



Making Connections Between Imaginary Play and Deep Learning

Using Teacher Research in Our Practice

by Mary Ann Biermeier, Susanne Kenworthy, and Kristine Lundquist

As educators, our craft challenges us to design dynamic and enduring learning experiences, and environments that heighten children's curiosities and spark shared memories. Really great teachers have this talent. One such teacher is Susanne Kenworthy. A pre-K teacher for many years at Pinnacle, Kenworthy first introduced the idea of "Notty the Elf" within her pre-K classroom. She explained, "We want to create environments that encourage writing—where writing is made meaningful and purposeful."

She added, "We were not sure the children would believe, that it would go anywhere. We risked looking foolish." But as they so often do, the children surprised the adults.

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Mary Ann Biermeier is an author, educational speaker, and instructional designer with over 20 years in the early childhood field. Inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach and educators at Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool, she understands the transformative power of relationship-driven teaching strategies. Documentation drives her own learning, seeking a deeper understanding of each child. It is a way of listening to children, of re-telling their stories. Biermeier believes the Notty Project affirms what we have known for a lifetime, that young children learn deeply through highly social, playful environments.



Susanne Kenworthy has enjoyed working in early childhood education for over 30 years. Her creativity and commitment to responding to children's questions drive the Notty Project. A letter from an imaginary elf will spark a room full of children creating with their own hands, writing letters, and constructing knowledge through questions and conversations. Kenworthy is a testimony to the impact teachers can have within the classroom and the greater community when we embrace playful learning strategies.



Kristine Lundquist is a certified early childhood educator and has been teaching preschool for over 33 years. Embracing the Reggio Emilia Approach, Lundquist has a talent for capturing children's explorations through photography. She is well known on campus for her singing talents, delighting children with her joyful renditions and rhymes. Lundquist also has a unique role in designing playful activities/provocations for our outdoor learning environment. She believes the Notty Project has been a catalyst for fostering children's creativity, curiosities, and values. She reminds us that teachers must delve deep with children, building relationships and becoming collaborators and researchers alongside them.

“Children are always talking about him and making things for him. Year after year, regardless of the composition of personalities in the classroom, children connect to the elf.”

Today, Notty has become a school-wide phenomenon. After all, we could not contain the magic to just one classroom. To accommodate the entire school, Notty has moved from the doll house to a small camper on the playground. Finding Notty’s camper, hidden on the playground, has become a daily discovery for all of the children.

Imaginary Play Environments

There is a small woodland elf exploring the grounds of our preschool. Although the children have never seen the little guy, they are certain he exists, because on tiny sheets of stationary, tucked into small envelopes, the elf writes to the children. They call him “Notty,” short for Nottingham. Mail from Notty is often read during our morning meetings, and the children are encouraged to write back to the elf. Much to the children’s delight, Notty seems to know a lot about the classmates. They wonder aloud if the elf hides somewhere in the classroom.

In the writing center, the children are drawing pictures, asking Notty questions, seeking out spelling, and signing their names. They are adamant about writing their names on the letters, for the teachers have explained that Notty cannot return a letter without knowing the child’s name and room number. At the creative tables, children are making things for Notty’s home and discussing what Notty might need. Most astonishingly, the children are writing letters and creating gifts on the weekends, as parents encourage this school-wide fantasy.

Relationships Drive the Learning

Honestly, who does not love getting a letter in the mail? The kind of letter that comes with a stamp and is hand-addressed with our name. We cannot wait to tear it open and read what is inside. The letters from Notty arrive in small envelopes (gift card size), as he is a little guy. We think children take to Notty because he understands what it is like to be small. In his letters, Notty seems to know things about these children and their classroom. The children wonder aloud if Notty has been in the room. Is he hiding somewhere? The questions pour forth. When we share these letters, we help the chil-

dren connect to Notty’s stories and inquiries on a personal level. We ask open-ended questions, such as:

“Has something like this ever happened to you?”

“How does Notty know this about you?”

“What is happening in the picture you drew for Notty?”

“What could you make to help Notty?”

“How did Notty figure that out?”

“How would you reply to Notty?”

“Hidden in this incredibly fun activity are all the things we preschool teachers love to see,” explains teacher Shauna Winburn. “Students are perfecting their grip, beginning to sight-read familiar words, and asking for help in how to spell various new words. Most importantly, they are feeling a meaningful connection to the written word and the power words can convey.”

Consistently after our morning meetings, children rush to the writing tables and creative tables to respond to Notty’s letters. The letters have become so numerous that we installed a Notty mailbox near the playground. We added a “mail carrier” to our classroom helper lists—a highly prized task of delivering mail to the mailbox. The box is stuffed every day, clear evidence that something extraordinary is happening.



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Letters and drawings to Notty appear daily in our classrooms.

The Importance of Group Work

The Reggio Emilia approach is a blend of theory and practice that challenges educators to see children as competent and capable learners in the context of group work (Fraser & Gestwicki 2002). Malaguzzi emphasized “it was not so much that we need to think of the child who develops himself by himself, but rather of a child who develops himself interacting and developing with others” (Rankin, 2004). As such, at the core of Reggio Emilia-inspired schools is the emphasis on building and sustaining relationships. Much like Vygotsky’s theories, Loris Malaguzzi believed that social learning preceded cognitive development (Gandini, 2012). Malaguzzi emphasized that the social environment plays a central role in the process of making learning meaningful. So important was this notion, that Malaguzzi defined the environment as the third teacher (Gandini, 2012). The social learning environment has several layers:

1. A school-wide environment that reflects the values we want to communicate to children;
2. A flexible teaching environment, responsive to the need for teachers and children to create learning together;
3. A rich learning environment fostering creativity through the work of young hands manipulating objects or artistic materials; and

4. A classroom environment that shapes a child’s identity as a powerful player within his or her own life, and the lives of others (Bongiorno, 2014; Curtis & Carter, 2008; Dombro, 2011; Mraz, Porcelli, & Tyler, 2016; Neil, et al., 2013; Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001; Paley, 2005).

We believe our classrooms should provide many opportunities for students to connect positively to each other. The Notty project is irresistibly connected to this idea, this hope, of group work.

Children discuss Notty and their imaginings about life as an elf. Conversation skills and vocabulary grow. They write letters together. They ask adults how to spell the words. They sign their name and room number to the letters. They create gifts, build furniture, boats, planes, pictures for his walls ... together. It is not that teachers are directing this activity; rather, the children drive the learning through their shared interest.

“What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught, rather, it is in large part due to the children’s own doing, as a consequence of their activities and our resources.” —Loris Malaguzzi (Gandini, 2012)

In designing the Notty project, we knew that by asking students to reply to the elf, we could foster this idea of group work within our classrooms. We also suspected that we could draw out their stories by asking the children about what they wondered. The creativity, emergent literacy, fine art, and social-emotional milestones easily fell into place around this delightful long-term project. Accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach, Pinnacle Presbyterian Preschool follows the Arizona Early Learning Standards (Arizona Department of Education, 2018). We find our documentation and photos easily exceed state and NAEYC standards.

Social-Emotional Development: Children learn and thrive within relationships in which they feel emotionally secure and physically safe.

Language and Literacy Development: Through play and intentional



Peeking into Notty’s camper. Children’s creations (picture of sunny skies) are often displayed in Notty’s camper.

activities children learn to create meaning from language and communicate with others using verbal communication, pictures, symbols and print.

Social Studies: Through intentional teaching practices children develop an appreciation for rights and responsibilities within the group.

Scientific Inquiry: As children seek answers, they will plan, observe, predict and form conclusions. Children's positive experiences around inquiry form the foundation for future investigations and critical thinking.

Artistic Expression: For young children, the importance of the arts is in the process of creating and constructing. Through artistic expression children discover ways to understand, design, and explain their ideas, thinking, and theories about the world.

Across all classroom ages, and across all skill levels, children are connecting with each other through imaginary play. Notty connects each child to others within their own classroom, and with children down the hall. It's the kind of experience that transforms a school, liberating our divided ways of being. This kind of collaboration does not happen by chance.

The Environment: Open-Ended Materials

Both Reggio Emilia-inspired schools and Montessori schools describe the environment as a powerful teacher (Gandini, 2012; Lewin-Benham, 2011; Montessori, 1995). There are spaces for whole group work, small groups and individual investigations. Classrooms are designed with creativity in mind, asking the student to use artistic tools to express knowledge and understanding. Large, empty tables await the children's creativity. Cubbies and shelves are filled with open-ended materials easily within reach of small hands. Mini-ateliers are filled with many kinds of papers, drawing and writing instruments. The environment is an invitation to touch, to investigate, and to create.

Connecting Learning to Families

Long before Notty appears on campus, parents and caregivers are in on the gig. During school registration, parents learn about the elf living on our playground. By setting parents' expectations, we prepare them for the letters their child will be receiving. We show the parents how this is a

highly social and creative writing endeavor for the children. We make the learning visible by helping parents see the academics emerging through the play.

"Notty is a perfect context not only for literacy and writing but for empathy and math" said Debra Ortega, a teacher. "Students used recycled materials to make furniture for Notty, took photos for a catalogue, and labeled what they had made, along with prices. Whenever Notty ordered something, he would ask for the total price owed, for which the children would need to add up numbers to give him the total. It amazes me over and over how the learning involved in Notty builds upon itself and expands in endless ways."

The Notty project has been instrumental in legitimizing our claims about playful learning environments. We set the stage. The adults understand their roles as facilitators. And the children consistently rise to the provocation.

Project Sustainability

Long term projects require commitment from administrators, teachers, and teaching teams. Processes are put in place. Individuals and teams are given responsibility. The letters are gathered each day from the mailbox and sorted by classroom. Within days, Notty replies to the children, often asking them a new question. As if taking on a life of its own, the circle of correspondence begins again.

Because the outcomes of the Notty project are highly valued and visible, we continue to put extra time and energy toward this work. It is deeply rewarding for teachers and children. These outcomes, this delight and joy, are why we work in this field. For many years, Susanne Kenworthy wrote all of the letters to the children. Astonishingly, she responded to each and every child. Thousands of letters.

"I kept a catalog of the children's questions and my answers. It was the only way to be consistent in creating this image of Notty," she explains. "Over the years, I was surprised at the duplication of questions: 'Do you have a mother?'; 'Are you a boy or a girl?'; 'Where do you go in the summertime?'; 'What is your favorite football team'; 'How tall are you?' Only once did a child ask me if Notty was married," she laughed. Today, this large binder guides the next generation of teachers, assisting them in writing letters to the children.

It is empowering to recognize that this project began with one teacher. The real secret to sustainability is to share your vision with others—to allow others to rise and lead, and to

play a collaborative role in the outcome. To be certain, we are all in this together: teachers, administrators, and parents. It is long past time to put research into practice, to make playful learning more than a marketing slogan. For over a century, the early childhood field has acknowledged the powerful forces of imaginary play. This life force within each child is eager to learn and grow, to imagine and create.

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