experiences from several classrooms over a few years. We have included experiences from two infant classrooms, three toddler classrooms, and three two-year-old classrooms. This was a hard choice because we value threads of continuity in which one occasion for learning, when observed, documented, and analyzed, informs the design and curation of the next and holds us accountable to walking closely alongside the children and their interests. But, we weighed this against the potential for readers to encounter a wider variety of environments, materials, and experiences, as well as the thinking behind them, and we chose the latter. We kindly ask that you stay close to the understanding that none of the experiences in this book happened in isolation or without informed intention. All of the stories we share are rooted in observation and analysis of the children's interests, strategies, curiosities, and cognitive knots over many threaded concepts and experiences. We do our best to situate each story within a short context of previous encounters and thinking, but the main idea is that as educators we offer a world full of curious possibilities to children.

We would be remiss if we didn't mention that our choice of materials and the ways in which we curate experiences might challenge some readers. We are not an ordinary school with a standard outlook on infant and toddler education. That may be uncomfortable for some. You may question some materials, and we welcome that. We have found, however, that if we hold space for "we could if" thinking, we open possibilities for children that are far richer than those we offer if our initial reaction stops at "we can't because." So, we ask that you try on "what if" as you browse the pages of this book. Perhaps you will discover new ways of seeing, thinking, or acting to bump against what you have held as certain.

## Incorporating Technology

It is important to note that one of our strong intentions for the past decade has been innovative strategies for embracing the digital world. This action research project, which we have named Echoes of Reality, seeks to build understanding regarding the many ways that the tangible and intangible worlds can combine to create layered realities. We remain committed to choosing and using technology with the same philosophy and values with which we



choose all materials. We are constantly asking ourselves how these tools invite complex thinking and development of the cognitive and creative intelligences. We have found, for instance, that digital microscopes offer a unique opportunity to examine the world with both micro- and macroperspectives: Digital projections of various landscapes invite children into an augmented experience of reality. Mirrored boxes extend this augmented reality in interesting ways.

We have found that the most effective integration of technology occurs when teachers stay closely attached to the “we can if” research attitude and remain committed to navigating the ambiguity, risk, and open-ended possibility associated with learning something new. Thus, as the need or desire to integrate a new technology emerges, teachers embrace the mindset of learning through doing. Although we set aside time to “mess about” with new materials, the bulk of the learning occurs alongside children, who tend to be adept and natural in their relationships with technology. As teachers experiment with various materials, they undergo a parallel learning process, discovering innovative ways to present concepts, facilitate learning, and adapt to the diverse needs of their students while developing their own skillsets with the particular tool. This active involvement creates an important empathy for the learning children do. Involvement not only enhances teachers’ pedagogical understandings but also instills a sense of resilience, adaptability, and stronger fluency. Teachers evolve as colearners with children, taking risks and weaving their newfound insights into the daily experiences with children. Simultaneously, children witness the transformative power of lifelong learning supported by curiosity, experimentation, resilience, and invention. If a technology tool is not readily available in the school, the teacher can rely on the spirit of collaboration with the broader community. Establishing connections with community resources, such as local artisans, scientists, or craftspeople, enriches the learning experience for both teachers and students.

Equipped with advanced tools and technology, fab labs (fabrication laboratories) and makerspaces are havens for creativity and innovation. These spaces give teachers access to a plethora of materials, from 3-D printers to laser cutters. We have found many community resources eager to collaborate with us and allow us to use technological tools and to offer us hands-on experiences and training. We have found some valuable local resources that you may have in your area as well:

- **Fab labs:** Search for your local fab lab to set up times for messing about and for classes to learn the logistics of the different technologies.
- **Libraries:** Research local libraries to find makerspaces that offer use of 3-D printers, vinyl cutters, small laser cutters, and recording studios, as well as classes to deepen your understanding of how to integrate these tools.
- **Educational institutions:** Make connections with local schools, colleges, and universities, and share or borrow resources or ideas.
- **Children’s museums:** Build a relationship with your local children’s museum to develop your understanding of curated installations, innovative thinking, and hands-on experiences for children.

- **Network of like-minded colleagues:** Seek others who hold similar values around education and the integration of technology.
- **Pottery studios:** Local pottery studios and clay producers are great resources for purchasing clay and glaze and for firing clay artifacts that the children create.
- **Parks and recreation:** Your local department may offer specialized classes and equipment.
- **Photographers:** Professionals, studios, or family members with photography backgrounds may offer photography courses or online tutorials. Professional development can help teachers understand how to document and analyze children's learning.
- **Public school districts:** Some will sell used science equipment, such as digital microscopes.
- **Online retailers:** We have found shopping for rope lights, spotlights, and other specialty lighting is best after the holiday season when prices are discounted. We have also ordered a variety of small digital microscopes through online retailers at a minimal cost.

## A Word about Budgets

Please know that there is often a misunderstanding regarding independent schools and budgets. We function on a tight budget in the same way that so many early learning contexts must. We have made intentional choices for our spending to reflect our values and philosophy. For example, instead of purchasing plastic counting bears, we use reclaimed and recycled materials such as corks or stones. Our shelves are lined with open-ended materials, or loose parts, that are donated by local businesses and families. Our teachers collect and sanitize take-out containers and gather recycled jars and plastic containers to organize and display materials. The children bring collections from family members' sewing rooms or garages for textile areas or makerspaces. These strategies, apart from contributing to a smaller carbon footprint, let us use funds to purchase technology and high-grade art materials while still honoring the budgetary constraints of our school.

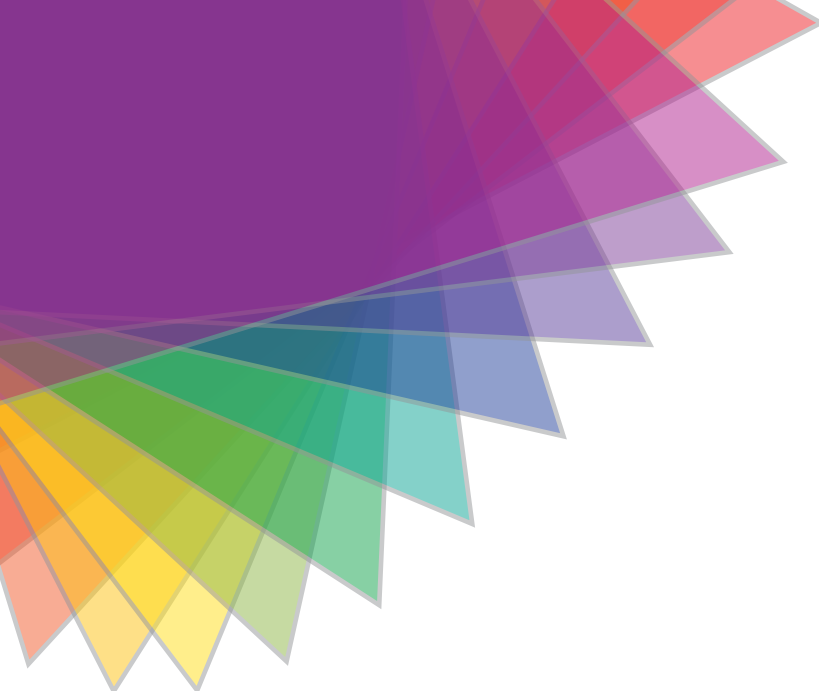
- **Family connections:** Talk with families in your class or school community to learn about their hobbies and knowledge bases and how they might share those with your school.
- **Sewing shops:** Local sewing shops often host classes that teach the basics of sewing and can offer ideas for textile studios.
- **Plastic supply companies:** This is, hands down, one of the most used resources in our community. We have been able to get acrylic scraps and other interesting materials for construction areas.

- **Families:** Each year, our educators send letters to the families with a list of possibilities for open-ended materials. As families clean out drawers and closets, they send their donations to repurpose and use in the school. Keeping families informed on projects and installation ideas helps them better understand the materials we are seeking and repurposing for projects.
- **Local arts and humanities councils:** They often have resources for connecting with local artisans, performers, ballet companies, theater groups, symphonies, and so on.
- **Flower shops:** We have several agreements with local florists to collect flowers that are beginning to wilt or fade. We simply collect them at the end of every week.
- **Hardware stores:** Ask local hardware stores about their scrap bins, and take time to search through the pieces for materials to develop your makerspaces.



It is our hope that, as readers encounter the many occasions narrated through this book, they will uncover the pedagogical choices of the educators, the dynamic interplay between the environment and the children, the ongoing conversations between the children and materials, and the interplay among open-ended experiences and children's creative and cognitive intelligences. We believe that if children are immersed in this environment, they can experience education as a grand adventure of inquiry, experimentation, action, and social construction of knowledge. And if that is what education is, then we can inspire a lifelong love of the learning process. What better gift could we offer young children than that?






# Section I:

## **School as a Place of Research**









# Chapter 1:

## Research in Action

*“Education is not preparation for  
life; education is life itself.”*

—JOHN DEWEY,  
PHILOSOPHER, PSYCHOLOGIST,  
AND EDUCATION REFORMER

As I turn the corner of the infant-toddler hallway into a color lab, I am greeted by a large, white floor canvas that is alive with materials in various shades of blues, greens, and purples and overlaid with a projection of a peacock. This sensory experience is further enriched by the recorded sounds of one of our resident peacocks, along with his feathers, numerous textural elements, and reflective surfaces of various shapes and sizes. The invitation is one of many in this space that focuses on the ways in which color plays with light, reflection, and everyday experiences on our campus. Having watched the peacock outside their window strut his emerging feathers for several days, the teachers have thoughtfully translated this encounter into an immersive sensorial palette. Five young children sit near each other: Three are playing with white tulle that has seemingly captured the peacock within it. Another is grasping a peacock feather, and yet another is enchanted with a blue cupcake liner that echoes the familiar hues of a peacock. The teacher is nearby taking notes and photographs while carefully listening to and observing the nuances of the children’s

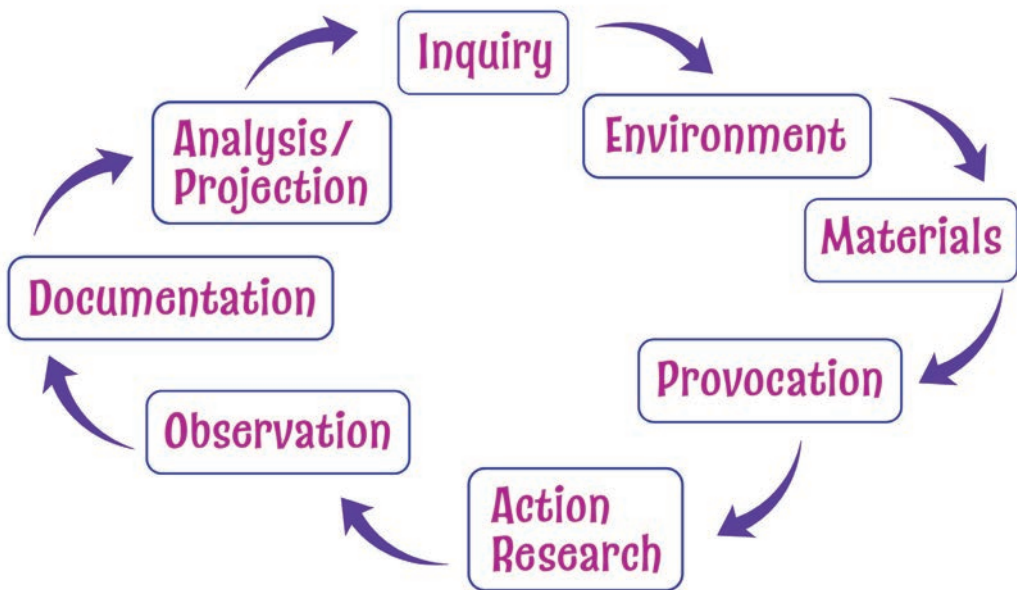
interactions—watching for curling toes, reaching out a finger or hand, the gaze of an eye, the “thinking tongue,” or joyful coos that indicate the myriad ways thinking and learning are flourishing.

At Riverfield Country Day School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, these kinds of invitations are at the heart of our everyday lives. Steeped in social constructivism—a philosophy that believes children construct their knowledge through conversation and interaction with each other, with teachers, with the environment, and with materials. We embrace school as a working laboratory, a place of research, where hands and minds work in unison and the creative and cognitive are always in tandem. It is a place where environments, materials, inquiry, and interesting invitations beckon learning that remains alive.

John Dewey, an educational philosopher and reformer, famously proclaimed, “Education is not preparation for life. Education is life itself,” and we have found this to be both compelling and accurate as we work alongside children in their innate quest for knowledge. Carlina Rinaldi, President of Reggio Children Foundation, unpacks John Dewey’s quote in the following profound way in *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2011):

When we say that school is not a preparation for life but is life, this means assuming the responsibility to create a context in which words such as *creativity, change, innovation, error, doubt, and uncertainty*, when used on a daily basis, can truly be developed and become real. This means creating a context in which the teaching-learning relationship is highly evolved. That is, where the solution to certain problems leads to the emergence of new questions, new expectations, and new changes. This also means creating a context in which children, from a very young age, discover that there are problems that are not easily resolved, that perhaps cannot have an answer. For this reason, they are the most wonderful problems because therein lies the spirit of research.

At Riverfield, we use the inquiry cycle as a way to orient our thinking and strategy toward this “spirit of research.” Believing that learning begins with really good questions and then follows a continuous cycle of inquiry and reflection, teachers set up robust environments full of intelligent materials and curate occasions that pique curiosity and adventure. Throughout the encounters, children are engaged in action research as they grapple with interesting concepts, experiment with action and reaction, uncover big ideas, discover connections, apply knowledge from previous experiences, and build relationships—cognitively, creatively, emotionally, and socially. Working and playing alongside the children, teachers carefully observe, document, and analyze the encounters of the individuals and the group to understand more fully the children’s strategies; what ideas or concepts they are wrestling with; how they approach the environment, materials, and experiences; and how they build meaning and knowledge individually and as a group. Based on the actions and reactions of the children, teachers self-reflect by actively questioning and critiquing their choice of materials, group composition, how and when they lent knowledge or nudges, and the timing



and nature of the questions they asked. They also seek the perspectives of colleagues, and at times, family members, to find ways to refine the experience, add complexity, deepen the play, thinking, and learning, and represent all of it through their documentation. Drawing from their conclusions, teachers brainstorm and design possibilities for the next query and provocative occasion. In this way, research becomes woven into the fabric of daily life. Children begin to rely on the solidarity between their role as active protagonists and the role of their teacher as a provocateur of questions and on the process of constructing answers. As Carlina Rinaldi states in *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2011), “Children appreciate the fact that we are right there by their side in the search for their answers: the child-researcher and the teacher-researcher.”

But what does “research” look like in the life of a young child or for the teachers who work with them? Creating a culture in which school is an ongoing place of research is complex and fascinating. It implies that everyone is seeking that which they do not know. It provokes courageous learning and adventure. It means that everyone spends their days immersed in curiosity and thinking, that beautiful questions abound, that the environment is robust enough to support inquisition through experience. It means that the intelligent materials lend the affordance of learning through doing. It means that active listening becomes part of the pedagogy, that the role of the child and the role of the teacher shift in interesting ways as they become partners in learning processes. It means that theory and practice have a reciprocal relationship, where one informs the other in an ongoing way.