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Project Study Group: A Narrative Inquiry into how Individual Epistemological Beliefs and Teaching Practices are affected by Participation in a Study Group Implementing the Project Approach

by

Stacey Pistorova

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Education

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December 2013
An Abstract of

Project Study Group: A Narrative Inquiry into how Individual Epistemological Beliefs and Teaching Practices are affected by Participation in a Study Group Implementing the Project Approach

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Narrative analysis opens up a pedagogical research space to investigate the questions of what do we teach and how, illuminating a deeper understanding of the complexity of embedding inquiry based, constructivist practices into the early childhood classroom. The following research represents a form of inquiry that exposes the tensions that emerged out of the context of a specific professional study group’s engagement in the study of the Project Approach between personal epistemological beliefs, classroom practices and the professional field of early childhood education. The narratives of four teachers tell the stories of early childhood educators seeking to implement projects into their classrooms and to open up a dialogue that invites us to take a deeper look at the findings of this research that challenge and uncover the following narrative threads: the role of experience in teachers’ ability to connect the theory of inquiry-based practices with implementation; the invitation to challenge teacher education and professional development models that disseminate content and information with the expectation that methods are assimilated into teachers’ epistemological perspectives and practices; and the
need for additional, qualitative methods that expose the complexity of teachers’ lives and calls to view teachers holistically and as learners who approach teaching and learning from multiple perspectives. The stories found within this research are far from quantifiable or generalizable, but provide a new lens on project-based work and provide insight into the possibility and capacity for projects within the current field of early childhood educators.

The challenge of this research is to pay close attention to the experiences of educators in the field and take the time to observe, document and tell their stories. We need to stop the efficiency model of labeling and engage in more narrative inquiry to gain a deeper understanding that can inform our practices and build the capacity for project-based, constructivist practices. When we stop isolating teachers and begin to investigate more deeply the systems within which they work then we open up a space that moves beyond prescribing teachers and their practices. This shift begins to describe the reality of teaching and learning and working within a system that often counters constructivist approaches to education and pushes the limits of pre-determined, mainstream paradigms in teacher education, educational practices and educational research. We must continue to challenge norms as the means of living in the tension and constructing new alternatives to pedagogical practices.
To Ben and Emily, when I began my graduate work you were six and two, you are now fifteen and eleven. I first and foremost dedicate the following research to both of you. You have always been the driving force behind my work.

Ben, I will never forget you asking me, “so do they teach you how to make children be quiet in class and sit still when you want to become a teacher?” This question continues to drive me in my work which seeks to counter such experiences for children.

And in response to a question you once asked me on the way to kindergarten Emily, “When I grow up do I have to go to school, be a mom and work?” I can only say, do what makes you happy and follow your dreams.

Tomas, you have stood behind me in your always gentle, quiet but steadfast way, even when I questioned myself. I would have never completed this work had you not had confidence in me and my work. You are my best friend.

Mom and dad, what can I say, you have been with me all the way through everything, thank you for never holding me back and always pushing me to follow my pursuits.

I also dedicate this to my students both past, present and future. You always hold me accountable to practice what I preach. Never underestimate yourselves or young children. Thank you for being equal partners throughout this work, always encouraging me and even more so inspiring me.
Acknowledgements

None of this could even be a possibility were it not for the daily work of early childhood educators. I particularly acknowledge the teachers and assistants of this study with whom I continue to work and who every day contribute to society by making a difference in children’s lives. You inspire me daily and it is my hope that by sharing your story, we can impact and support other teachers in their journey.

All of the members of my committee have impacted me in ways you may never know. Ruslan, you have been there from the beginning, never pushing, but always gently nudging me forward and being the mentor I hope to be at some point in my career as well. Lynne, you are one who truly practices what she preaches, modelling in all aspects the epitome of an educational researcher. Susanna your wealth of knowledge, understanding and level of questioning continues to challenge me. I acknowledge the work all three of you do daily with all of your students to push the norms of what we assume education to be.

Sylvia, I don’t know if you know how much both your work and our relationship has truly impacted me. And while I acknowledge you within my own work and research as significant, the international early childhood community acknowledges you daily around the world through their steadfast commitment to study and implement the Project Approach. Cheers to your ongoing persistence in supporting teachers’ ability to implement and sustain project-based practices!
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Chapter One

Introduction: Finding My Way

“Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that will never be again. And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are?”

Pablo Picasso (Spanish Artist and Painter. 1881-1973)

Picasso’s provocation provides the framework for the following research and the context for my own personal narrative as a visual artist and early childhood education professional. As a visual artist I find I approach the things of the world with a sense of wonder and inquisitiveness, an innate quality mirrored by young children as they observe, explore and investigate the world with intensity as the means of making sense of the world. Such qualities drew me to the field of early childhood education only to be faced with an approach to education all too often grounded in the mere dissemination of facts such as two and two make four. And so, when I came into contact with the Project Approach, a curriculum that reflected both my image of a child and my pedagogical and conceptual philosophy of early childhood education, I found myself drawn by the need to engage in my own study of the Project Approach, seeking pedagogical spaces with other early childhood educators for such research. One such space and the narratives and knowledge that emerged out of the context of a specific group of early childhood professionals engaged in the study and implementation of the Project Approach provides the framework for this research.
I originally sought to tell the story of our collaborative journeys and intersecting paths through what I believed to be a formal, academic lens by disconnecting myself as the researcher from the text. My intent was to stay within the parameters of acceptable, quantitative research in education as I sought to find the one denominator that would prove to have statistical significance to my questions. As I struggled to represent the data in a narrative form, I was struck by the duplicity of my trying to tell the co-construction and emerging nature of our intersecting stories within a specific space and time while simultaneously standardizing it through the façade of the removed researcher and generalizable meanings.

My attempt at removing the self from the story and narrowing the scope accordingly proved frustrating and led to several unsuccessful drafts as I found only contradictions between my theory and praxis. It was at this crux in my own work that I came upon a challenge posed by Elliot Eisner (1995) to make forms of inquiry an artistically and humanistically grounded part of what is considered viable and reliable in the educational research community. This challenge allowed me to confront my own perceptions of academic research and methods and engage in the process of representing knowledge as a living process through the construction of new and different conceptions and perceptions of research and education. This opened up a completely new space for me in my research and helped me ground my work in a more holistic form of inquiry and illuminate the complexity of our story.

The following research represents a form of inquiry that exposes the messiness that emerged out of the context of a specific professional study group’s engagement in the study of the Project Approach and the resulting tensions between personal
epistemological beliefs, classroom practices and the professional field of early childhood education. My approach to this phenomenon is to capture a story, the story of a specific group of early childhood educators engaged in the construction, de-construction, re-construction and co-construction of professional knowledge about the Project Approach while at the same time illuminating the intricacy of individual story lines and personal epistemological beliefs on teaching and learning and classroom practices, all of which are in some way informed by the larger narrative of early childhood education and the historical narrative of the Project Approach. The intersections and tensions within the context of our group between teacher-directed and child-centered practices; theory and practice; the personal and professional; individual and group proved significant and revealing in my analysis of the data and provided the “narrative threads” upon which I intend to focus (Beattie, 1995). The following research account invites you to read this story from my point of view, fully dependent upon my specific context and guided by the need to further explore the specific tensions that emerged out of our study group.

**Navigating within two Historically Grounded Education Movements**

The question of “what do we teach our children [and how]?” has long been debated within the United States and has led to significant competing views on teaching and learning. The struggle for control of educational practices has often been defined as a division between teacher-centered instruction where knowledge is given to the passive learner, subject matter is isolated with the teacher as the possessor of the necessary content; and innovative, constructivist, student-centered instruction where knowledge is actively discovered and co-constructed by the teacher and students and subject matter is emergent, not predetermined or fixed (Cuban, 2004; Dewey, 1897; Katz & Chard, 2000).
While this deep rooted polarity in both past and present educational theory appears to present educators with an either/or paradox, in reality teachers’ epistemological beliefs and resulting classroom practices fall somewhere along the continuum of these two pedagogical extremes (Cuban, 2004; Dewey, 1897; Kilpatrick, 1918; Gal, 2004; Labaree, 2005).

I have found through my personal experience that educators move and work somewhere within this socially constructed pedagogical paradox, navigating between personal, epistemological beliefs of teaching and learning; a formal, systematic approach to education that holds them responsible and accountable for student learning through prescribed standards and expectations; while simultaneously calling for innovation in teaching that supports inquiry, collaboration, critical thinking and the social construction of knowledge (Bramwell-Rejskind, Halliday & McBride, 2008; Greene, 1995). In recent work I continue the daily struggle to find a middle ground between personally constructed, epistemological beliefs of teaching and learning, and the theoretical, cultural and political perceptions and expectations of the current field of early childhood education. These personal experiences reflect Malaguzzi’s (2001) understanding of teaching and education as an arduous and difficult process of daily negotiating a pedagogical identity that is grounded, shaped and informed by a culture and history of doctrines, beliefs, rituals and values.

Carla Rinaldi (2001) invites us to pay close attention to this correlation between personal epistemologies and the process of constant negotiation with historical, political and cultural realities and the phenomena that affect our pedagogical practices and individual classrooms. Paying close attention to the phenomena that affect pedagogy
helps find connections, not oppositions between the personal and professional, individuality and inter-subjectivity (Rinaldi, 2001). It is these connections to which Rinaldi (2001) refers that I sought and continue to seek in my own work and life within the field of early childhood education where I am constantly navigating between the personal and professional, constructing and reconstructing my knowledge of teaching and learning within a social and historically shaped context. It is my own journey to more fully understand the connections between the personal and professional, theory and practice that sets the stage for this story that answers Rinaldi’s (2001) call to pay close attention to both the connections and oppositions.

**My Story: The First Narrative Thread**

I would never say I came to teaching willingly. So many educators with whom I have encounters or relationships with talk about how they longed to be a teacher since childhood. This was not the case for me, since my childhood I was drawn to the visual arts: sketching, painting and drawing all that I encountered as the means of understanding the world and myself. I never considered the possibility that my passion for the visual arts would bring me to the field of early childhood education.

I outwardly resisted the field of education given what I viewed as the restrictions and limitations of a systematic education grounded in approaches to pedagogy lacking creative liberties. My personal experiences in the arts and creativity proved an unnatural fit with pedagogical practices that relied upon an insistence that learning is a dry process that removes content from the child’s context, is memorized and then measured; removing the creative process from the act of learning which I had come to know, experience and engage in (Gal, 2011; Labaree, 2005). It was not until my personal
encounter with an alternative approach to early childhood education that I turned away from my understanding that there was a single approach towards education.

The notion that “knowing is a moment of praxis” (Sartre, 1963, p. 93) drove my own personal inquiry where I encountered alternative approaches to what I had come to know as mainstream education. I was particularly drawn to the powerful images, work and theories of the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Grounded in the theory of “the hundred languages” and the understanding that children have not a single language, but a hundred languages through which they can engage with and make meaning of the world, the schools of Reggio Emilia reinforced my personal image of the child as capable and competent and provided an approach to education that contradicted teacher-driven curriculum and models (Malaguzzi, 1998; Rinaldi, 2001). The disconnect I witnessed in the educational practices within the United States between content and the arts, school and life proved to not exist within the schools of Reggio where the visual arts and other means of communication are seen as tools for constructing knowledge. Their curriculum naturally integrates content and skills; children are actively engaged with the things of the world; and teachers are lifelong learners. The Reggio Approach to education where learning is an active process and knowledge is socially constructed provided me an alternative to early childhood, an approach that continues to be informed, but not bound by past theories and pedagogical practices (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006).

The Reggio Approach challenges us to “open ourselves to rethinking the mainstream of knowledge” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 7), a provocation that I both accepted and supported as I entered the field of early childhood education. It was not only their innate understanding of the visual arts that drew me to the theories of the
schools of Reggio Emilia, but their understanding that knowledge cannot be predetermined and learning does not proceed in a linear manner. It was their turning away from pre-packaged, standardized curriculum with pre-determined content towards an understanding that knowledge emerges out of local experience and is socially constructed that proved crucial to my own values and epistemological understandings of teaching and learning.

The practices of the Reggio Emilia schools with infants, toddlers and preschoolers gained not only my interest, but the international attention of early childhood educators for their ability to build on the interests and natural tendencies of young children through in-depth projects and their engagement of children in authentic learning and meaningful experiences (Helms & Katz, 2001; Katz & Chard, 2000). The Reggio Approach showed the field of early childhood education an approach that facilitated and built upon the innate curiosity, capacity and capabilities of young children. Such an image of young children served as a catalyst for many early childhood educators.

The images, texts and philosophies on early childhood education that came out of the schools of Reggio Emilia led to the organization and funding of Reggio Study groups in the state of Ohio. The intent of these groups was to create early childhood learning communities formed by early childhood education faculty, teachers, and parents of young children seeking to engage in dialogue and the study of the Reggio Approach as the means of supporting and implementing child-centered curriculum. These professional learning communities, described in the field as Reggio study groups, were drawn to the in-depth investigation and projects of the Reggio Emilia schools that supported the theory of learning by doing through child-centered curriculum and to the dilemma of how to
integrate such an approach into the current field of early childhood education within the state of Ohio.

My personal interest in the Reggio Emilia Approach led me into such a learning community where I sought and gained a greater understanding of project, inquiry-based learning approaches to learning in education through the context of the Reggio Emilia schools. While I entered into such a community with epistemological beliefs I believed to be parallel to that of the Reggio educators, participation in this professional learning community exposed me to multiple epistemological beliefs of other early childhood educators that fell all along the continuum between convention and innovation. With the Reggio Approach forming the focus of our study, the complexity of navigating individual theories and practices within the current field of early childhood education surfaced.

For some individuals within the study group the challenge was the disconnect between the practices of the Reggio Approach and more traditional beliefs about teaching and learning. For others like me it was the challenge of implementing such an approach within a current educational system that seemed in sharp contrast and opposition to such practices. Within the context of our collaborative inquiry and dialogue we all challenged and confronted our individual beliefs about teaching and learning and the current educational practices which informed our practices, an experience which for some led to epistemological and curricular shifts.

**The Weaving of Narratives: Introducing Multiple Threads**

While I gained knowledge and understanding of the Reggio Emilia Approach from my participation in a Reggio study group, it was the phenomenon that occurred within the context of the study group that began to shape and guide my personal inquiry.
I was drawn to the pedagogical conflict. I witnessed in all of us as we navigated between theory and practice presented to us by the schools of Reggio Emilia, our individual epistemologies and the current field of early childhood education within the United States. There was a constant tension between theory and practice, between believing in the concepts of inquiry based learning in early childhood and the struggle to implement such practices into the classroom. The question of what led to epistemological and curricular shifts within these tensions emerged for me as the narratives of the other participants began to weave into my own, forming a more complex insight into what I had always perceived as an either/or debate, either you implement inquiry-based practices or engage in more conventional, teacher-directed models of teaching. What I wasn’t prepared for were the grey areas all along the continuum between these two models. It was just these grey areas that became increasingly intriguing to me.

I naively entered the Reggio study group with the belief that anyone exposed to their theories and practices would immediately see the power of such an image of young children. It was within the context of the study group that I found myself confronted with multiple narratives, all of which differed in some way, but were also similar. We all found ourselves within the current tension of early childhood education and somewhere within the continuum between fully embracing inquiry-based practices and more conventional, structured models of teaching. Study group discussions often came down to comments such as: “I know that children should be actively engaged in learning, BUT do you know how many standards I need to reach, I don’t have time”, “Yes, this is great, BUT I have no time, they have to be ready for kindergarten” or “I would like to engage in projects like Reggio, but we are a standards-based school,” and began to dominate
discussions around curricular changes supporting the theories of pedagogical progressivism and inquiry based learning (Geist & Baum, 2005). These “yeah, buts” led the majority of members of the study group to lean more towards predetermined curriculum and outcomes with a lack of understanding children’s prior knowledge, experiences, interests, abilities and knowledge and ultimately resulted in the majority of teachers within my Reggio study group failing to find a way to implement such a curricular approach into their respective classrooms.

Two Threads: Study groups and the Project Approach

The conflicting definitions and conceptions of teaching and learning led to the lack of sustainability of the Reggio Approach within our respective study group as well as throughout the state of Ohio as a whole. While there proved to be no overall sustainability of the Reggio philosophy and practices overall in Ohio, two concepts that emerged out of the Reggio Emilia schools and gained momentum were: study groups as a model of teacher professional development and incorporating projects within the already embedded curriculum of the classroom. These two emergent threads of the Reggio Approach both shaped and formed the field of early childhood education in early childhood educational programs within Ohio as well as having a significant impact on my personal narrative.

Noteworthy to state is that at the same time the Reggio Approach appeared to not take substantial root in early childhood education programs in the state of Ohio I made the transition from the early childhood classroom to a consultant role as an Early Childhood Coordinator for the state of Ohio. This personal shift in my work in the field of early childhood education furthered my exposure to multiple epistemological beliefs
and provided me a professional context to further my possibilities to engage in and facilitate study groups focused on project based learning with early childhood educators in my region of the state of Ohio. It is through this work that my narrative and understanding of inquiry-based learning significantly expanded through my personal study of the Project Approach, my work with early childhood educators and my correspondence and collaboration with Dr. Sylvia Chard.

**The Project Approach Thread**

The element of the Reggio Approach that had most impacted me was the capacity of an early childhood curriculum to support the capability and image of children I held to be true through deep investigation into a topic that supported children’s interests and prior experiences. One barrier for the teachers with whom I had contact was the fundamental need for some structure within which to work. While the schools and educators of Reggio inspired many early childhood educators in Ohio, there was no curricular framework within which to support such practices in their respective classrooms. This is what brought me to the Project Approach, a curriculum that supported the same capable image of the child, but provided what I believed to be a structure within which to work and support teachers in implementing such an approach. And so, as I entered into a new role in the field of early childhood, I also began to be more invested in my personal study and inquiry into the Project Approach, which then came to influence my work with early childhood educators. I saw the Project Approach as a medium for teachers seeking to implement a child initiated curriculum, but needing some form of structure within which to work.
Founded on the historical foundations of the pedagogy of Dewey, Kilpatrick, and the project work of British schools in the 1960s and 1970s, deemed “integrated or informal curriculum”, the Project Approach provides a framework within which educators can incorporate projects into their ongoing curriculum (Katz & Chard, 2000). The Project Approach of Katz and Chard (2000) supports the role of natural learning; the understanding that school is life; the role of direct experience in learning; and student-centered, inquiry-based teaching and curriculum while emphasizing the importance of standards, knowledge acquisition and a structured curricular model (Dewey, 1938; Katz & Chard, 2000; Labaree, 2005). Breaking with the either/or debate, Katz and Chard (2000) take a position through the Project Approach that “the matter of curriculum emphasis is that neither the academic nor the traditional socialization/play approach is adequate for the education of young children because both fail to engage the child’s mind sufficiently” (pp.6-7).

The Project Approach supports an appropriate curriculum for early childhood education and young children through its emphasis on the intellectual capacities of young children and the role of the teacher in facilitating an environment that supports children’s natural way of learning and supports them in gaining knowledge of the phenomena around them (Katz & Chard, 2000). Katz and Chard (2000) define projects as:

“An in-depth study of a particular topic, usually undertaken by a whole class working on subtopics in small groups, sometimes by a small group of children within a class, and occasionally by an individual child. The key feature of a project is that it is an investigation – a piece of research that involves children in seeking answers to questions they have formulated by themselves or in cooperation with their teacher and that arise as the investigation proceeds” (Katz & Chard, 2000, 2).
Supporting an aim of education that cultivates the minds of children by encouraging them to ask questions, pose hypotheses and pursue answers in order to become more aware of the world around them, the Project Approach opens the door to a curriculum that supports both the demands of the current field of early childhood education within the United States and the nature of young children.

Developed around the concept of projects being like a good story with a beginning, middle and end, Katz and Chard (2000) developed a structure for the Project Approach consisting of three phases. The organization of the Project Approach based upon the three phases of projects supports teachers in grasping projects and reduces many of their “how to” concerns (Chard, 2002; Helms & Katz, 2001; Katz & Chard, 2000). The organization and structure upon which the Project Approach is based addresses an element considered lacking in previous attempts at project work that resulted historically in failed implementation and sustainability of project work in classrooms (Cuban, 1993; Labaree, 2005).

Given my personal experience with the lack of sustainability for the Reggio Approach that I witnessed, it was just such a structure and framework upon which to base a more child-centered curriculum that I felt would move teachers forward in their ability to implement projects into their classrooms. And so as I began to define my role as an early childhood coordinator for the state and study groups began to gain more credibility as a valid form of professional development I began to formulate the possibilities of a professional, pedagogical space through which I could engage with other early childhood educators through a collective inquiry into the Project Approach. This work began with my piloting and facilitating a study group of early childhood educators interested in
engaging in a more child-centered approach to curriculum and willing to engage in a year-long study of the Project Approach.

The Study Group Thread

My invested interest in the Reggio Emilia Approach and resulting experiences mirrored those of a group of early childhood administrators of a four county Head Start program in northwest Ohio with whom I had worked previously and a region to which I was assigned in my new position. Like me, these administrators were also drawn to the powerful image of the child portrayed through the work of the schools in Reggio Emilia. The interest was so strong that one administrator travelled to Reggio Emilia for a first-hand experience of this approach. They, like me, had engaged in Reggio study groups and sought to see similar approaches to early childhood education take root in classrooms, specifically the infant, toddler and preschool classrooms of their program. At the same time, they faced the challenge of implementation and teachers’ struggles to engage in such an approach. Conversations around such topics and previous work with both administrators and teachers in this program allowed me to establish a relationship and open the door to engaging them in a study of the Project Approach. And so, in the 2009-2010 academic school year I piloted a Project Approach study group with this program in my new role as early childhood coordinator for the state of Ohio.

SSOW (pseudonym), a community action program, provides Head Start services, among many other community services, in four counties in northwest Ohio. The significance of working with this particular program goes beyond our common philosophies and visions for a child-centered approach to early childhood education. We also shared a common vision for teachers and professional development. Meetings with
administrators at the beginning of the academic year in 2009 showed they had a clear vision of a shift not only in approaches to early childhood education, but in teacher education as well. Discussions between me, teacher mentors and administrators revolved around the potential of engaging early childhood educators in study groups. Such discourse emerged out of our own experiences in Reggio study groups and the depth of discussions, content, knowledge and motivation we gained from our active participation in a model so different from the “norm” of teacher professional development.

Reggio study groups had exposed us to an alternative to what has been termed “sit and take” models of professional development where you passively sit for a day through a training absorbing content presented by an expert that one is then to take and implement back into the classroom. What we all knew is that such professional development experiences for teachers rarely impacted classrooms, teacher practices or children’s experiences in any significant way. As a group, we sought an approach to teacher professional development that modeled a form of education for early childhood professionals we wanted to see take root in classrooms and so the decision was made to pilot a study group for teachers focused on the Project Approach and inquiry-based learning.

The chance to facilitate this pilot study group provided multiple opportunities for me as an early childhood coordinator and provided an excellent context for me to further investigate questions I had begun to pose. Teacher education and professional development had always proven an obstacle for me, both as a student and later a teacher educator. While in theory my educational experiences supported progressive concepts and the need to connect life to school in meaningful ways, on the whole such theories
were presented through formal lectures, but never experienced through hands on practice. This pilot study group provided a space for me to play with a concept I felt crucial to creating a shift in early childhood educational practices, we must model and provide pedagogical experiences and spaces for teachers that reflect what we expect them to provide for children. It was my hope that a study group model of professional development would create a community of learners where teachers were active participants in the process of learning, an approach reflective of that which I sought to see in the classrooms.

My response to the “typical” teacher professional development reflects that of others seeking change in the field of education. Mary Beattie (1995) describes a similar discontent with professional development and “how teachers were treated and viewed by curriculum developers. It seemed highly inconsistent…that workshop leaders promoted a view of the student learner as a self-motivated, self-directed problem solver at the same time they were treating the teacher learner as a receptacle for current teaching strategies and skills. This attitude toward teacher learning gave very little credit to our individuality as teachers, our different backgrounds, and our different levels of experience and knowledge” (p.28). I found it impossible to continue to perpetuate more passive, prescriptive models of teacher education if I sought innovative, progressive models of teacher education. The Project Approach provided a curricular model for the early childhood classroom, what I was seeking was a professional development venue that actively engaged teachers in the process of engaging in such an approach to early childhood education and viewed teachers as “self-motivated, self-directed problem solvers” (Beattie, 1995). I saw the study group as the vehicle through which to do this.
Multiple Narratives, Multiple Threads

This pilot study group left me with far more questions than answers or solutions. Thinking of the energy and knowledge I had taken away from my own participation in the Reggio Study group I had the same hopes for all participants of this study group for the Project Approach. What I failed to remember was that not all the participants in the Reggio Study Group were as invested as I. This proved an obstacle for me. I entered into the study group with the conception that it would become a pedagogical space where all of us as participants took equal responsibility for the group through our common goal of gaining greater knowledge and understanding of the Project Approach. I accounted for our varying levels of knowledge and experience in relation to the Project Approach and knew there would need to be ample time set aside for gaining additive knowledge in respect to implementing the Project Approach. I didn’t take into consideration how the other participants would view my and their role in the group or the lack of engagement and investment for some of the participants in the study group and the Project Approach. It was during this first year that I gained a great deal of practical knowledge in terms of what it means to facilitate a study group as well as the complexity of implementing the Project Approach into early childhood classrooms while at the same time learning how to reconcile my personal goals and professional knowledge and expectations with that of the study group participants, their expectations, goals and narratives.

While I was negotiating my role as “facilitator”, participants were navigating their own role within this pedagogical space. Having never been engaged in a study group model of professional development it became obvious early on that the participants continued to view the study group as a typical “in-service”. Study group sessions quickly
shifted as participants looked to me for the “how to complete a project” and a “checklist” for completing what was necessary to gain their continuing education units. Statements such as “just tell me what to do” and “I need some kind of checklist” began to revert monthly sessions more towards a transmission, trainer directed model of professional development far removed from my perception of the study group as a space where we all entered on equal ground and with equal investment in the process of learning about the Project Approach. As participants came to view me not as facilitator of the study group, but as a typical trainer of a typical “in-service” I once again began to assume a more directive role in response to the teachers requests, questions and expectations.

Quantitatively, if I had looked at this from the single perspective of whether engaging teachers in a study group showed a significant shift in teachers’ attitude towards inquiry-based learning and the ability to independently implement the Project Approach into early childhood classrooms then I would have to have considered my findings a failure and ceased to engage in future study groups or further research. I don’t deny my own sense of frustration with what seemed a lack of investment on the part of the other participants to actively engage in their own study of the Project Approach as they merely turned to me to provide the necessary information and knowledge to get them through the year. My own sense of disappointment can be seen in a reflection I made during this year stating, “If I can’t even engage the teachers in any form of inquiry then how can I expect them to engage children in projects?” Statements from participants such as “why should I put too much into this, next year they will just ask us to do something else”, “I could be getting ready for next week if I didn’t have to sit here for three hours” and “I think we should be preparing children more for kindergarten” further exasperated me. I couldn’t
comprehend why the teachers did not seem to value the process of engaging children in learning through in-depth investigation over models of rote memorization, worksheets and letter of the week as the foundation for “school readiness”. The intent of the study group as providing a space where all of us could engage collectively in deep inquiry into teaching and learning through a focus on the Project Approach became for many teachers just one more thing they were asked to do and another thing to check off their “to do” list every month, failing to impact classroom practices or teachers’ experiences significantly and merely perpetuating teaching methods I had sought to counter and change.

The above statement “I had sought to counter and change” with an emphasis on “I” became crucial to my self-reflection on this pilot study group and raised a fundamental question that has guided my work since that year. I had to return to my original intent for the study group and admit that I went into this group with claims of there being equal ownership of what occurred within this community of learners, as long as they did what I wanted and reached the goals and objectives I had predetermined. I had been seeking the antidote to moving teachers in the direction I believed they needed to go if they were to provide quality experiences for young children in their teaching practices.

Thoughts and statements like “teachers just need a curricular framework and guidelines like the Project Approach with the Phases and they will be able to implement projects in their classrooms” and “providing an alternative professional development model will actively engage teachers in the process of learning that will then be transferred to their classrooms” illustrate my quantifying of this experience down to a single catalyst for change. This illustrated my complete disregard for our individual
narratives and the complexity of our shifting epistemological beliefs on teaching and learning that occurred within the space of the study group, standardizing the experience as a whole. I was merely perpetuating the either/or debate when what continued to prove significant were the grey areas that had first gained my interest and how all of us moved back and forth along the tension between the either/or extremes throughout the course of the year.

My research to this point reflected a similar pattern. I seemed to be seeking “the” variable that would produce statistical significance in relation to teachers’ ability and understanding of the Project Approach. I began with questions such as: what continues to serve as barriers to teachers continuing project work in their classrooms; what is the role of a professional learning community in supporting teachers sustained engagement in a study of the Project Approach, failing to see the complexities and richness of what I had witnessed occurring within the study group. It was with the help of others through discussion, feedback and collaboration that I have moved beyond creating either/or dichotomies and move to the core of my research.

The catalyst for this change began with the feedback I received on a draft research proposal that honestly said:

“It is very “etic” of you to attribute the ideas the teachers in the pilot study have had as falling along these lines (the historical issue of competing theories). This seems contradictory to your own beliefs about the importance of an inquiry stance toward the world (and I would assume for this dissertation). You seem to be trying to do an anthropological study and it seems at odds to this approach to set a priori categories and frameworks for your data analyses. So why such an emphasis on setting up such strong dichotomies?...the real world is far more interesting and complex than either/or choices imply. I would suggest you take a more “emic” approach to the ideas the teachers express – let their words guide your theme building and let their words describe their beliefs.” (SH – email)
This statement truly impacted the research to follow. While proving seemingly messier, I sought to show the intricacies and complexities that existed within the grey areas between the either/or, because this is where we gain understanding. And this is just what I set out to do as I continued on my own journey and inquiry, both of which have been shaped by further interactions with early childhood educators within study group settings and individuals who have helped me move forward.

Significant to my personal narrative and a result of the pilot study group was my connection to and continuing collaboration with Dr. Sylvia Chard. At the conclusion of the pilot study group in the spring of 2010 in order to build capacity for project work across the region in the state of Ohio in which I worked I was asked to coordinate and host a conference that supported project-based learning. I had frequented Dr. Sylvia Chard’s web site on project work to support my understanding of the Project Approach and when asked to expand the project work beyond the study group participants, I invited Dr. Chard to be the keynote speaker and presenter at a conference focused on the Project Approach in May of 2010. One hundred and fifty early childhood educators and administrators attended this conference, including all the participants of the Project Approach pilot study group. While the conference in and of itself was successful, this initial contact with Sylvia has proven pivotal to my work and my personal inquiry into the Project Approach and supported my process of engaging in inquiry into the nature of the construction and reconstruction of professional knowledge and epistemological beliefs about teaching and learning (Beattie, 1995).

Elements of the relationship between Dr. Chard and myself will continue to surface throughout this research and the telling of the unfolding tale. Sylvia’s narrative is
woven through numerous layers of this story as she provides the historical context of the Project Approach through her personal story, knowledge and understandings served as an external voice that often entered into and impacted the pedagogical space of our study group in meaningful ways. The discussions, knowledge and collaboration that have evolved out of my relationship with Dr. Chard will prove a significant thread on multiple levels throughout the following research.

**Finding My Way**

The past two years have consumed me as I engage in the process of untangling the threads that in my first attempts I sought to lump together. Quite different from my original, single variable approach, the narrative that has emerged has many layers woven together. It gets messy and murky at times, but that reflects the complexity of the process of teachers engaged in the study of a curricular approach to early childhood education within a pedagogical space that require participants to negotiate personal epistemological beliefs on teaching and learning with that of others, the group and the grand narrative of the current field of early childhood. It is these intersections and the shifts in epistemologies all along the continuum, both up and down, between mainstream and innovative, progressive approaches to early childhood education that serve as the subject of the following narrative guided by these research questions:

- What occurs within the space of a study group focused on the Project Approach?
- As teachers participate in the study group and engage in the implementation of projects what shifts in teachers’ epistemological beliefs on teaching and learning occur?
• What are the common threads and tensions that emerge out of the narrative of a study group focused on the Project Approach and inquiry-based learning?

Guided by the Reggio conception of education where learning is an active process and knowledge is socially constructed, an approach that continues to be informed, but not bound by past theories and pedagogical practices (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006) this research employs the qualitative method of the narrative analysis of case studies to provide some understanding of the above outlined questions. The narratives emerge out of the context of a study group on the Project Approach in the academic year 2011-2012. This group consisted of a group of early childhood educators: Four lead teachers of Head Start classrooms; eight assistants; two teacher mentors and me. All of us had previously engaged in projects in some capacity with five of us having been a participant in the pilot study group or a subsequent study group on project work.

What brought us together was a continued interest in pursuing a study of the Project Approach. For me, there proved something crucial to the narratives of teachers who continued to engage in a study of project-based learning and implementation of such an approach in their classrooms beyond a year and the continued complexity of such a process. It is my hope that the following tale, woven out of the data collected throughout the course of this year will illustrate the active process of this groups social construction of knowledge and epistemologies, informed, but not guided by the past (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006).
Chapter Two

Literature Review

“avoid dividing the complex world into binary opposites; judge a policy by what happens as a result of its implementation, not by its intent; be suspicious of grand narratives that purport to be based on the truth”

Amos Hatch

The following chapter provides a framework for this narrative written from my point of view as the documenter and teller of the story of a specific group of early childhood educators. This literature review supports the premise of this research to illuminate the “organic connection between education and personal experience” (Dewey, 1938, p.25) and provides a survey that invites us to look more closely at the correlation between personal epistemologies and the process of constant negotiation of such epistemological beliefs that occurs within the pedagogical space of a study group engaged in the study and implementation of the Project Approach, an inquiry-based curricula (Rinaldi, 2001). Building upon chapter 1, the purpose of this chapter is to tell my developing and changing relationship with the literature as I made the shift from seeking a single catalyst for change in teaching practices towards inquiry-based practices to the process of untangling multiple threads, stories and patterns as I grew in my own understanding of how teachers “create and re-create their own professional knowledge” and the “distinction between inquiry and implementation” (Beattie, 1995, p.35) within the context of this particular research and narrative.

Weaving My Tale

I began this study prepared to build upon my doctoral coursework and comprehensive exams by seeking change and finding the catalyst for change towards
more inquiry-based practices in the field of early childhood education. My research and writing to this point had been focused on the need to challenge the current, conventional educational system in support of innovated practices grounded in the work of individuals such as Dewey, Freire, and Fromm. I sought to support a system and model for educational practices that called teachers to imagine knowledge as “being, becoming and changing” (Fromm, 1976, p.21), an alternative to pre-determined, dictated conceptions of knowledge within much of our current education system. I called for what I believed was the need for a significant shift in perceptions of knowledge, teaching and learning in education and the means for moving forward.

From Theory to Practice. Upon completion of my doctoral coursework, my comprehensive exams provided the space for me to further examine and articulate answers to questions I had formulated around the field of early childhood education, the role of the teacher, and the need for a paradigm shift within the current early childhood practices. Both the preparation and writing of my exams allowed me to navigate through the literature that correlated to my epistemological belief on teaching and learning and an image of childhood as a journey of seeking meaning, of discovering the self and one’s own identity within the world (Vygotsky, 1978). In order to support such an image of childhood and children, I argued for the need to: move beyond the practice of defining childhood with a single denominator; return the voice of the teacher often silenced in a standardized, educational system; and to encounter an alternative to current early childhood practices that challenge perceptions and assumptions about the competencies of children and early childhood educators (Dewey, 1980; Freire, 1998; Fromm, 1976;
It was upon this foundation of literature that I entered into the work of my dissertation. The year preceding my comprehensive exams and leading to my dissertation proposal proved crucial as it was a time of uncertainty. The struggle to find my way played out in my failure to navigate between the conceptual framework upon which I had based my work to this point and active research in the field of early childhood education that would serve as the content and context of this research. This led to a first draft of a literature review that relied heavily upon the historical foundations of what I viewed to be a pedagogical dichotomy between two binary approaches to education, conventional vs. innovative or as defined by Larabee (2005) between the administrative progressives and the pedagogical progressives. These two factions both claimed to be student-centered approaches, but had very different conceptions of teaching, learning, curriculum making and curriculum use (Gal, 2011). The struggle for control between these two competing educational approaches has been described to be at the heart of the story of educational practices within the United States since the twentieth century (Labaree, 2005). The dilemma for me was that I had placed so much emphasis on these two historically competing educational approaches they soon became the core of my story.

Upon completion of my proposal and its defense, I faced the difficult task of shifting away from the safety of allowing pre-existing theory and literature to prescribe the nature of my research and to begin to weave the literature and theory into new patterns and threads, constructing new meanings from the story that emerged out of the context of our inquiry. My research proposal led to more questions than answers and while I left my defense wanting to immediately begin editing and writing my second draft
I heeded the recommendations of my committee to not revise immediately and to hold off changes prior to data collection. The necessity to fully immerse myself in the field and the collection of data proved essential as it was during the collection period that threads and patterns began to emerged and take shape, supporting the argument that research should occur as much as possible within the classroom and field (Rinaldi, 2006). It was the experience of full engagement in the field and the process of research that reminded me “that education, learning, knowledge, childhood, teacher, evaluation and much else besides have many meanings” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.17), not a single denominator grounded exclusively in history. The process of engaged inquiry allowed me to overcome my struggle with the separation of theory and practice and to see research and practice as inseparable.

Adopting a social constructivist approach to the research process meant risking the uncertainty and complexity of the process in which I was an active participant (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). What I discovered is that I did not need to abandon the historical and theoretical framework for the sake of praxis. What had been done in the past did not need to be abandoned for the sake of the new, but needed to be reconfigured and formed to create a new story. I had to break away from what Gardner (1994) describes as the paradox of American educators and the idea that while we call for innovative approaches to education we continue to rely and fall back upon the safety of traditional practices. By embracing the process of constructivism I was able to embrace theory and apply it into practice. It was through this process that I began to create a more cohesive fabric from the patterns of the specific research context and the theoretical foundation.
Following the data collection I began to write a second draft by returning to my proposal with a new lens. Three main themes emerged from my original proposal: models of “curriculum making and curriculum use” (Wells, 1921, p.1) and the concept of curriculum (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2011; Bullard & Bullock, 2002; Chard, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Glassman & Whalley, 2000; McAninch, 2000); the role of epistemological beliefs of teaching and learning on teaching behaviors (Gal, 2011; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Marra, 2005); and the possibility of participation in a learning group for effecting change in pedagogical practices and challenge teachers’ notions of knowledge and learning (Au, 2002; Gardner & Rinaldi, 2001; Niesz, 2007; Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Wenger, 1998). These three topics continued to prove significant as our specific narrative of inquiry into the Project Approach began to take shape and served as the starting point for my return to the literature from which numerous threads began to weave in and out of and create new patterns as the means of shaping my story. I returned to the literature on the Project Approach as curriculum; conceptions of curriculum; epistemological beliefs of teaching and learning; inquiry in education; and the conception that “knowledge is a mode of participation” (Dewey, 1980) to make connections in significant ways to the work of this research. It is upon this literature foundation that I was able to shape new meanings specific to this story as I made the shift from a researcher attempting to prescribe what happened to describing what actually happened within the context of our specific inquiry into the Project Approach (Beattie, 1995; Eisner, 1988).

**The Project Approach: One Form of Curriculum Making and Use.** The shift from theory to practice proved difficult for me to articulate in writing, from the beginning
of this journey there was a clear connection in my work with educators between theory, literature and practice. I could not suddenly remove myself from my image of the child and inquiry into approaches to early childhood education that upheld the concept of the child as competent, engaged and constructor of knowledge nor detach my research from my work to this point with educators and in the field early childhood. Knowing the impossibility of acting contrary to my image of the child (Malaguzzi, 1993) and my epistemological understandings of teaching and learning, my work was driven and guided by a research perspective that matched both my approach to research and early childhood practices. In my own research I sought to build upon and create new narratives and meaning from the work of individuals such as Dewey (1899/1902/1938), Katz, (1994), Katz & Chard, (2000), Kilpatrick, (1918), Malaguzzi, (1994), and Rinaldi, (2006) that both informed and shaped my research. It is the Project Approach, one means of curriculum making and use that provided the context to continue my ongoing work in the field and support my conceptual framework.

The emphasis of the Project Approach on a balanced integration of child, subject matter and society matched my own perspective on education and epistemological views on knowledge, teaching and learning (Marshall, Sears, & Schubert, 2000; Dewey, 1899; Dewey, 1902; Dewey, 1938; Kilpatrick, 1918). I came to the Project Approach through my interest and study of the infant-toddler and preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Both curricula (Project Approach and Reggio Emilia Approach) theoretically and practically support inquiry-based teaching and learning through projects and emphasize curricula founded on making connections between content and active engagement. What separates the two is that while the Reggio Approach is completely contextualized within the culture
and town of Reggio Emilia, the Project Approach has proven to be more generalizable in terms of implementation. This may be due to the fact that while the Reggio Approach feels like a complete rejection of one’s past teaching practices; the Project Approach does not suggest completely eliminating one’s current practices, but complementing and enhancing current practices through project work (Katz & Chard, 2000) making it more accepted within the field of early childhood education and adopted within the practices of early childhood educators in the United States and more specifically, within the classrooms I most had contact. The Project Approach provided a form of “curriculum making and use” that helped shape my research perspective and allowed me to connect my epistemological beliefs with a curricular approach to early childhood education that had gained a renewed interest amongst a number of early childhood educators in Northwest Ohio where I worked.

I think what originally drew me as well as other early childhood educators to the Project Approach was the ability of Katz and Chard (2000) to outline a structure for inquiry-based learning and to remove the perception that in order to implement projects one had to completely eliminate their current teaching practices and systematic instruction. While I was personally drawn to the organic nature of the Reggio Approach and an ongoing, emerging curriculum, I was cognizant of how difficult it was for teachers to navigate between the expectations of high standards and objectives and an image of a child as a constructor of his/her own knowledge. This proved a crucial point to educators in the field seeking to incorporate a more inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning and thus relevant to my interest in finding a project-based curriculum that early childhood educators with whom I worked could implement.
The Project Approach balanced my epistemological beliefs on teaching and learning and the reality of teachers currently practicing in the field of early childhood to be accountable in a standardized educational system (Cuban, 2004). The Project Approach does not discredit the importance of gaining the basic skills and knowledge, but provides a curricular context through which children can meaningfully apply such skills and knowledge (Katz & Chard, 2000). The Project Approach, when included within the entire early childhood curriculum, provides child centered experiences that promote critical thinking and problem solving while also providing a foundation for early childhood educators to teach basic skill and knowledge (Katz & Chard, 2000). The Project Approach removed the either/or dilemma teachers felt was required of them in the Reggio Approach, either you completely embrace projects as your whole curriculum or not, opening up the door for many teachers to the possibility of implementing inquiry-based practices within their ongoing practices.

Katz & Chard (2000) conceived the Project Approach to be “appropriate curriculum for young children that puts high priority on intellectual goals” (p. 8). Different than a curriculum geared solely towards academic goals with a high priority placed upon the acquisition of the basic skills, the Project Approach provides a curricular tool through which teachers with children engage with content in meaningful ways that “strengthen their confidence in their own powers” (Katz & Chard, p. 2). Whereas the experiences of children in a purely academic curriculum are passive, standardized and supportive of a narrow range of skills and knowledge, the Project Approach builds upon children’s natural tendencies to engage and explore the world, building a strong knowledge base as they make sense of the phenomenon around them (Katz & Chard,
As an early childhood consultant I began to more consciously provide opportunities for teachers to investigate and take a closer look at the Project Approach, introducing them to a form of curriculum making and use that supports evidence based research and recommendations for best practices in early childhood education while addressing the barriers they often claimed prohibited them from engaging in child initiated curriculum such as accountability and standards (Wells, 1921).

As I had increasing opportunities to engage teachers in the study of the Project Approach the complexity of implementation materialized. Yes, I had a group of teachers who conceptually believed in the relevance of projects and saw the Project Approach as an effective, developmentally appropriate curriculum that engaged the child directly with content in his/her world; but they had difficulty moving beyond the “concept” of projects (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2011; Katz & Chard, 2000; Kilpatrick, 1918). The profound paradigm shift projects call for in how we think about curriculum and the transformation of the role of the teacher from the holder of knowledge and content to that of a guide of students’ interests towards deep levels of engagement proved difficult not only for the teachers with whom I worked, but historically for teachers in the United States (Cremin, 1961; Kilpatrick, 1918).

The significance of teachers’ ability to make the shift from historically and socially constructed perceptions of teachers as disseminators of a pre-determined curriculum to facilitating an emergent curriculum was a thread that historically had shown to be a significant attribute to the lack of sustainability of project-based practices within our educational system, weaving my personal narrative with that of research. Without a framework teachers simply reverted back to what they knew (Fromm, 1976;
Gato, 2005; Dewey, 1899; Dewey, 1902; Dewey, 1938; Kilpatrick, 1918; Marshall et al, 2000). The general perception being there was a lack of vision of how to put such theory into practice and the absence of a curricular structure was the consequence of a weaker curriculum (Weiler, 2004). I knew that in order to move forward, teachers needed a curricular framework to help shape their role as teacher in supporting project-based experiences for children.

And so did Katz and Chard (2000). Katz and Chard (2000) addressed the lack of structure by organizing project work into three sequential phases. While projects were far from new to the field of early childhood (Dewey, 1899; Dewey, 1902; Dewey, 1938; Kilpatrick, 1918), Katz and Chard (2000) moved beyond a mere theoretical, curricular framework within which teachers were meant to find their own way in implementation. They clearly outlined project work “to identify the main tasks as they unfold, and to deepen the sense of direction and purposefulness of the work” (p.105).

My search for additional research and literature on the development and delineation of the three phases came up empty, resulting in my posing the following question to Dr. Sylvia Chard “So how exactly did you come about the three phases and their features in the Project Approach?” I recorded my conversation with Dr. Chard in my journal:

*Dr. Chard told me of her personal experiences in the schools of Britain with project-based instruction and the integrated curriculum movement, an approach later incorporated into schools during the Open Education movement in the United States during the 1970’s, and how these more informal, open method approaches to teaching and learning were abandoned for more traditionally structured, academic models of*
education. Dr. Chard noted numerous reasons for these shifts between traditional and inquiry based practices, from teachers not having the adequate support to engage in project-based learning and thinking they needed to abandon all their previous teaching practices to not having an understanding of how to implement project-based practices in an effective manner. And so she engaged in the research of what it took for teachers to engage in this approach by observing expert teachers engaged in projects. Dr. Chard documented what these teachers did at the beginning of a project, in the middle and the end. Analysis of these observations eventually resulted in the Phases of the Project Approach. (Personal conversation with Dr. Chard, May 2009)

The research of Dr. Chard in actual classrooms of teachers implementing projects linked theory with practice and responded to educators’ inability to translate pedagogical progressive theories into practice due to the lack of knowing how to implement a child-centered curriculum while addressing the demand for skill and knowledge acquisition (Cuban, 2004; Helms, 2003; Katz & Chard, 2000; Labaree, 2005). The three phase curricular model of the Project Approach developed by Lillian Katz and Sylvia Chard (2000) scaffolds the process of project work and helps teachers understand their role in projects and how to support children in the acquisition and application of the academic skills and knowledge, while supporting the intellectual and social capacities of young children (Stacey, 2011).

Katz and Chard’s (2000) development and delineation of the three phases of projects provided an entry point for me into the larger narrative of project work in the United States and my individual inquiry in the Project Approach by addressing what I had come to characterize as a definitive barrier to teachers engaging in projects. The
educators with whom I worked simply didn’t know how to make the shift from more teacher directed models of education to more innovative, emergent, and inquiry-based teaching practices (Bramwell-Rejskind, Halliday and McBride, 2008). Until coming across the Project Approach within my own studies and inquiry I had felt at a loss as to how to build the capacity for projects within early childhood classrooms when teachers felt a lack of confidence in their ability to further pursue and implement projects within their respective classrooms (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2011). Conceptually I could articulate my notion of curriculum as supporting an image of the child as capable, competent and constructor of thought through active engagement with the world where “cognitive efforts have the purpose of helping us cope in the world of experience, rather than the traditional goal of furnishing an objective representation of a world as it might “exist” apart from us and our experience” (Glasserfeld, 1995, p. 177). It is the Project Approach that allowed me to see the possibilities of putting such theories into practice in early childhood classrooms. The three phases of the Project Approach provided a necessary guideline or template within which teachers could plan for student learning and engage in inquiry based teaching and learning.

**Conceptions of Teaching and Learning: Shaping my Narrative**

I was fully cognizant of the fact that I was not entering into this research in isolation. Project work was far from new in the historical, theoretical and practical field of early childhood education providing a theoretical base upon which to build (Stewart, 1986). My work, situated in the field of research into inquiry-based practices, specifically in creating change within teaching practices and contextualized within the Project Approach, was able to draw upon the work of Chard (2002), Dewey
(1899/1902/1938), Fromm (1976), Helms (2003), Katz and Chard (2000) Kilpatrick (1918) and Rinaldi (2006) as my primary resources. Building upon this primarily theoretical foundation I was also aware of the small research base for the Project Approach contextualized within the experiences of teachers within the field (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2011), requiring me to draw upon my personal experiences in the field of early childhood education as the means of finding my way. It is here where my narrative began to weave into the larger narrative of the Project Approach, taking on its own shape and creating new meanings.

My story began with my personal shift from seeking a quick fix to moving all teachers in a standardized manner towards full implementation of project-based work in the classrooms. This began with the realization that if the three phase structure were all it took to implement project-based learning, then the classrooms of the teachers with whom I worked and had already engaged in the study of the Project Approach would all be implementing projects with ease at this point. My experiences led me to the understanding that teachers’ awareness of the three phases of a project and implementing them into practice through a project was the first step in teachers knowing how to implement the Project Approach within their ongoing curriculum (Chard, 2002).

My original inquiry was focused on teachers’ initial practice with implementing the Project Approach, but as I grew in my personal understanding of the phenomenon of teachers engaging in projects based upon my work in the field with early childhood educators and project work, what emerged out of the context of my personal experience were multiple narratives and responses to the Project Approach. Mirroring the research of Chard (2002) I had found that some of the teachers embraced the Project Approach
with enthusiasm while others had difficulty making the shift towards more child-initiated practices. All of the teachers with whom I had contact saw the Project Approach as an effective context for supporting young children and strove to improve their practices. All the teachers implemented the Project Approach on their own initiative and sought new strategies to support children’s learning (Rejskind et al, 2008). While objectively I understood how difficult it is for teachers to change one’s practices and that teachers come to curriculum studies from multiple perspectives (Clifton & Roberts, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), subjectively I just couldn’t understand why some teachers quickly embraced inquiry-based practices and others continued to struggle to understand the Project Approach (Chard, 2002; Dewey, 1916; Rejskind et al, 2008). These are the questions that moved me away from merely repeating prior research such as how to do projects and teachers’ initial experiences in implementing projects (Chard, 2002; Katz & Chard, 2000) to what leads teachers to multiple perspectives and approaches on projects and why some teachers easily embrace such an approach while others struggle (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2011; Bullard & Bullock, 2002; Chard, 2002; Rejskind et al, 2008).

Not only is the research base on the Project Approach small, the literature that does exist primarily focuses upon supporting teachers understanding of how to implement the Project Approach (Chard, 2002; Katz & Chard, 2000); the efficacy of incorporating project work in the classroom (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2011; Chard, 2002; McAninch, 2000); the effectiveness of the Project Approach in providing an effective context for academics, addressing standards and learning (Beneke, 2000; Donegan, Hong, Trepanier-Street & Finkelstein, 2005; Edmiaston, 1998; Scranton, 2003); and the role of professional development on implementing the Project Approach (Bullard & Bullock,
While these studies proved pertinent to the sustainability of the Project Approach, they were unable to get to the core of my inquiry. I was no longer seeking to sell the Project Approach as an effective curriculum for early childhood education; I wanted to look at the curriculum of the Project Approach from the teacher’s perspective as the means of gaining more insight into what it took for early childhood educators to embrace a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning into their ongoing practices.

My work with early educators showed that while it was a starting point, it wasn’t enough for teachers to believe that children benefited from inquiry-based practices (Rejskind et al, 2008). My research sought to deepen my understanding of the experiences of early childhood educators seeking to implement the Project Approach into their classroom practice. This study began to take shape as I searched for new patterns as the means of providing parameters for this story contextualized within a conceptual, theoretical and practical framework (Beattie, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

Building upon the studies related to ideas of curriculum and teachers’ understandings or personal epistemologies (Bussis, Chitenden, & Amarel, 1976; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), my focus shifted away from definitions, justifications and processes of the Project Approach towards the process teachers go through to make sense and meaning of their approach to curriculum making and use in connection to their study of the Project Approach and the narratives of these experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1998).

**Weaving the Threads: Curriculum Making and Conceptions of Teaching and Learning**
I have already defined the Project Approach as one means of curriculum making and use calling for a child-centered curriculum that defines projects as a “wholehearted purposeful activity in a social environment” (Kilpatrick, 1918, p. 320). Such a curriculum utilizes the natural tendencies of the child and leads to higher degrees of knowledge and skills that develop the capacity to develop sustained interests and critical thinking (Katz, 1994). You as the reader will have recognized by now, as I had, that teachers come to the Project Approach as curriculum from multiple perspectives; some seeking the how to do it while others seek a deeper understanding of the Project Approach at a deeper level (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Wells, 1921). This phenomenon is not specific to teacher’s study and implementation of the Project Approach, but to pedagogical conceptions of curriculum (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

The concept of curriculum as presented by methodologies like the Project Approach focuses upon the dynamic relationship between individuals, defined by Dewey (1938) as the “necessary relation between processes of actual experience and education” (p.20). While the dominant culture defines curriculum as a course of study, the Project Approach requires teachers to co-construct knowledge with their students, basing education on experiences and what Dewey (1938) defines as the experiential continuum. For teachers accountable to more conventional forms of teaching based on predetermined objectives, learning outcomes and materials, focusing on a curriculum that stresses openness to experience can prove difficult even for teachers willing to make the effort to change (Chard, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Dewey, 1938; Rejskind et al, 2008).

**Epistemological Beliefs**
What we teach and how is the practical application and manifestation of our theoretical perspectives on teaching and learning this may need to be reworded. Connelly & Clandinin (1988) describe it in this way, we all have a mental picture of curriculum that we then translate into our pedagogical practices and interactions with the content. Returning to Dewey’s writing, I realized how much my curricular picture was grounded in his understanding of the child at the center of all pedagogical practices (Dewey, 1902) and his “philosophy of education based upon a philosophy of experience” (Dewey, 1938, p.29). This in turn brought me to curricular approaches like the Project Approach that supported my conceptual framework for teaching and learning by providing the context for putting my epistemological beliefs into practice. I felt that my ways of knowing were present and articulated into a curriculum through the Project Approach. Epistemologically I had found the match between my picture of curriculum and pedagogical practices.

Building on my personal narrative and understanding, I was drawn to the relationship between teacher’s personally constructed epistemological beliefs and how they approached and defined curriculum. This proved relevant to teachers engaged in project work in Chard’s (2002) study of teachers undertaking their first projects which showed that “for many teachers, it was important to feel that their own beliefs about teaching were affirmed or underscored in the new approach” and that “some teachers did indeed find that their current practice and educational philosophy allowed them to take to project work” (p.8). I began to make connections between the research specific to epistemological beliefs effect on teaching and the role of personal epistemologies in teachers approaching the Project Approach as curriculum.
While epistemology defines an area of philosophy pertaining to the nature and validity of knowledge (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Marra, 2005), my inquiry focuses on personal epistemological development or epistemological beliefs that describe individual understanding, constructs, theories and beliefs on knowledge (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Marra, 2005; Sandoval, 2005). My initial navigation through the literature on epistemological beliefs and personal knowledge showed direct connections between teacher’s beliefs and teacher’s practice, arguing that epistemological beliefs and teacher’s conceptions of knowledge directly impact how one teaches (Brindley, 2000; Marra, 2005; Windschitl, 2002). Research specific to the impact of teacher’s epistemological beliefs on constructivist approaches to learning make the argument that certain epistemological belief systems must be in place for individuals to adopt and support constructivist learning experiences in the classroom (Marra, 2005; Windschitl, 2002). This research presents a very straightforward theory in personal knowledge and epistemological beliefs and the notion that only if a teacher is ‘epistemologically ready’ (Marra, 2005, p.151), thinking and perceiving knowledge from constructivist point of view, will the teacher be able to implement a constructivist curriculum.

I came to this body of research on epistemological theories and the relationship between beliefs about knowing and learning from a similar, a priori perspective of epistemological readiness (Marra, 2005). I began by making parallels between the idea that if project work was a “best fit” for me as it provided the curricular context through which I could put my epistemological understandings into practice and the idea that the teachers with whom I worked up to this point who either struggled with implementation or chose not to continue with the Project Approach must not be ‘epistemologically ready’
or in the ‘zone of readiness’ (Marra, 2005). Initial reading of the research supported the direct correlation between teachers’ conceptions of knowledge and teacher practice through the assessment and measurement of epistemological beliefs (Hofer, 2000; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Marra, 2005; Perry, 1970; Schraw & Olafson, 2008; Windschitl, 2002).

While each study differed, the focus was to measure epistemological beliefs and place them on a developmental scale that progressed from simple, either/or thinking to complex, higher order thinking (Brindley, 2000; Hofer, 2000; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Marra, 2005; Perry, 1970; Schraw & Olafson, 2008). The main goal of this type of research led to models of epistemological development denoting distinct, unidirectional stages (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Bussis, Chittenden, & Amarel, 1976; Perry, 1970). Such models provide a lens through which to view epistemological beliefs. As my own efforts to navigate through this research led me towards this conception of measuring teachers ways of knowing and the relationship to teaching advanced I was reminded of advice provided by a committee member during my proposal defense, “every day before you start writing ask yourself what is the purpose of this research and what are my questions as a way of keeping yourself focused” drawing me away from the limited conception of prescribing and defining teachers based upon the single variable of epistemological beliefs.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) also caution against such a priori approaches to personal epistemologies and curriculum calling for the need to not merely take the research one reads at face value, but to read it from one’s curricular point of view. As I began to view the research on epistemological beliefs and teacher practices from a social
constructivist approach upon which my personal epistemological beliefs, the Project Approach and this research are based, new threads emerged that supported a move towards a “politics of epistemology” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.11). Such a perspective removed the conventional approach to curriculum, methodology and research that conceptualizes knowledge as objective and fixed, making the necessary shift for this particular story in favor of knowledge as an “interpretation of reality that is constantly evolving” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.15). This opened up a pedagogical space to pursue the role of epistemological perspectives from a social constructivist point of view.

Contextualizing this particular story from a socially constructed point of view removes the assumption that epistemological understandings of knowledge and teaching are something that can be isolated, measured and directly correlated to success or failure in implementing project based curricula, opening this research to the possibility of viewing teacher knowledge as a process of construction, deconstruction, reconstruction and co-construction (Bussis, Chittenden, & Amarel, 1976; Rinaldi, 2005). Viewing teacher’s epistemological understanding from an inquiry-based perspective opened up a research space removed from the traditional view of teacher knowledge as fixed, standardized and analytical towards documenting the “existential phenomenon called curricula” (Goodlad, 1969, p. 369) and presenting “teacher’s knowledge as something dynamic, held in an active relationship to practice and used to give shape to practice” (Beattie, 1995, p.45).

This story builds on the concept of knowledge as “an interpretation of reality that is constantly evolving” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.125) by taking up more direct lines of inquiry into teachers beliefs, experiences and practices as the means of illuminating the
complexity of the process of the construction of knowledge of individual teachers and the construction that occurs with others (Bussis et al, 1975; Rinaldi, 2006). My experiences to this point clearly illustrated how each teacher used their knowledge of the Project Approach, curriculum, teaching and learning in distinct and individual ways (Beattie, 1995; Elbaz, 1983). The learning process each teacher underwent with respect to the Project Approach did not merely occur through the transmission of the knowledge of the three phases and being able to simply reproduce projects in their respective classrooms, but was a process of construction unique to each teacher.

Far removed from the measurement and categorizing of teachers’ epistemologies that silenced the voice of the teacher for the sake of uniformity, I sought to explore the multiple understandings teachers made of the Project Approach and the constructs they formed based upon their personal epistemologies, the ‘whys’ of teaching, and the reality of daily practices in the field (Rinaldi, 2005). Contrary to more quantitative approaches to curriculum research where the teacher is viewed primarily as an instrument or conveyer of curriculum, project work views the role of the teacher as an active agent in the planning, implementation and success of the project (Elbaz, 1983; Katz & Chard, 2000). I was interested in understanding on a deeper level the process of curriculum development specific to the Project Approach from the teacher’s perspective and how their knowledge manifests itself through project-based work (Elbaz, 1983).

This perspective led me to the work of Elbaz (1983) on ‘practical knowledge’. Contrary to placing teachers upon an epistemological scale of hierarchy and viewing knowledge as static and abstract, Elbaz (1983) views knowledge as function. Shifting away from an ‘empirical’ or ‘analytical’ view of knowledge, Elbaz (1983) places value
on experiential knowledge defined as how teachers apply their knowledge of teaching and learning into their day-to-day practices. It is upon Elbaz’s (1983) conceptualization of practical knowledge that I base my own work given the dynamic view of teacher knowledge and how that knowledge informs curriculum practices but is also informed by daily practice (Beattie, 1995).

Elbaz’s conception of practical knowledge further reflects the relationship of two forms of knowledge defined by Katz & Chard (2000) as behavioral and representational knowledge. Representational knowledge refers to the mental representations we have of concepts, facts and ideas, behavioral knowledge is one’s ability to actually put knowledge into action (Katz & Chard, 2000). Katz and Chard’s (2000) definition supports my own shift from placing the emphasis first on representational knowledge and teachers’ mental understanding of the phases as the means of understanding project-based work towards a deeper understanding of teachers’ behavioral knowledge. While teachers may have representational knowledge of project-based work, it proved much more difficult putting such knowledge into practice. It is this tension that sustained my inquiry.

This query into Elbaz’s conception of personal knowledge shifts the view of teachers as mere subjects to teachers as agents of change, intensifying teachers’ involvement and autonomy in the process of curriculum involvement and planning. Such an approach asks the question, how do teachers construct the knowledge they hold and how is this then reflected in how they plan for student learning (Elbaz, 1983)? Moving beyond setting epistemological beliefs upon a linear continuum of development, this line of inquiry allowed me to view teacher knowledge as an ongoing, process in constant revision (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Rinaldi, 2005). This notion provided a conceptual
framework upon which I could explore teachers continually negotiating their knowledge and theories of teaching, their constructs of the Project Approach and their ability to put the Project Approach into action (Beattie, 1995; Katz & Chard, 2000). Such a framework opened up a research space in which I could observe and document the active relationship between theory and practice and the experiences that influence understandings and shape personal constructs that either restrict or enlarge thinking about inquiry-based practices, providing the context for the emergence of patterns meaningful to us, a group of early childhood educators engaged in the study of the Project Approach (Bussis et. al., 1976) and the process of “being, becoming and changing (Fromm, 21).

Study Groups: Our Pedagogical, Research Space

Just as it was necessary to view knowledge from my curricular and epistemological perspective, it proved equally important to define a research space guided by Dewey’s concept of knowledge as a mode of participation (Dewey, 1958) and building upon the social constructivist approach to knowledge as a process of “construction by the individual in relation with others” (Rinaldi, 2005, p.125). Such a space could not standardize teacher experiences or remove the teacher from curriculum development, but one that provided a setting in which teachers actively negotiated their personal constructs of teaching and learning through curriculum (Bussis et al., 1976; Elbaz, 1983). Such a study required a place of research where teachers have the autonomy to make their own meanings of inquiry-based curriculum, teaching and learning and to engage in the ongoing process of revising their personal constructs through participation in a group engaged in the study of the Project Approach (Beattie, 1995; Bussis et al., 1976), a group where teachers could deconstruct their present
For the educators of Reggio, teaching and learning does not happen individually, but out of the context of the group. The power of the group proves an essential component of the teachers of Reggio where educators engage in the development of ideas, theories and understandings about teaching and learning (Gardner & Rinaldi, 2001). Teachers engaged in collective inquiry into teaching and learning with a shared focus of study interpret and reflect upon their shared and individual experiences as the means of projecting towards growth and future contexts for teaching and learning (Gardner & Rinaldi, 2001). Reggio’s image of learning groups illustrates the potential of moving teachers beyond the mere acquisition of information about a curricular approach as a particular set of teaching strategies and techniques towards a perspective on teaching and learning that involves active engagement with the curriculum through critical thinking, creativity, problem solving and collaboration, leading to the potential for a different perspective on what is learning and how to facilitate it (Chard, 2002; Katz & Chard, 2000; Wenger, 1998).

Reggio’s concept of group often called community of learners or professional learning communities within the field of education defined my personal experiences in study groups focused on the Project Approach up to this point. I will use the term study group as this is what we came to know and define our specific group to be. Such a model of practice and education, far removed from more traditional teacher education spaces, provided a space in which we could share and shape our personal meanings of teaching
and learning contextualized within our everyday life experiences while nurturing our natural tendencies and capabilities of knowing (Wenger, 1998). I had come to experience study groups to support an educational environment in which there was a flexibility and openness for educators to autonomously experiment, research, critique and argue our personal knowledge teaching, learning and curriculum (Rinaldi, 2006). It was within such pedagogical environments that thought took the place of the mere transmission of pedagogical strategies, leading to action and change within our teaching practices (Wenger, 1998).

The study group serves as “a place of encounter and dialogue” (p. 197) engaging teachers in the process of ongoing construction of knowledge, teaching and learning (Rinaldi, 2006). Grounded in the conception that deep learning experiences occur when we engage and contribute to the practice of a community, not when we are required to isolate and memorize a particular set of teaching techniques, study groups provide a space in which thought occurs, experiences are shared and reflected upon, and individuals enter into the process of co-constructing knowledge through dialogue, leading to revisions in one’s own personal knowledge (Elbaz, 1983; Katz & Chard, 2000; Rinaldi, 2005; Wenger, 1998). A pedagogical space like study groups provide not only “opportunity to learn” and the “opportunity to practice”, but the “opportunity to change” (Butin, 2005, p.213).

Gardner and Rinaldi (2001) define a learning group as “a collection of persons emotionally, intellectually and aesthetically engaged in solving problems, creating products, and making meaning – an assemblage in which each person learns autonomously and through the ways of learning through others” (p.16). Study groups are
grounded in the conception that new and significant meanings do not just come out of thin air, but come out of individual and collective experiences that lead to the constant negotiation of personal meanings and our active engagement in experiences, calling for us to interact with the things of early childhood education and the alternative perspectives of others on curriculum, teaching and learning, leading to an ongoing renegotiation of meanings of teaching and learning (Butin, 2005; Wenger, 1998). It is the experience of interaction, communication and learning with the study that provides a pedagogical space for teachers to reformulate their personal knowledge of teaching and learning, placing theory and practices in a reciprocal relationship, with precedence to practice (Malaguzzi as cited by Rinaldi, 2006).

It is only within a research space like the study group that I could uncover the messiness of untangling the threads emerging out of teachers daily living in the tension between personal beliefs and reality (Palmer, 2009; Rinaldi, 2006); gain a deeper understanding into the complexity of the relationship between personal epistemological beliefs, classroom practices and the professional field of early childhood education; and document the subjective experiences of teachers' autonomy in their study and implementation of the Project Approach. The study group provided a research context for me to observe, document, reflect upon and analyze the everyday experiences of teachers and the work they do with attention to their knowledge and how such knowledge is manifested in their practices (Elbaz, 1983). As documenter and researcher, the study group opened up to me a pedagogical space in which I could move beyond prescribing curriculum to teachers towards documenting the experience of teachers engaged in the study and implementation of the Project Approach from their own perspective and the
dynamic nature of the ongoing process of navigating personal knowledge with practice (Elbaz, 1983).

Summary

This chapter shows my personal story of navigating through the literature as the means of moving beyond measuring teachers’ ability to implement or not implement project based work and my search for a research context that would support a deeper understanding of the organic relationship between conceptions of teaching and practice (Dewey, 1938; Elbaz, 1983). Situated within a social constructivist approach provides the context in which theory and practice are no longer disconnected and the voice of the teacher is returned to the question of curriculum development. The story of my navigation through the literature illustrates the construction and reconstruction of my understandings of the phenomenon of curriculum making and use; conceptions of teaching and learning; personal knowledge; and the role of study groups specific to my personal experiences with early childhood educators and the Project Approach.
Chapter Three

Methodology: Documenting a Story within an Ongoing Narrative

“Stories are used to describe human experience” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.5)

The previous two chapters set the stage and background upon which this study is based. While chapter 1 told my personal tale of the process leading up to this research, chapter 2 built upon this by illustrating the story of my navigation of the literature providing a conceptual framework within which to work. It is here where I found myself facing the daunting task of finding a form, structure and methodology in which to present our story. I had already described the setting (the study group) and topic (how teachers’ personal knowledge impacts and is impacted by participation in a study group focused on the Project Approach), now it proved necessary to describe in more detail the form, genre, characters, setting and structure. This chapter seeks to do just that as I situate this story within the field of educational research, methodology and our particular context as I further investigate my interest to find meaning and seek understanding of the autonomous role of the teacher in shaping inquiry-based classroom experiences through my research into teachers’ personal knowledge as they engage in a collaborative study of the Project Approach by telling the tale of our study group.

Research Design: Finding a Qualitative Framework in which to Work

The rationale for choosing qualitative methods has been referred to in previous chapters as I illustrated my move away from seeking variables to measure teachers’ ability to implement the Project Approach or teachers’ epistemological beliefs and began to frame my research from a social constructivist perspective as the means of
understanding the development of curriculum based on the Project Approach from the
teachers’ perspective. With the lack of identifiable variables and theories upon which to
view teachers’ personal knowledge and how this impacts and is impacted by their
participation in a study group focused on the Project Approach, the emergent nature of
qualitative methods address the need to further explore and provide a detailed view of the
topic while supporting the need to build a stronger, evidence-based research foundation
for inquiry based approaches to curriculum with teachers viewed as active agents of
curriculum development and classroom experiences (Creswell, 1998; Elbaz, 1983).
Narrowing the view and lens upon which to focus on this topic through quantitative
methods would not suffice to address and present answers to the open ended nature of the
research question or create a larger research base on this topic (Creswell, 1998).

The goal of this research is not to detach myself but to listen, observe, document and
tell the experiences of this specific group of teachers through the context of the study
group and their study and implementation of projects. My role is to describe the
experiences that occur within the study group and that impact the experiences in the
classrooms of the teachers with the aim of making their voices heard, broadening what
we know and understand about the phenomenon of inquiry based approaches to teaching
and learning, and to make visible the personal meanings teachers make of the Project
Approach through their relationships with others (Eisner, 1998; Elbaz 1983). Lincoln
and Guba (1985) describe this approach to research that seeks to make sense of
experience and to tell the stories of others as “naturalistic inquiry”.

Qualitative research methods and naturalistic inquiry do not provide a priori theory,
but open a space for knowledge and theory to emerge within the context of inquiry
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The open-ended nature of naturalistic inquiry provides the opportunity for directions, themes and knowledge to emerge rather than be bound by strict parameters. Removing the precept of absolutes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), naturalistic inquiry allowed me to remain open to the possibilities and nuanced complexities of the experiences of early childhood educators and allowed me “to accept ambiguity and allow for learning along the way” (Bateson, 1994, p.235). Collecting and analyzing the stories of the participants in their natural setting will provide the context from which narrative data will emerge, develop and unfold (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The hope is that by making visible the process of this group of teachers seeking to implement the Project Approach into their ongoing curriculum, their personal knowledge and shifting perceptions will “emerge, develop and unfold” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Narrative Inquiry**

The Project Approach provides an alternative means of thinking about curriculum making and thus calls for research measures that counter the mainstream, qualitative methods that dominate research in education. I felt it was my task as the researcher in this study to “confront the formidable task of trying to represent what (I) have come to know through some medium” (Eisner, 1998, p.27) and to maintain fidelity and reliability to the topic and research questions. Language has become the most common medium, and within this research will be the primary mediator and conveyor of the changes within my own and the subject’s situated experiences (Eisner, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1995). Thus, I have chosen narrative inquiry as the language to support my qualitative research design and the means through which I will convey and describe both my own experience and that of the teachers.
Polkinghorne (1995) turns to narrative as the linguistic form that best represents the situated experiences of individuals and composes qualitative research. Narrative is a form of discourse “in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.5). I found narrative to provide a research context through which I could document the events, experiences and knowledge of a specific group of early childhood educators both within the space of the study group and in the classroom (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative serves as the linguistic expression to explain teachers’ experiences and the connections they make between teaching, learning and curriculum making while allowing me as the researcher to explore and illustrate a different way of representing knowledge and information about teaching and learning from the perspective of the teacher (Polkinghorne, 1995).

Using the elements of narrative (plot, scene, dialogue, and point of view) the power of the story enabled me as the researcher to represent the tensions and boundaries between personal knowledge and practice (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995). “The storied narrative is the linguistic form that preserves the complexity of human action with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings, and changing interpersonal and environmental contexts” (Polkinghorne, 1995. P.7). Supporting a social constructivist point of view where learning cannot be viewed in a linear or predictable way, projects must be viewed as a series of narratives that also cannot be combined in “an additive and cumulative way” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.7). Narrative inquiry provides a space for me as the researcher to address the complexity of teaching and learning within the context of project-based teaching and learning. This interpretative, naturalistic and narrative approach to qualitative research allowed for me
to engage with the subjects in a natural setting and to make sense of the meanings the subjects made of particular phenomenon while at the same time expanding my own knowledge and understanding of the topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Maxine Greene (1995) believes if we seek growth and a paradigm shift in educational practices that support active learning, critical thinking, questioning and construction of knowledge individuals need their own experiences in “releasing the imagination” where there are significant encounters with multiple modes of seeing, interpreting and experiencing (Greene, 1995). Narrative inquiry requires active, conscious participation and participatory involvement in modes of inquiry that exposes one to narrative inquiry, aesthetic and educative experiences. Active engagement in such experiences does not occur in isolation, but collectively as individuals interact and collaborate, sharing their narratives and exposing each other to multiple perspectives and modes of thinking and knowing.

**Researcher Positionality: Establishing my Role**

With the above stated, this was no easy task to approach. The dichotomy between needing a structure within which to frame my research and the difficulty in not making assumptions of the results of my study proved more difficult than I could have imagined. I first realized the complexity of this during my dissertation proposal defense. Within my proposal I had written that one aspect of my research was an “inquiry into the barriers of this particular group of teachers in the ongoing implementation of the Project Approach” to which a committee member responded, “that’s making the assumption that there are barriers”. It is here where I realized that my research design must be focused upon the process, with no end product or result in mind, allowing threads and patterns to emerge.
out of our stories which would be collected throughout the research. I found myself often longing for the cleanliness of quantitative methods as I was caught in the ongoing process of navigating my role within this research process, a situation not much different from that of the teachers seeking to implement the Project Approach in their class who return to models of teaching where one can predetermine objectives and goals for learning.

There is an uncertainty and tentativeness when one takes a narrative perspective given the many alternatives, interpretations and ways of explaining the same phenomenon. It was my role as the researcher to pull together the multiple narratives of the teachers and their approaches to teaching and learning into an organized, connected whole that pulls together the multiple perceptions, events and actions that occur within the setting of our study group (Polkinghorne, 1995). I found myself asking the question, if my research methods are grounded in qualities, experiences, data, subjectivity and expression rather than statements of meaning (Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 1998), can I even make meaning from our experiences and narratives? The organic nature of making meaning from the thoughts, ideas, theories, wonderings and questions of all of us within the study group without preconceived ideas about what it all meant led to many moments of doubt, hesitation and uncertainty.

I turned to my personal knowledge of the Reggio Emilia approach and their understanding of the methodology of pedagogical documentation. Challenging conceptions of documentation as a collection of “documents used for demonstrating the truth of a fact or confirming a thesis”, pedagogical documentation “is interpreted and used for its value as a tool for recalling, that is, as a possibility for reflection” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.62). Intensive documentation makes visible the pedagogical experiences and
work of teachers, all of which is open to interpretation, critique, discussion and understanding. Pedagogical documentation serves as a memory to which one can recall, revisit and recall, and not just as a tool for making generalizable assumptions (Rinaldi, 2006).

By embracing such an approach, I also had to come to terms with my role. Far from the objectivity of the detached researcher often expected in the field of educational research, my role in this process was purely subjective. Everything I did within the space of this study group, every choice I made in respect to observations, data collection and documentation would affect my interpretation of these experiences. My actions could not be considered independent variables in the process of making meaning, but had to be viewed as directly impacting both the pedagogical space of the study group and the shaping of the narrative itself. I would remind myself throughout this rigorous process of Rinaldi’s (2006) challenge to take responsibility for my point of view while being fully cognizant of the fact that while I would shape my own meanings that would emerge and evolve from my personal knowledge, observations and documentation, there were many alternative meanings that could be made as well.

However subjective in nature the following analysis and subsequent narrative may be, the process of shaping my personal meanings did not occur in isolation, but within the space of the study group where knowledge was constantly being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed for interpretation. Just as learning does not occur through the transmission of knowledge in the classroom, the personal and collective knowledge gained within the space of the study group emerged out of the process of our interactions, relationships and social construction of understandings. Such an approach
“insists on the need for rigorous subjectivity, by making perspectives and interpretations explicit and contestable through documenting in relationship with others” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.16).

**Teachers as Co-constructors, Co-researchers**

The role of the teachers in this research goes beyond mere participants in the process of constructing ideas, questions, experiences and documentation. I viewed them as co-researchers. While I observed, listened and documented the experiences of the study group, it was the teachers’ role as co-researcher that allowed this research to occur not only within the space of our study group but in the classroom and by teachers (Elbaz, 1983; Rinaldi, 2006). If the purpose of this research is to “make visible” the complexities of teaching and learning, the learning process of a particular group of teachers engaged in the study and implementation of project work into their classroom then removing the research from the natural environment would prove irrelevant and contrived (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As co-researchers they listened, observed and documented the experiences of the classroom. It was from their own documentation that they subjectively chose to share specific observations, photos, videos, text, and other artifacts that they felt most told the story of the teaching and learning that occurred within their respective classrooms. Their documentation guided the discussion and content of our study group session, impacting this study, our personal knowledge and collective knowledge.

In my research proposal I had originally justified the selection of a purposive sampling primarily on the grounds that the teachers “had previously engaged in a study of the Project Approach, implemented a minimum of one project in their classroom, and
indicated continued interest in pursuing the study and implementation of the Project Approach through their voluntary participation in a Project Approach study group within their organization”. While I couldn’t discredit these objectives and held these to be necessary components of this narrative, what I had come to discover is that there is much more to purposive sampling. Grounded in the definition that “purposive sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sampling from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p.61), I knew that I could gain understanding and meaning from the group selected given an established professional relationship with the lead teachers and mentors that led into a reciprocal rapport and respect we all had for one another. In addition to the uncertainty and tentativeness I myself faced, there was an additional vulnerability to each individual willing to engage in this research process as teachers were required to enter into a learning process and a space that can lead to doubt, insecurity and a great sense of exposing oneself by being open to the sharing of their ideas, concepts and practices. This could not be possible with a randomized sample.

Co-researchers

The following list introduces you to the co-researchers and main characters in our narrative (four lead teachers), followed by an additional description of their aids and teacher mentors who played significant roles within the context of the study group. All research participants are employees of a single, non-profit, community action agency serving four counties in Northwest Ohio. This setting provides a “bounded system” for the research and further supports the rationale for a purposive sampling. The agency as a whole made a significant shift in the professional development opportunities for their
teaching staff towards study group models. Piloted in the academic year of 2010-2011, the agency implemented study groups as their main form of professional development, seeking to move away from more typical models of professional development based on a training model of education and efficient transmission of additive, content specific knowledge. This pilot year informed the continuation of the study group model of professional development for the academic year 2011-2012 which serves as the context of this particular research.

The choice of selecting teachers within this agency who self-selected the Advanced Project Approach study group further supports the nature of a purposive sampling, the bound system for a case study, while providing the context for the research setting and informing the posed research questions. Their participation in the study group did not correlate directly to being participants in this research. Teachers were given full choice of the breadth and possibility of their participation. All participants did choose to participate in some form in this study, signing consent for the data collected, recorded and retold.

While all participants of this study, identified by pseudonyms, are employees within the above mentioned organization, their selection allows a multitude of perspectives in relation to setting, educational background, professional title and their participation in this study was completely voluntary. The following is an introduction to individuals essential to this narrative and willing to share narratives taken from demographic surveys and artifacts.

**Main Participants.** As in all stories there are major or minor roles. While all participants to the study group are essential to this story, there are narratives that
dominate just given the nature of the current classroom structure and the emergent nature of this research. In this particular story, the main characters are the lead teachers of the four respective classrooms.

**Lisa.** Lisa has been in the field of early childhood for twelve years, eleven years at her current center, this year being her first as a lead teacher in her AM/PM preschool Head Start classrooms of three to five year olds within a building holding six independent classrooms. She attended the Project Approach conference with Dr. Chard in May of 2009 and attended two study groups prior to this year as a teacher assistant. She was currently completing her bachelor degree during the course of this research where she was also exposed to the study group and the Project Approach was taught. She was also exposed to the Project Approach in her associate degree program as a student teacher. She works in one of the larger centers of the organization located in a city of thirteen thousand citizens.

**Amanda.** Amanda has been in the field for ten years, three years of those years at the current center where she is lead teacher in an AM/PM preschool Head Start classroom of three to five year olds. Amanda works in the same building as Lisa. Prior to this year she was the lead teacher of a childcare classroom which was eliminated within this center. Prior to working in this center, Amanda had worked at the elementary level. Amanda was a participant in the original pilot study group, was a participant in the Project Approach conference in May of 2009 and attended two additional study groups prior to this year, all as lead teacher. She has her bachelor degree and stated to have no formal educational experiences with the Project Approach. Her previous projects
included a construction project, creek project, and a bathroom project. Amanda works in the same center as Lisa (see above).

**Kailey.** Kailey has been in the field of early childhood education for twelve years, four of the years in her current center working as a lead teacher in a childcare classroom, the only full day program for children in her center. She attended the Project Approach conference in May of 2009, but given the logistics of her classroom had not attended study groups, sending her one aid in her place for the past two years. She has an associate degree in early childhood education and is working on her bachelor degree. Kailey has been working on project-based work in her classroom for four years on topics such as trees, gardens, birds and fishing. Kailey also works in the largest center of the agency, with her classroom being the only all day childcare room for preschool age children. There are also two all day infant-toddler classrooms and five additional Head Start preschool classrooms. The center is located in a city with a population of sixteen thousand, seven hundred.

**Kami.** Kami has been in the field for five years and working in her current classroom as lead teacher for three years. She had attended one study group on the Project Approach prior to this year as a lead teacher and was a participant in the Project Approach conference in May of 2009. She has a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education which introduced her to project work and she has been doing she began engaging in project-based work since she entered the field. Kami’s classroom is the only classroom in a small, rural community of approximately six thousand, seven hundred.

**Additional Participants.** In addition to the four lead teachers, their classroom assistants (two per lead teacher) and the WOSS teacher mentors were also participants in
the study group and thus contributed to the data. While all participants signed consent forms, in respect for the assistants and questions pertaining to education, I did not require the assistants to complete demographic surveys and made it an option. This resulted in four assistants not returning their surveys: Lisa’s assistants (pseudonyms Demi and Fiona) and Kami’s assistants (Andrea and Katy). Both did sign consent forms to be included within the study. In addition, due to medical issues and release, I was also unable to receive one of Kailey’s, assistant’s survey as well (Kathy). The other assistants and mentors are as follows:

**Elaine.** Elaine is Amanda’s assistant and has been in the field of education for twenty years. She has been working in her current position for 4 years. Elaine attended two study groups and the Project Approach conferences prior to this year and supported projects on bathrooms and construction in Amanda’s classroom. She holds a CDA (Child Development Associate credential) and is working towards her Associate’s degree.

**Pam.** Pam holds a CDA and claimed no formal education in project work to this point. She had not attended any study groups on the Project Approach nor did she attend the conference, but stated “I know I have more to learn and as we go on with our projects, I am sure I will become informed with Project Work” (demographic survey). She has been in the field for four years, three years at the current center and this is her first year working with Amanda.

**Janet.** Janet holds a CDA and has been working on projects for the past two and a half years, the same amount of time she has been working with Kailey. She has attended three study groups as a representative of Kailey’s classroom and the conference
with Dr. Chard on the Project Approach. Janet has been in the field for twenty years and has engaged in projects on walks, rock gardens and trees.

**Tammy.** Tammy works as a teacher mentor in a variety of centers, one being that which Lisa and Amanda work. Her role within the centers she services is to set goals and provide additional support to teachers. She has been in the field for ten years and has worked six years for the agency. She co-facilitated the project approach study groups and attended the conference on the Project Approach as well as an additional administrator session with Dr. Chard.

**Delores.** Delores is the other teacher mentor for the agency and provided mentoring to both Kailey and Kami. She has been in the field for thirty-seven years and has worked in some capacity with projects for the past eight years. She attended three other study groups focused on the Project Approach when possible and was a participant in the Project Approach conference with Dr. Chard.

**Cathy.** Cathy attended the first study group session and was the only participant outside of the organization. While she did not continue on with the year, her mini-narrative within the beginning of our study proved pertinent to this narrative as a whole and is included. She did not complete a demographic survey.

**Data Collection and Recording**

As the researcher, I must be an active listener as the means of opening the space for the sharing of assumptions, experiences, contextual understandings, common knowledge and aims. A variety of qualitative data and documents was collected. The following data collection methods were triangulated: 1) field records including participant observational field notes and transcriptions of naturally occurring interactions;
2) semi-structured interview transcripts; 3) and document analysis of teaching practices including reflective journals, photos and other graphic representations all of which support my purposeful sample and the emergent nature of this study (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Lincoln & Guba; 1985). The multiple data sources collected throughout this process were collected with the explicit consent of the participants and in full compliance with the Human Subjects Review Board guidelines. In accordance with qualitative research tradition and more specifically to the storied narrative of qualitative textual data and an inquiry-based approach to education and research this research seeks to “contextualize experience and personal knowledge through narratives and other genres” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p.54).

Documentation is a collection of documents and data that are interpreted and used as a valuable tool for recalling and provides a space to reflect upon and tell the story of a learning experience (Rinaldi, 2001; Stacey, 2011). Given the collaborative nature of this study, documents, data and analysis was grounded in the everyday realities, meanings and interactions between me and the teachers, none of which could be predetermined or prescribed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Given the nature of this particular study and the established relationship between myself and the four primary co-researchers (Lisa, Amanda, Kailey & Kami) data collection and analysis was a collaborative process with varied levels of participants from March-November of 2012. Additional historical artifacts were shared by both myself and the teachers as part of the learning process linking the past, present and future of our work.

**Researcher Data Collection and Recording**
I collected data throughout the course of the study and did so in a variety of forms: demographic information (see appendix 1); participant-observations; observations; documents; reflective journals and participant surveys (See appendix 2). I kept an ongoing reflective journal separate from other data that helped me process my own construction and reconstruction of knowledge throughout the data collection period window and throughout the analysis process. These were kept separately from other documents in both a handwritten journal and an electronic file on my personal computer.

Records from the field included monthly agenda for study group session which reflected collaboration between me and the teacher mentors, Tammie and Delores. Records of our discussions on agendas leading to the monthly agendas are sparse given they were mostly done via phone conversations prior to study group session, but are clearly illustrated in the monthly agendas which were saved to a specific file monthly. Agendas were informed by discussions and the emerging questions generated during study group sessions, illustrating the emergent nature of such pedagogical spaces.

**Participant-observations.** Participant observation supports my immersion into the setting, allowing me to truly experience the reality of the participants by spending considerable amounts of time and the opportunity to learn directly from my own experiences within the research setting (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Providing the space for more intentionality on my part, participant observation proved essential to my relationship with the participants of this study, the recording of the ongoing narrative of the teachers and will shape the nature of my field notes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Participant observation through narrative inquiry establishes a relationship through which
field notes and texts are interpreted and collaboratively constructed, not researcher driven or controlled (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Participant-observation field notes were kept by me to both reflect the emergent content of study groups and to document the events, discussions, and experiences that occurred within the context of our monthly sessions. The sessions occurred during the academic school year of 2011-2012 on October 14, 2011; November 11, 2011; December 9, 2011; January 13, 2012; February 10, 2012; March 6, 2012; and April 13, 2012. While not all of these fell specifically within the window of data collection, but given the nature of study groups and the rigor within the state of Ohio for quality professional development, I was required to both document and submit the contents of each sessions which included agendas, minutes and teacher reflections. All teachers signed consent for such documentation and these will be noted as historical artifacts within the context of the research. I recorded extensive notes within the context of our study group sessions and within the same day, typed these up and saved them in electronic files on my computer and backed up on an external hard drive. I attempted to give the most detailed, accurate accounts possible of everything that occurred while refraining from placing my own interpretations, judgments or assumptions during the write-ups. Participant-observations were used as mentioned above.

Observations. A variety of field notes and observational records support and are more consistent with narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This diversity was supported by my reliance not only upon my own observational field notes, but that of the participants. I continued in my ongoing role as participant observer within the context of our monthly, study group meetings, taking detailed running notes of the conversations,
questions and interactions that occur around our inquiry into the implementation of the Project Approach within the classrooms. My field notes taken within the classroom setting were triangulated with those of the teacher mentors and the teachers with a focus on the projects and taken in a variety of forms. Taking into account that my field notes placed the participants at a single moment within the classroom, I recognized the need to complement my field notes and texts with those taken by the participants, allowing for multiple perspectives and also providing a broader view and larger lens through which to interpret our joint experiences.

The Project Approach requires of teachers to be observers and recorders of students' experiences as the context for planning for students' learning. Focused observations taken within the context of the projects further supported teachers’ understanding of the Project Approach as they learn to see and hear differently, building on the questions of children and supporting inquiry based learning. Participant observations further supported teachers’ growth in implementing the Project Approach and providing multiple dimensions of data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Multiple reporters of participant observation notes helped open up the research space to support the “ambiguity of working within an open and boundless three-dimensional inquiry space” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.95) between the researcher, the participants and the pedagogical space. These were collected throughout the data collection period in a variety of forms, both electronic (saved in electronic files on my computer and backed up on external high drive) and hard copies (kept within project research binder).

Email. Email proved to be a meaningful form of communication between myself and participants. Email, a form of written dialogue, provided another means of
communication through which teachers discussed their classrooms, provided accounts of their experiences, worked to make sense of these experiences, and helped to maintain a relationship between myself and the participants through our shared and individual experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Communication was initiated both ways, between me and participants and between participants and me via email as we posed questions and engaged in discussion specific to their individual projects as the means of furthering our dialogue and experiences in projects. Email has helped to establish a sense of trust, added rapport, listening and caring between myself and others and provided a space where teachers felt safe to pose questions in response as the means of sustaining our conversation and inquiry thus proving a beneficial document for this research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

**Reflective journals.** Reflective journals were kept by me as a means of processing experiences, ideas, concepts and questions throughout the course of this research. Reflections on study group sessions were written within the same file as the participant-observations while journals outside of the sessions were saved in electronic files on my personal computer, backed up on external hard drive and dated accordingly under reflective journals. Participants of the study group were also asked to engage in reflective writing at the beginning of each session which they could turn in if they chose to do so, leading to some overlap, but also a richer data base upon which to engage in analysis. These were more subjective in nature, process based and emotional in nature. Participant reflections were handwritten and filed within a study group binder under reflections.
Semi-structured Interviews. Interviews are described as a “conversation with a purpose” (Kahn & Cannell, 1957, p.149) and a way of formalizing the everyday practice and interactions between individuals involving asking and answering questions into a research method (Mischler, 1986) are quite common to qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Given time restraints and lack of release time for the participants, I conducted one semi-structured interview with each lead teacher lasting approximately one hour. Teacher assistants attended and participated in these interviews. One semi-structured interview was conducted with teacher mentors. Both the recordings and transcriptions were saved as electronic files on my computer and an external hard drive. Transcribed interviews were shared with participants to allow for member checking and support the extension and continuation of the continuum of experience and dialogue between myself and the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The discourse was jointly constructed between me (the researcher) and the participants (teachers and teacher mentors) during the interview. Consecutive member checking of transcriptions were conducted (Mischler, 1986) and further built upon the participation observation and artifact data collected.

These in-depth interviews sought to reflect conversations more than formal events and were shaped substantially by the teachers (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This method supports the natural form of the inquirer-respondent relationship where the “inquirer and the “object” of inquiry interact to influence one another, knower and know are inseparable” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.94). The discourse of the interviews was shaped and organized by the posing of questions and the emergent dialogue between myself and
the teachers taking on more the quality of a focused conversation (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Conversations reflected equality between participants that does not occur in more formally structured conversations with predetermined questions, allowing for questions and topics to emerge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A key feature of a “project is that it is an investigation – a piece of research that involves children in seeking answers to questions they have formulated by themselves or in cooperation with their teacher and that arise as the investigation proceeds” (Katz & Chard, 2000, p.2). While open-ended in nature, the interviews were framed and guided by questions and discussions around our joint inquiry into project work and more specifically the projects implemented within the individual classrooms (Appendix 3).

**Co-researchers Data Collection and Records.** To maintain fidelity and validity to my research questions and the nature of this inquiry, this research did rely not only upon my data collection and documentation, but also on the documentation collected by participants within the classroom as the means of contextualizing this research as much as possible in the classroom, making the voice of teachers heard, and to maintain the need for multiple perspectives and interpretations of our joint experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Teacher planning materials such as lesson plans and documentation worked simultaneously together as a document. Documentation makes visible the learning that occurred as the result of the teachers intentionally and systematically planning for such learning experiences. Crucial to implementation of the Project Approach is a systematic way of planning for student learning that includes documents such as anticipatory webs,
curriculum webs, children’s topic webs and the transcription of questions generated by the children, all which serve as the starting point of Phase 1 of the project and the documentation of learning experiences (Katz & Chard, 2000). As teacher and children move through the phases of the project, there is ongoing planning which can take the form of anecdotal notes, teacher meetings and discussion and documentation collected which include artifacts such as drawings, dictated writing of children’s thoughts, three dimensional representations and photos of the experiences within the project investigation. These documents were essential to discussions around the phases of a project within the context of our study group sessions, generated additional questions and showed the variance of teachers’ competencies in implementing the Project Approach. Teacher planning materials and documentation as documents supported this research by providing a visual memory of project experiences open to analyses.

The documentation of participants is less structured given the nature of the study group and their autonomy to bring to the group that which they self-selected to make visible their practices in the classroom. Documentation included, but was not exclusive to photos, anecdotal notes, children’s drawings, videos, handwritten notes, journals and assessments. Teachers brought documentation to each session which was shared, discussed and questioned within the process of our co-construction of knowledge. This provided an additional, naturalistic means of member checking within the context of the study group. As researcher I recorded such documentation in my own notes, photographs, photocopies or other forms as the means of keeping records. These were saved either as electronic files and backed up or placed in a binder specific to this research under teacher documentation (See Table 1).
Table 1:

*Data Sources*

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<tr>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Self</th>
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<th>Teacher 2</th>
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Qualitative research “involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.3). The continual observations, documentation and data collection taken from our individual perspectives and brought to the space of the
study group supported the ongoing, collaborative process of recalling, revisiting and co-constructing new meanings. For Elbaz (1983) “if we reflect on our everyday experiences of the work teachers do, their knowledge and its use are manifest” (Elbaz, 1983, p. 4) clearly defining the intent of this research.

**Framing and Organizing my Work: Case Study and the Project Approach**

Lincoln & Guba (1985) propose the case study as the methodology most reflective of the “continuous reporting process that characterizes naturalistic inquiry” (358). This dissertation employed a case study methodology of narrative inquiry. A case study explores a “bounded system” or a case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context” (Creswell, 1998, p.61) providing a methodology that supports the purpose of representing the continuum of experiences as well as the process of change of a specific group of early childhood educators seeking to implement a particular curricular approach. The case study proved the most fitting for this research that is based upon the temporality of the bounded experiences of this specific group of educators shaped by the past, present and implied future and based upon the culmination of reports that have gone prior to this research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Definitions of case studies include such explanations as an in-depth examination of some instance or an intensive, complete examination of an issue or event over a particular amount of time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Guba and Lincoln (1981) provide a list of examples for case study reports including individuals, agencies, societies, culture, movements, events, incidents, and projects. This particular research supports the definition of a collective study (Stake, 1995) as it involves continuous reporting, deep inquiry and analysis into a group of fourteen early childhood educators engaged in a
collective purpose of supporting project work and inquiry based learning in their specific classrooms (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This collective case study is written in the narrative form. Narrative in qualitative research methodology provides a “linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action…Narrative is the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed processes” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.5). The primary purpose of this collective study is to improve my own and the readers’ insight and understanding into this unique collective case of the experiences of early childhood educators engaged in teaching and learning within the context of the Project Approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1995). This collective case study draws together the unique and diverse experiences of individuals into an organized whole to further support our understanding of teacher’s continuum of experience in correlation to the Project Approach.

**Analysis Grounded in the Project Approach: A Three Phase Structure**

Triangulation has generally been considered the process of clarifying meaning through the collection of multiple meanings and perspectives, serving to “clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being seen” (Stake, 1994, p.241). Member checking further strengthens the reciprocal process of data collection and analysis as participants review the transcripts and observations; support and add to the data collection with classroom observations and interpretations; and engage in data analysis. Member checking strengthens this research inquiry as we collaborate, corroborate and provide feedback to one another (Stake, 1994). Each research participant will be provided numerous opportunities to review the raw data, support the data collection and analysis, respond to the research questions and further add to the coding.
This research will follow the typical analytical procedures as delineated by (Marshall & Rossman, 1999):

a) Organizing the data (*data will be organized according to methods of data*);
b) Generating categories, themes, and patterns (*an ongoing process in tandem with data collection and supported by member checking*);
c) Coding data (*this will be ongoing and done manually in the interest of fully involving the participants in the process*)
d) Testing the emergent understandings (*ongoing and strengthened by member checking and my keeping of a research, reflective journal*)
e) Searching for alternative explanations (*generated by participants but also by addressing other research interpretations*)
f) Writing the report (p.152)

These six elements of qualitative analysis will be built into this research study and guide the data analysis as the means of ensuring its rigor and quality.

**Analysis and Organization**

The transition from theory to practice, text to analysis proves difficult as the researcher engages in bringing meaning to data that allows the reader to gain an adequate understanding and grasp of the context and experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As researcher I was cognizant of the fact that how these experiences are represented is crucial and I faced the question of how to take all of the experiences represented through the data and reduce them to what Lightfoot (1983) described as a mere “portrait” (Eisner, 1998). The shift from text to analysis within narrative analysis and qualitative research
involves the task of storytelling, stories which will “express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experience in which actions and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.8).

Data analysis is the process of organizing, structuring and interpreting large amounts of data from diverse settings, sources, experiences and actions through a unified and organized process (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1995). The story provides the context for understanding through the process of bringing together this mass of data into an organized whole (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative analysis brings numerous experiences together into a unified story through which a “new level of relationship significance appears” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.7).

Stories serve as a linguistic form through which human experiences can be expressed (Ricouer, 1986). The triangulation of multiple data sources will help to achieve and establish a sense of trustworthiness in both the collection and analysis process which occur simultaneously in qualitative studies, validating the events, actions and experiences of the story (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1995). The temporal framework of the Project Approach, designed to support teachers when engaging children, provides an outline applicable to this research. Katz and Chard’s (2000) view of projects as resembling a good story with a beginning, middle and ending served as a structure for me in which I could analyze data and organize my writing while matching my research perspective. While providing a framework, the three phase structure of the Project Approach does not define one way of doing something, but opens up a space for being responsive to the participants both individually and as a group;
emphasizing teachers as active agents through their engagement and participation in the
direction of our investigation into the Project Approach; and encouraging teacher
responsibility and initiative for what occurs both within the space of the study group and
respective classrooms as well as in this research (Elbaz, 1983; Katz & Chard, 2000).

While not all features of the phases of the Project Approach are applicable to our
investigation, I will provide a brief outline of each Phase followed by a table (see Table
2) to further support the readers understanding of the phases. I will then delineate how
this format can be used to structure this narrative (Katz & Chard, 2000). Prior to phase 1,
the role of teacher planning as defined by Katz & Chard (2000) proved pertinent to
sustaining the study group and to my role in the study group (defined later within this
chapter). Teacher planning involves the advanced and ongoing planning one does to
improve the “chances of fruitful investigation and accomplishment” (Katz & Chard,
2000, p.91). Phase 1 considers ways of engaging both interest and engagement and how
to get started in inquiry, which includes what Chard has defined as EQWK (experiences,
questions, wonderings, and knowledge). Understanding the prior knowledge and
experiences with which the participants entered the study group would serve as entry
point for our individual and collective inquiry, while both the questions and wondering of
the group would be the means of moving us forward in our personal and collective
knowledge of the Project Approach and provided the foundation for Phase 2. Phase 2 is
the middle and plot of the story where participants undertook the task of more fully
understanding the Project Approach to early childhood curriculum, seeking to answer
their question and reflecting on their learning. And just like all stories must come to an
end, Phase 3 is the culmination and closure of a project where information from the project approach is shared and assessed.

Table 2

Organization of Project Work:

Phases of the Project Approach based on Katz and Chard, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases of the project Approach</th>
<th>Structural Features</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Concluding Projects</td>
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<td>• evaluating project</td>
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The phases and organization of the Project Approach served as an outline upon which I could structure our story, code, analyze and discuss the data. Contrary to traditional research where findings and results are analyzed and written in chapter 4, I have broken chapter 4 down into two separate chapters as the means of allowing the
narrative to unfold in a more structured manner with Chapter 4 being Phase 1, the introduction to our inquiry and Chapter 5 the story of our inquiry and investigation into the Project Approach. Our collective narrative will then conclude in Chapter 6 and 7 with Phase 3. I have chosen to spread Phase 3, my discussion and implications sections, over two chapters to show multiple means of illustrating and representing to others the experiences of the study group and the meanings made. Chapter 6 focuses primarily on Phase 3 from the teachers’ perspective and Chapter 7 is written from my perspective. The phases provided just enough structure for me to more clearly organize the data and present it to the reader in an articulate manner. There was some overlap between the phases where I as the researcher had to decide which chapter the content most fit (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Analysis and Organization*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases of the Project Approach</th>
<th>Structural Features</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Supporting data</th>
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<td>Teacher Advanced Planning</td>
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<td>Journals Agendas</td>
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<td>Deciding scope of project</td>
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<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>Engaging and sustaining interest</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Artifacts and participation in study group Agendas Email</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EQWK (experiences, questions, wondering, knowledge):</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Artifacts Reflective Journals Participant-observations</td>
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</table>
## Phase 2

Inquiry into main research questions
- Group discussions
- Sources of information
- Investigation
- Displays

Chapter 5
Reflective journals
Teacher documentation
Supporting materials provided teachers
Participant observations
Observations
Interview transcripts
Emails

| Phase 3 | Culmination of project | Chapter 6 and 7 | Interview transcripts
Teacher documentation
Surveys
Emails |
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## Limitations

One of the limitations for me as the researcher was time. Again I find my experiences directly reflect those of the participants engaged in projects within their classroom. Just as teachers find there is not enough time for planning, organizing and documenting I too felt this restraint and found myself bound both by the window of data
collection as well as time restraints on data collection resulting in my personal schedule or that of the teachers. For example, the original intent was to conduct a minimum of two semi-structured interviews, but given the lack of release time provided teachers I was only able to conduct one interview per participant (minus Cathy who only attended one session of the study group). But, as mentioned before, this is reflective of teachers’ experiences in the classroom and provides some insight into the narrative.

I had worried about maintaining multiple roles within the context of this research and that facilitation of the study group would be impacted by this research. Throughout the course of our study group sessions I gave priority to my role as facilitator of the group as the means of maintaining the rapport I had established with the staff. My fear was that teachers would be resistant or apprehensive to engage fully in the study group or feel I was in some way abusing our professional relationship to complete my research. By including all participants in the entire process and allowing the data to emerge out of the study there was no additional pressure or expectations placed upon the participants beyond those required by the Ohio Department of Education in relation to study group professional development other than the one hour, scheduled interview. I provided throughout the course of this research and beyond multiple opportunities for participants to assume the role of researcher and have autonomy within the entire process. The space of the study group naturally provided this opportunity. My continued collaboration with two of the teachers as well as my ongoing professional relationship with all participants I hope illustrates that I did not abuse my role as researcher and maintained key relationships in the early childhood field.
Another limitation that I feared might arise was that due to the openness of this collaborative process some teachers might feel inadequate in relation to others in terms of implementing the Project Approach, a risk that is involved in any study group which now carries over into this research inquiry. Not your typical professional development space where one can sit in isolation, acquire information and take it home with no form of collaboration; the space of a study group can be one of vulnerability and insecurity. This could be only heightened when research is involved. By eliminating any form of measurement of teachers’ ability or “success in implementing projects” and seeking only to tell the story, while not eliminating the possible emotions that can emerge within such a space, it is my hope that this was diminished.

To further diminish apprehension and the sense of vulnerability I was opening the participants up to, I sought to provide the participants ownership of both this narrative and the data which shaped it. To provide complete autonomy, in addition to gaining formal consent to document our story I also allowed participants to be anonymous through their selection of participation. While all were required to journal at the beginning of each session participants were provided the opportunity to turn reflections in anonymously or to keep their reflections. While I saw this as strength to my being able to build rapport with the participants, it also proved detrimental when I began analyzing data and recognized the often unbalanced data between participants. As the reader continues recognize this when you find yourself asking the question, why do some teachers’ stories appear richer and more saturated with data?

Summary
This dissertation employs a case study as the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry to support the purpose of this dissertation and the means through which the narratives of a group of early childhood educators engaged in the Project Approach naturally emerge and are told. Framed by the research questions and my personal inquiry I have chosen to utilize narrative analysis and case study methodology within the structure defined by the Project Approach. The conceptual framework supported by: the research context; participants and researcher positionality; data collection and analysis are presented and justified in relation to this specific inquiry. The function of this research study is meant not to state meanings, but to express them (Dewey, 1980), pointing to meanings rather than stating them as truth (Langer, 1942).

This focus on the storied narratives of a specific group of early childhood educators is supported by the case study and naturalistic inquiry, allowing for the possibility for multiple meanings to unfold out of the context of this study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The unpredictability of what might emerge cannot be known in advance and for me as the researcher to portend what could be known ahead of time would contradict the theory, conceptual framework and praxis of this research grounded in the Project Approach and pedagogical progressivism (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Just as the teachers are asked within the context of implementing projects in their classrooms to accept the uncertainty of engaging in project work and the interaction between the students and themselves, I must equally accept the emergent nature of the data as the interaction between myself and the teachers. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such interactions are on the whole unpredictable in advance as I, the researcher, “cannot know sufficiently well the patterns of mutual shaping that are likely to exist; and
because the various value systems involved (including the inquirer’s own [mine]) interact in unpredictable ways to influence the outcome” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 41).

Chapter Four

Getting Started and Phase 1: Emerging Conceptions of Teaching and Learning

One never enters into a space in isolation. Entry into the pedagogical space of our study group was the result of multiple narratives being interwoven into the larger narrative of the field of early childhood within the United States and history of inquiry-based learning, specifically the Project Approach. Projects and the challenge to engage in curricula that supports a balanced integration of the child, teacher facilitation, subject matter and society by placing the child at the center of pedagogical practices are far from new to the field of early childhood education (Marshall et al, 2000; Dewey, 1899; Dewey, 1902; Dewey, 1938; Kilpatrick, 1918). Our individual and group narratives, brought together by the commonality of our inquiry into the lives of children and the means through which they make sense of the world while far from unique and shaped by a historical context, must also be seen as specific and unique to our story.

This is the story of our collective inquiry into the Project Approach and teaching and learning which officially began on Friday, October 14, 2011, but emerged out of our individual and collective pasts as well as the historical context of project-based learning. It was the beginning of a year filled with challenging experiences that would require shifts in epistemological positions and pedagogical practices for all of us as we became a learning group with multiple perspective and different understandings and ways of
knowing. The following narrative documents our collective and individual learning processes as the means of making our experiences visible (Rinaldi, 2001). Our story begins in Phase 1.

**Getting Started: Teacher Planning**

“Phase I includes introducing and clarifying the topic and subtopics to be investigated, sharing experiences and knowledge related to it, and specifying the list of questions to be investigated” (Katz and Chard, 2000, p.105).

In preparation for our first study group, Deores, Tammie and I met in my office to reflect on our past Project Approach Study groups, set goals and more immediately, set the agenda for our first study group session. By this point in our professional relationship, we had grown to know each other quite well, having now worked together for 4 years in different capacities. I had first come to know Deores and Tammie in my work for the state as a literacy specialist. We had always collaborated with mentor teachers in the classroom, first with a direct focus on literacy and later in project work. Given their position as Teacher Mentors throughout WOSS, they were not only a part of the monthly study group meetings, but were able to provide additional support to the classrooms and teachers on a more regular basis. Personally and professionally we had developed a great deal of trust and respect for each other, working as a team who had learned to draw on each other for support, build upon our individual strengths, share ideas and frustrations, seek solutions to support teachers and ultimately improve things for young children. And so, when we came together to meet prior to our first study group meeting, we had no difficulty agreeing upon some of the barriers we had faced in prior years and outlining some clear ideas of how to begin this year as the means of
establishing a learning group that would essentially move forward in their understanding and implementation of the Project Approach.

Our discussions brought us immediately to the topic of how to get started not only in our upcoming study group meeting, but how to further support teachers’ understanding and engagement in the Project Approach. Our discussion led us to Phase 1, the phase that I had to admit I, the mentors and teachers had not valued enough in our study up to this point. We were always so eager to jump to the deep investigation and inquiry of phase 2 that we undervalued the role of anticipatory planning, topic selection, the documenting of children’s prior knowledge of the topic and generating questions around which to build new experiences and curriculum. As we reflected on this we realized that we had come to define projects as Phase 2, an error on our part as well as that of the teachers. Without Phase 1, it proved quite difficult to ever obtain the level of inquiry necessary to sustain the deep investigation, higher level thinking and learning we sought in Phase 2 and the closure of Phase 3.

If a good project is like a good story with a beginning, middle and end (Katz & Chard, 2000) then skipping Phase 1 is like starting a book in the middle. Both the reader and the author have no understanding of how the story began, resulting in numerous tangents, but no clear story line or conclusion. Without the introduction, there is nothing upon which to build a story. And this is exactly what our prior experiences had shown us, without a strong Phase 1 there were only a lot of mini-experiences provided the children around a particular topic, but the outcome was never a complete project with a beginning, middle and end. And so Delores, Tammie and I came up with an agenda for
our first study group that focused on Phase 1, both as the source of our collective inquiry and as a starting point for classroom projects.

**Topic Selection**

“A project can begin in several ways. Some begin when one or more of the children in a group express an interest in something that attracts their attention. Some projects begin when the teacher introduces a topic or when a topic is selected by agreement between the teacher and the children” (Katz & Chard, 2000, p.70).

Project topic selection had proven to be an automatic roadblock in my past experiences for many of the teachers. They would spend so much time looking for “THE” interest of the children, that they would be midway through the school year and still hadn’t gotten started. Teachers put an enormous amount of pressure on themselves to find “THE topic”, resulting in lost time and lack of engagement in projects themselves for the majority of the school year. In past study groups, teachers would show up month after month having made no progress and falling back on statements such as “we just haven’t found something that interests the children yet”. Tamie, Delores and I discussed the issue of topic selection and our frustration with the lack of momentum in past study groups due to the fact that many teachers failed to even begin engaging the children in projects until mid-year. We raised the question of whether teachers’ failure to select a topic had come to serve as a valid excuse for teachers’ inability to begin engaging in projects and how do we prevent this from happening in the upcoming year of study?

Shifting from teaching methods where units of study, knowledge and skills are predetermined by the teacher towards building on interests proved difficult. Building a
lesson plan around a single standard or concept was easy and could be grounded in past educational or classroom experiences, but to step back, evaluate children’s’ prior knowledge and build experiences around that was a difficult transition to ask of teachers. This shift is illustrated in teachers’ ability to select a topic. Insight into the complexity of teachers’ ability to choose a topic was gained during our first study group meeting when participants were asked to anonymously respond to the writing prompt: *Reflect on your experience with projects: Successes, failures and questions* (Project Study Group Agenda, 10/14/2011, artifact). What we came to find out was that the same disappointment and difficulty around topic selection was mirrored by the teachers. Participants’ journal responses during our first study group sessions included frustration with the “long time searching for projects” (Amanda), the challenge of “tuning into an interest they [the children] have” (Lisa); and keeping the children focused, not “jumping from interest to interest” (Kami, reflective journals of Amanda, Lisa and Kami, October 14, 2011). These individual reflections made it much more difficult to merely write off the teachers as looking for a way out of doing projects in their classroom and defined topic selection as significant to project work and something to be more closely analyzed and discussed.

“Teachers have the foolish notion that in project work the child directs you. The child doesn’t direct you, as the teacher you are still fully in control of your curriculum and the children; you are merely guided by their interests” (Dr. Sylvia Chard, Personal conversation, May 2009). My experiences with teachers and Sylvia’s comment illustrate a recurring theme historically and currently in teachers practices when implementing inquiry-based approaches. Teachers misinterpret the term child-centered and equate it
with child-directed practices. While this may seem a matter of semantics, in reality, when asking teachers to engage in a way of teaching and learning that emphasizes children’s active participation in their learning, it can make all the difference.

Historically, the misconception that teachers can’t take a directive role in projects, supported the overall failure of inquiry-based learning to ever fully take root in classrooms within the United States. The misunderstanding of the role of the teacher as a hands-off approach to teaching in curricular perspectives such as those of the Project Approach and just allowing children to do as they please, reflects the misinterpretation of progressive approaches to education, criticized by Dewey as sugar-coated education (Reese, 2001). Quite opposite from the theoretical foundation and intent behind inquiry-based learning, teachers’ conception of the Project Approach as allowing children to take charge and merely do what they want all day leads to unsound teacher practices and curricula, a lack of knowledge acquisition for children, and a political backlash against an approach to education that was seen as lacking rigor and academic standards (Cuban, 2004; Labaree, 2005).

The past couple of years had taught me well the results of such misinterpretations: lack of sustainability of project work, teachers’ inability to engage the children in any topic or in-depth investigation and many mini-experiences, but not a single, complete project with a phase 1, phase 2 or phase 3. As facilitator, I knew it was my role to confront teachers with this misconception of the role of the teacher if we were to move forward this year. Dewey (1938) spoke quite clearly to me through the words, “it is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading. There is no point in his being more mature if, instead of using his greater insight to help organize
the conditions of the experience of the immature, he throws away his insight” (p.38). As facilitator, I was responsible for the direction in which this group and year would move. Given my awareness of the misinterpretation of the teacher’s role as being hands-off and non-directive, beginning with the misunderstanding that they had to wait for a topic to emerge out of the children, it would prove a waste of time if I allowed participants to perpetuate such conceptions. I knew it was in my hands to organize the study group sessions in a direction that would shift away from such misconceptions and thus support teachers’ ability to organize conditions conducive to quality project experiences in the classroom.

In order to move forward, it was necessary for me to first make the shift I was going to be asking of the teachers. I came to the realization that in the past my role as facilitator had also been a more hands-off approach. I had come to the realization that while I was looking for them to take ownership of the group and the content of our sessions, what they sought was direction and guidance. There were organizational needs of the study group necessary to establish a sense of consistency and coherence which I as a facilitator needed to address and support. In my own role as facilitator I realized how I was perpetuating the conception that a teacher engaged in inquiry based learning provides no direction by also not using my knowledge to direct and support teachers. I chose to change direction and model an alternative by illustrating that “some projects begin when the teacher introduces a topic” (Katz & Chard, 2000, p.70). I decided with Tammie and Delores to introduce a first topic that all classrooms would begin with on our first study group session, the topic of school.

**Becoming a Community of Learners**
“Learning does not take place by means of transmission or reproduction. It is a process of construction, in which each individual constructs for himself the reasons, the ‘whys’, the meanings of things, others, nature, events, reality and life. The learning process is certainly individual, but because the reasons, explanations, interpretations and meanings of others are indispensable for our knowledge building, it is also a process of relations – a process of social construction. We thus consider knowledge to be a process of construction by the individual in relation with others, a true act of co-construction” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.125).

Knowing that groups provide “a powerful context for learning” (Gardner & Rinaldi, 2001, p.16) the importance of creating a community of learners weighed heavily on me given my previous experiences in what had been deemed study groups, but lacked the key components of a true learning group. I entered into this year with the question of whether it is possible to establish a collaborative, professional learning group grounded in dialogue, continuous reciprocal change, and the process of construction. The choice to pre-select a topic had the intent of moving the group forward and preventing them from being stuck by the technicality of topic selection. But the question that I sought to answer was, could a common topic across the groups serve as the means of establishing “the sense of common group history …[as the means of strengthening]….the sense of community” (Katz & Chard, 2000, p.106) and provide the foundation for creating a powerful context for teaching and learning?

**Emerging Threads and Epistemologies**

The context within which we began our Project Approach study was one of multiple classrooms, individual centers within one agency, different perceptions on
teaching and learning, and varying prior knowledge of the Project Approach. With such diversity, the topic of school provided a common ground for the group upon which all had experience and would serve as the impetus for discussion, the emergence of questions, and the framework within which epistemological beliefs could be made known. While there is much that could be said about the actual topic of school and the validity and meaning behind selecting this particular topic, the focus will be upon the threads that began to emerge out of our initial discussions focused on Phase 1 and our common topic, threads that would continue to weave in and out of both our individual and collective narratives throughout our study and within our community of learners.

Questions, Prior Knowledge and Epistemological Beliefs

In Phase 1 “we begin by considering ways of involving children [individuals] during the preliminary discussions in the earlier stages” (Katz & Chard, 2000, p.105). The purpose of these discussions is to engage and invite interest, encourage curiosity and promote a level of involvement. Initial discussions provide the context of relevancy by connecting to past experiences while building a sustainable interest to further investigate. Given my awareness of the significance of these initial conversations around the Project Approach, we began by reflecting on our previous experiences with projects, our perceptions of teaching and learning, as well as our successes, failures and questions in relation to teaching and the Project Approach (October agenda 2012, artifact).

Removing the barrier of topic selection and opening up a space for reflecting on our previous experiences created the context for sharing our individual stories about teaching and the Project Approach. Within our conversations terms and concepts such as projects, teaching, meaningful learning, letting go, engagement, cooperative learning,
experience, time, facilitator, thinking and knowledge were tossed around and questions for deeper consideration began to take shape around the role of the teacher; child initiated vs. standards based curriculum; project based learning matching individual perceptions on teaching and learning; and wanting to engage in project learning “w/out adding more work” or without being provided sufficient time to plan and document. This was the start of what Amelia Gambetti (2001) refers to as a “seesaw of dialogues and different point of views”.

As I explored the stories within these oscillating conversations between and within the participants, I began to hear and see patterns as participants listened and responded to their own voice as well as that of the others. This created a space in constant flux as participants began to edit their own thinking on teaching and learning within the context of a professional community of learners where there was no dominant voice, but a multitude of voices and points of view and perspectives. Interacting narratives resulted in tensions as participants sought to clarify their own understandings and meaning of inquiry-based learning within the context of a space that also required them to be more responsive and receptive to the voices of the other participants. The tension of negotiating one’s individual epistemologies within a community of learners was further complicated by the constant need of teachers to negotiate between the competing demands of the profession on their time, their attention and their energy. The following narratives provide insight into these tensions and highlight significant questions that will continue to weave in and out of our ongoing study of projects.

Prior Knowledge, Emerging Questions and Tensions
“The project I liked best was the bathroom that was built by our class. The shower, toilet and blueprints were all done by the children (see Figure 1). They came up with the ideas and they implemented them” (Amanda, reflective journal, 2011, study group artifact).

This reflection of Amanda’s is upon a project she had undertaken with her classroom in the previous school year and illustrates what Amanda defined as success in her implementation of the Project Approach, proving significant for her particular narrative. Success for Amanda in this particular project correlated with the concept that it was student initiated, but the statement “they came up with the ideas and they implemented them” was countered by Amanda also stating that “a huge barrier that I [Amanda] have is letting go [in project-based learning]. I also like to have a set of standard rules to go by” (Amanda, reflective journal, October 2011, artifact).

The apparent conflict between allowing children to initiate learning and Amanda’s difficulty to let go was clearly reflected in the bathroom project to which she refers in her first reflective journal (Amanda, reflective journal, October 2011, artifact). In a sense the bathroom project happened despite her. The original topic Amanda had selected that year had been focused on the children’s bodies. Amanda had sought to emphasize healthy bodies to support the ongoing curriculum in her classroom in February which was among other things dental health and awareness month. While dental health
and healthy bodies proved difficult to justify as a project topic, it was from Amanda and this more teacher-driven topic or unit of study that the students became engaged in the topic of bathrooms, a project that supported the children’s knowledge, skills and positive dispositions within a meaningful learning experiences. While this reflection and return to a past project illustrates Amanda’s prior experiences in project implementation and a project she stated liking the best, she also expressed her ongoing struggle with “getting comfortable in the approach” (Amanda, reflective journal, October 2011, artifact).

Significance lies in Amanda’s statement that “they [the students] came up with the ideas and they implemented them” (Amanda, reflective journal, October 2011, artifact) and how she views her role as absent and merely “letting go”. When defining teaching during our first session she wrote, “Teaching is helping a child build on an idea. Helping them add new information to their brains” (reflective journal, October 2012, artifact) and yet she didn’t see her own role of teacher and facilitator within the bathroom project as helping the children build on an idea, but as the children taking control of the curriculum. Amanda’s difficulty navigating between supporting children’s interests and her own role as the teacher reflects the historical dilemma around the role of the teacher within project-based learning and historical perceptions of teaching (Reese, 2001). Her inability to get “comfortable in the approach” resulted from her own need as teacher to “need a plan and if I don’t have a plan then I’m like ....I’m everywhere at once” (Amanda interview, May 2012).

The tension between Amanda’s need for a plan and supporting child initiated curriculum is a thread that will re-emerge as it weaves itself in and out of both her individual narrative and our collective narrative. Amanda’s need for a clear plan on how
to go about the Project Approach reflects other teachers who seek immediate solutions for how to go about inquiry-based teaching and learning, wanting someone to just say, this is how you should do it, do this, then do that and this is how you do projects (Gambetti, 2001). Amanda’s difficulty with fully grasping her role as the teacher within project based learning led her to pose the question during our first session “is this approach right for me?” (Amanda, reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact).

A similar question was mirrored by another participant in the study group. Cathy, a participant from a local lab school at a nearby university defined teaching as “providing experiences, arranging the environment, and modeling and supporting and guiding for student discovery” and learning as “adding knowledge to earlier learning and schemas…developing and demonstrating deeper understanding” (Cathy, reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact). Her conception of teaching and learning as building on prior knowledge, facilitating an environment that supports the children and guiding learning is reflective of project-based learning. And yet, within the same journal she poses the question, “can I do project work in a lab school?”

For Cathy the tension was between her definition of teaching and the nature of her position in a university lab school for early childhood educators and the barriers that she viewed due to the nature of the lab preschool environment. I have to ‘teach to the standards’ so ….students can really ‘see’ them. I have 1-2 weeks of planning and the students plan activities that are, most often, unrelated to my objectives, needs in the classroom, or to each other’s activities. Weeks and days seem, somewhat, disconnected” (Cathy, reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact)! The issue of accountability not only for Cathy, but the field of early childhood education in general, has led to such practices
where standards are isolated and taught to the large group as the means of being sure to address and “reach” them for each and every child. Such an approach to reaching standards proves difficult in project work where accountability is not only in the hands of the teacher, but “accountability for a wide range of potential learning is shared by both teacher and the children” (Katz & Chard, 2000, p.17).

Teachers trained to teach “to the standards” struggle with the fact that project work and shared accountability does not mean there is an absence of standards and that curriculum can include and be a balance between systematic and project-based learning (Katz & Chard, 2000). For Cathy, the inability to see project-based learning as a complement to the more systematic instruction she was familiar with led to her belief that her conception of teaching and learning did not match the expectations placed upon her as an early childhood educator. Her perception of her role as administrator and mentor teacher for education students was that she could not base her practices on her own epistemological beliefs, but decisions were decided by others and were beyond her control.

Cathy’s narrative illustrates the consequence of educational practices within the United States that place enormous significance on a single set of criteria and predetermined normative outcomes, eliminating the possibility of schools becoming a space for uncertainty, possibilities and different ways of making meaning. This socially constructed dichotomy between theory and practice, idealism and reality, utopia and action results in apathy and teachers removing themselves from waiting to just be told what to do (Palmer, 2009; Rinaldi, 2006). Palmer (2009) defines this as corrosive criticism, a reaction to the reality of “how things are”, leading to the conclusion that
things can’t be changed. “I’ve come to the realization that I will be unable to meet the requirements for this study group…..I expressed my frustration at our last meeting and I’m afraid, as much as I would like to do project work in my class, I am struggling with how to do it” (Cathy, November 2011, email artifact). Cathy’s inability to “learn how to make the Project Approach work in a lab preschool” (Cathy, reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact) represents the above dualistic thinking, ultimately resulting in her choice to no longer attend the study group.

Cathy viewed her situation as an either/or dilemma, either she completely change her practices to match her epistemological beliefs and theories on learning through the implementation of the Project Approach within her lab school or she continue to engage herself, pre-service teachers and children in normative practices that match the grand narrative of early childhood education and directly correlate to the standards. Her questions, “can I do project work in a lab preschool” illustrates not only her present situation, but mirrors divisive thinking that historically led to the failure of inquiry-based approaches to learning to truly take root within the larger, educational system (Dewey, 1938). Curricular approaches like projects require an epistemological approach to teaching and learning that removes the either/or dichotomy, supporting what Palmer (2009) describes as needing to constantly live in the tension between idealism and realism. In the words of Lisa, “it’s a dance” (Lisa, reflective journal, October 2011, artifact).

Lisa wrote about the “dance” in her first journal entry when reflecting upon her prior experiences with the Project Approach and her conception of teaching and learning. Her metaphor of dancing in reference to teaching provides insight into how Lisa views
herself as a teacher and shows her understanding of teaching and learning as a collaborative endeavor with the children in her classroom. For Lisa the “dance” reflects the shared accountability between teacher and children in project work where “*sometimes the teacher leads, sometimes the role is to guide*” (Lisa reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact).

In contrast to Amanda’s understanding that she had to completely remove herself in order to engage in project work, Lisa believed in shared responsibility and shared learning, while always seeing a clear role for herself as the teacher where she plans “*for things, but sometimes just becomes the facilitator and the children take the lead*” (Lisa reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact). Lisa’s perception of her role as a teacher mirrors the shared accountability between the teacher and children inherent to project work (Katz & Chard, 2000). She did not see herself as the holder and disseminator of knowledge, but placed value on the process of constructing knowledge and the shared search for meaning between herself and the children (Rinaldi, 2006). Lisa’s perspective on teaching as inviting children into the process of learning allowed her to increase opportunities for children to “*make connections in ways that are important to them. The learning in projects is more rich and meaningful*” (Lisa, reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact).

Lisa’s epistemological beliefs remove the conception that teachers are merely individuals who transfer subject-matter handed down to us from the past on to her students (Dewey, 1938). “*Teaching and learning can go together. Often time’s teachers think they should be the holder of knowledge. It’s ok not to know every detail of a subject right away. Often times I’m learning right along with the children*” (Lisa reflective
In contrast to Cathy who worked with predetermined content and felt it necessary to pre-select standards to inform her curriculum and Amanda who sought a set of standards upon which to base her teaching, Lisa had an understanding of learning based on the emergent nature of knowledge, matching project work and opening a space for teaching that is less defined and uncertain (Dewey, 1936).

Lisa’s epistemological perspective on teaching and learning at this point illustrates the process of reciprocal learning where teachers learn from “the knowledge-building process of the children” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.57). Kami’s narrative forms a similar thread, viewing learning as “forever and ongoing, it’s exploring; it’s creating; it’s trial and error” (Kami reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact). Like Lisa, she also viewed the role of the teacher as a “figure in the classroom that guides and supports students’ ideas and interests” (Kami reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact). For Lisa and Kami the classroom becomes a space of encountering knowledge and where learning is an active process, not the mere transmission of pre-packaged, pre-determined content and knowledge (Dewey, 1936). Teaching and learning is no longer about an end goal such as a specified standard, but about the process that emerges out of the personal and social context of the teacher and children.

This common thread found in both Kami’s and Lisa’s narrative reflects a way of knowing and understanding of teaching and learning open to the uncertainty of the direction of the curriculum and to the possibility of inquiry-based learning. While Amanda and Cathy questioned their ability to implement project work, Kami and Lisa posed questions focused on the nature of project work and how to further build upon their prior knowledge of implementation. For Lisa, she posed the question of how to “pursue
different avenues of doing the project work?” Kami reflected on her past experiences of being unable to focus the children on a single topic asking, how to keep the children focused once a project is started when their interests jump and change? Both questions illustrate Kami’s and Lisa’s knowledge of project work, their past experiences and the desire to take build upon these experiences to further their understanding of project work and implementation.

Removing initial discussions around topic selection allowed for the emergence of the above narratives grounded in our prior knowledge of project work and more concretely, our theories and beliefs about teaching and learning. By not focusing on what the children are “interested in”, the study group moved beyond a common barrier of getting started, creating a space for individual and common threads to emerge around topic selection, the role of the teacher, and inquiry-based learning, providing a foundation that would shape our future inquiry and investigation into the Project Approach. Providing a topic didn’t provide answers or solutions to the participants of how to engage children in the topic and sustain a project, it was just a starting point leading us further in our inquiry.

In retrospect, I had to question the value of preselecting the initial topic of school for the teachers. The intent of this action was never to prescribe or provide a script or specific lesson plan that teachers were to follow, but was meant to be the means of moving forward and overcoming what I had considered and encountered to be a barrier to teachers engaging in projects in the past. Additionally, given feedback from participants like Amanda who sought more clarification around the components of each phase, the intent was to revisit components of Phase 1 and to generate what Katz and Chard (2000)
define as script knowledge, “knowledge about sequences of events leading to a goal” (p.107) to further support teachers' understandings of the Project Approach. While meant to support teachers, I had to face the question of whether I had removed an essential characteristic of inquiry-based practices, teacher autonomy. Had I removed from teachers’ ownership of their own practices in the classroom and thus modeled for teachers the exact opposition of what I was promoting through project-based work? It was upon further analysis that I was able to piece together my intentions from the results of my actions as facilitator.

Threads and patterns began to take shape within our study group through our initial engagement in the topic of school and the Project Approach, providing a context upon which I could begin to frame the role of personal knowledge. Discussions, reflective journals and project documentation provided multiple representations of what was occurring within the respective classrooms, provided a rich source of data and established a common ground among the participants by bringing together our ideas, experiences and knowledge. My role as facilitator of the group was to build a shared perspective on projects and to support the formulation of questions while at the same time respecting the multiple entry points of the participants into this study and their numerous levels of engagement (Katz & Chard, 2000). As documenter it was my role to make visible the experiences that shaped the beginning of our study and moved us into the level of deep inquiry. The following brings a close to Phase 1 and my understanding of the events that took place within the space of the study group experiences. I have chosen to focus my interpretation of our initial experiences within the study group upon the threads I feel provide deeper insight into the complexities and tensions that occur between
epistemological beliefs, classroom practices and the field of early childhood education: the multiple perspectives through which teachers approached the topic; the questions that emerged; personal knowledge of teaching and learning; conceptions of the Project Approach; and the autonomy the space of the study group provided teachers to engage in the topic in numerous ways and in some cases, to reject the topic all together.

**Discussions, Reflection and Documentation: Negotiated Learning and Current Understandings**

“During these Phase 1 preliminary discussions, the teacher encourages the children to talk about the topic…to draw or write about it, and to depict current understandings of it in other ways, depending on….levels of competence” (Katz and Chard, 2000, p.70).

While the intent of pre-selecting a topic of investigation for teachers was to provide a starting point by designing an initial plan for the participants, it was the self-reflective journals and collaborative discourses of the participants that really provided a more valid view of the struggle to live in the tension as all of us sought to grow in our understanding of the Project Approach (Forman & Fyfe, 1998). Teachers began to question one another and themselves within such discourses, leading to a shift in practices towards project-based learning or a reversion back to more traditional approaches to teaching in the name of growth an understanding (Forman and Fyfe, 1998; Gee, 1990). The resulting narratives serve as my version and analysis of what occurred within our initial study group sessions as participants confronted one another and our personal beliefs, illustrating the constant shifting of epistemological beliefs and teaching practices (Forman & Fyfe, 1998).
As facilitator I sought to “build a shared perspective on the topic” (Katz & Chard, 2000, p.70) and negotiate experiences through our study of the Project Approach by taking a “reflective stance towards each other’s constructs, and by honoring the power of each other’s initial perspective for negotiating a better understanding of the subject matter” (Forman & Fyfe, 1998, 239). In order to do so, there was a level of risk and vulnerability required of us all. Our inquiry called for all of us to expose ourselves through our documentation of classroom experiences, creating multiple levels of uncertainty and resistance. It was my role to navigate this process of negotiated learning within the study group by providing multiple ways for the participants to depict their current understanding of the Project Approach and to gauge the various levels of competency in project based work while establishing within the study group a pedagogical space in which all participants felt safe to deal with the tensions they were feeling, could hear their own voice, and listen to the voices of others as the means of moving beyond the facts of the Project Approach to the construction and co-construction of new meanings (Beattie, 1995; Forman & Fyfe, 1998).

As our year-long inquiry began I knew I would face various levels of knowledge, application and interest in projects as well as a certain amount of resistance. What I felt completely unprepared for was the handwritten note passed to me during the first session. It simply said, “Don’t call on Fiona to answer questions”. Upon further inquiry I came to find out that Fiona felt she had nothing to bring to the group being new to both projects and the study group. There was a true sense of stress and panic in this note and I was unsure of how to make sense of it in a manner that would respect her initial response to entering into this space, but not accept her lack of understanding her own personal
knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning. While I understood her apprehension that she mirrored in her statement that she is “brand new” to the Project Approach as a teaching assistant to Lisa, I was struck by her inability to recognize her tacit knowledge, the know-how knowledge of teaching she has accumulated through her own practices in the field and the result of her actions, relationships, thinking, and experiences (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Focusing wholly on her lack of explicit knowledge pertaining to the Project Approach, she was completely unaware of the fact that she knew much more than she thought and found herself unable to articulate her tacit knowledge.

Fiona’s written words became the focus of my personal reflection on the value of tacit knowledge, discourse and the study group. While my initial response to her note was one of disbelief at the fact that she felt such a lack of confidence in her own personal knowledge, it was through reflective journaling that that I began to shape meanings. The significance of her communicating her lack of confidence within the group at the beginning was raised in my reflective journal, “if this had occurred within the space of a typical professional development, I would have never known how Fiona felt, she could have easily just sat back within a more traditional model of teacher education of what is often called ‘sit and take’ professional development, never engaged in dialogue and left feeling the same lack of confidence as she came with and never been able to voice her individual entry point” (personal reflection, 10/14/2012, artifact).

Understanding the value of the study group that provided the space for Fiona to feel safe to state her apprehension of engaging in the discussion and content of the study group at her initial point of her entry was crucial. Not only could this not have occurred
within the context of a more traditional professional development experience, it could not have been possible without an openness to a variety of forms of discourse, such as the written discourse with which Fiona felt comfortable. As facilitator I came to the understanding that I needed to further establish the possibility of all participants to engage in multiple forms of discourse as well as to provide opportunities for teachers to understand the value of their practical knowledge and tacit value of knowledge.

**Discourse and tacit knowledge.** “Sharing tacit knowledge requires interaction and informal learning processes such as storytelling, conversation, coaching and apprenticeship of the kind that communities of practice provide” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p. 9). It was the study group that opened up a pedagogical space for participants to voice their individual responses and perspectives in relation to the Project Approach. Participants from the beginning sought to find their own way as there was a constant shifting of perspectives on teaching and learning and needed multiple means of discourse through which they could express this process both individually and collectively (Wenger et al., 2002).

Such a shift can be seen within the individual narrative of Fiona who went from “don’t call on me” to “well, I have to say after all our group discussion, the fog has cleared and I think I got it! I’m excited about the next project” (Fiona, reflective journal, 12/9/2011, artifact)! While in no way seeking to state that this was an end to Fiona’s learning process, she in fact at this point had considered their project on school a “failure, too hard for the children and could have been taken much farther” (participant-observation notes, 12/9/2011), it illustrates the role of multiple forms of discourse within the study group in affecting shifts in thinking and personal knowledge. The study group
opened a space for Fiona and all of the participants to engage in the telling of their personal stories, entry points and approaches to the Project Approach through individual reflective journals and to then confront their personal constructions of their role in the teaching and learning process through discussions that were grounded in the daily practices of the classroom and their tacit knowledge (Forman & Fyfe, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

Similar connections to the role of multiple forms of discourse in personal knowledge can be made to the narrative of Amanda and her classroom. Her story illustrates a shift from merely stating whether she could or could not implement projects to finding meaning in her teaching practices through reflective journals, documentation and discussions. It was through such the forms of written, visual and oral discourse that I gained insight into the complexity of the process and the tensions within which she practiced daily in the classroom.

Katz and Chard (2000) discuss the role of initial discussions within Phase 1 and the importance of allowing individuals to recount their experiences in some way through reflection and representation. For Amanda, her reflective narration of the story of their initial school project focused primarily on their inability to build upon the children’s interest. One of Amanda’s written reflections during this initial phase states “our school project never really got off the ground. We tried to get the class interested, but they were really hit or miss” (Amanda, reflective journal, 12/9/2011, artifact). This was mirrored by her classroom assistant Elaine stating, “Our project is ended now. Children have no interest in the school topic” (Elaine, reflective journal, 12/9/2011). It was through revisiting their documentation and the posing of additional questions by both me and the
other participants in study group discussions that provided the context for Amanda to move beyond merely stating it didn’t work to really telling the story of what happened.

The reflective writing prompt “tell me the story of your school project”, followed by a request for participants to further represent this experience provided a different lens through which Amanda and her assistants could view the school topic. While both Amanda and Elaine stated a lack of interest in the school topic by the children, further analysis of the data showed contradictions between what happened and their perceptions of what happened. In our second study group session Amanda stated, the children were ‘more interested in what’s outside, the playground, asking questions like why things are different and why they can’t use the other playgrounds’ (participant observation, 11/11/2011). The interest in playgrounds resulted in children on their own initiative to make play dough models of the playground and to make observations of their experiences through statements such as “that tire swing was not the same as the ‘little’ playground swing” (Child transcription, documented by Amanda) illustrating the emergence of a common group interest grounded in the past and present experiences of the children (Katz & Chard, 2000). The school topic provide the initial entry point upon which Amanda and her staff engaged the children’s curiosity and invited their interest in the playground as the means of building a shared perspective on the topic, key elements for getting started (Katz & Chard, 2000).

Amanda had established interest and common ground upon which to generate ideas, experiences and questions as the means of guiding future experiences, developing skills and acquiring new knowledge with the children. It is here where I began to see elements of what Amber referred to above as “hit or miss”. Journals and discussions
show the facilitation of experiences to further support the children’s focus on playgrounds which included interviewing children from other rooms in the school, observing children on the big playground, and generating questions such as who takes care of the playground. These experiences were sufficient on their own for developing investigations and deeper inquiry into the children’s interests, but were countered with additional teacher-directed experiences pertaining to other aspects of the school outside of the focus on playgrounds such as: talking about the employees of the school; talking about safe walks; looking at signs; drawing their favorite things at school; and designing a “school” classroom in their dramatic play area. While Amanda attributed the inability to sustain the school project on the lack of interest on the side of the children, more crucial are two emerging threads within her initial narrative, “letting go” and “having trouble focusing on it” (Amanda, reflective journal artifact, 11/11/2011).

These two narrative threads weave themselves together in statements such as “I need a plan and if I don’t have a plan then I’m like, I’m everywhere at once” (Amanda Interview, 4/13/2012). While seeking a plan, Amanda struggled with the three phase structure of the Project Approach, resisting what she called putting a label on her teaching practices and stating that “sometimes we don’t always do that in order” while at the same time claiming that she needs those labels and stating “I’m too wishy-washy in my head to not to have a plan...I am like all over the place” (Amanda, interview transcript, 4/13/2012). While Amanda clearly articulated her understanding of the importance of allowing children to come up with ideas and implement them through prior projects like the bathroom, the tension of being in control and seeking structure but struggling to work within a curricular framework led to her feeling of being everywhere
and resulted in classroom practices that provided a multitude of experiences related to the school topic, but lacked in engaging the children in sustained, focused attention. The result being that Amanda and her assistants defined their school project as a failure.

Amanda’s recognition of the value of inquiry based approaches, but her anxiety about giving up control reflects the conflict teachers find themselves between the understanding that inquiry-based practices supports students by providing them ownership of their learning and the traditional role of teachers as being in control of learning (Bramwell-Rejskind, Halliday, & McBride, 2008). The most common response to this tension between student initiated inquiry and teacher directed practices is to in some way limit the level of choice for children by the teacher assuming more control of the curriculum (Bramwell-Rejskind et al., 2008). For Amanda, Elaine and Pam, this is most clearly illustrated in their design of the dramatic play area into their conception of “school”.

One component of Phase 1 in the Project Approach is engaging the children in “dramatic play related the topic, to draw or write about it, and to depict their current understandings of it in other ways” (Katz & Chard, 2000, p.70). Here is where I and other participants of the study group began to see disconnect between theory and practice within Amanda’s first project that then led to the unravelling of a number of threads. Rather than engage the children in a discussion on how to prepare the classroom to reflect their topic and allowing them to make suggestions and ask questions, Amanda “changed the dramatic play into a classroom” (Pam, reflective journal, 11/11/2011). This change consisted of a blackboard, desks set up in rows, a teachers’ desk and a bookcase.

Discussions within the context of the study group responded to the role of dramatic play
within projects while directly addressing Amanda’s choice to direct the play rather than assume the role of ethnographer by building upon the experiences of the children as the means of constructing common understanding and furthering an understanding of how to think about and revisit prior knowledge as the means of engaging children in sustained inquiry (Katz & Chard, 2000).

Kami (to Lisa): Well, and I already heard you guys discussing how you could have brought it more, back into the classroom, like the kitchen stuff.

Lisa: yeah, hmm, hmm. Definitely could have, should have I think revisited the kitchen. And I didn’t think about it until I read your email Stacey where you wrote, places that you can revisit of interest and I thought (hits table) that’s it, right there, we should have went back to the kitchen or we should have you know, I could have taken it further because they were, they really liked that, but.

Stacey: And what was your dramatic play area during this time.

Lisa: It was home, it was a home living area.

Me: Because you do want to think about next time also really building all parts of the topic into your room. And I don’t know if setting up, because I know that Amanda mentioned setting up a school, but they don’t know that part yet. Wouldn’t it be better to set up, because they were so interested in the kitchen it would be the kitchen or if they were interested in the outside, something outside instead of just saying, well let’s just set up desks in rows, which I don’t like anyway, but the idea of a school that they don’t know yet instead of the school that they do know.

Lisa: right

Kami: well and too, it almost sounded like it was teacher directed, they’re bringing the stuff in for the kids which might have killed the kid’s interest. Because if you just set it up, here is our school they’re going to say, “no”.

Lisa: Yeah, because she could have asked how, if we were going to make our school in here, what could we put in.

Kami: and just using the stuff in the classroom to make the desk or the chairs or whatever.

Me: Because the more you take the control out of the kids’ hands the less they’re going to be invested. It has to be a, not that you’re completely eliminated, but it has to be a negotiation and you have to base it on what...you’re exactly right, what would you put it in, what would you like the dramatic play area to be, those are the things.

Demi: because how she set it up, it was like for elementary or middle school, they don’t know little desks and how the clock is.

Me: That idea of school and how their idea and understanding of school is much more important.

Kami: and they, when they, I’ve noticed a lot of kids, when they think of school, they think of kindergarten and what’s going to happen in kindergarten because in preschool they don’t really, they know they go to school but I don’t think they understand they’re learning all of these things.
Lisa: Hmm, hmm, yeah.
Kami: They think they're supposed to bet homework and this and that.
Lisa: I have a little girl that asks me every day, Ms. Lisa, what did I learn today, what did I learn (laughter)? She goes, because mom (me: my mom said ask) yeah. She goes, I don't know, I didn't learn anything. And I said, well, V( you did this and we did this and we learned this and she goes oh, okay, but it's too.
Kami: But, and for parents too it's, they want the concrete, what letters did they learn, what colors what sounds (Lisa: right) and that's why I love teaching strategies that's open now to the parents because it's so easy to send them, look at what your kid just did, this thing.
(Participant observation, 12/9/2011).

There are numerous knots and emerging threads to unravel from this initial discussion emerging out of the context of the study group that serve as the means of analyzing approaches to teaching, addressing problem areas, and multiple conceptions of the Project Approach evolving out of the daily experiences of the teacher in the classroom (Gambetti, 2001). While initially I became caught up in the knot of these multiple narratives coming together all at once, by first building upon Amanda’s narrative as the context I was soon able to untangle and weave additional narratives and threads. And so I return to the conception that the school topic was a failure and the idea that the “children have no interest in the school topic” (Elaine, reflective journal, 12/9/2011) as the context for building our collective narrative.

While it would be easy for me as the researcher and facilitator to state, that one reason why Amanda’s “dramatic play area is empty most days unless someone is writing on the board” (Elaine, reflective journal, 12/9/011) was the result of not engaging the children in the process and the disconnect between children’s interest, the project topic, prior knowledge and experiences with school; it is the learning process through the co-construction of knowledge within the group through dialogue that speaks most clearly. In the words of Kami, “it was teacher directed, they’re bringing the stuff in for the kids
which might have killed the kid’s interest. Because if you just set it up, here is our school they’re going to say, “no” (participant-observation, 12/9/2011). And in a sense that is exactly what happened. The children no longer visited the dramatic play area, resulting in a decline of interest, play and frequency in the “school” topic. For Amanda this meant the children had no interest and the project was unsuccessful, rather than viewing it as “presenting mere fragments of experiences” (Vecchi, 2001, p.158) which had the potential for a long-term project.

The role of dramatic play in sustaining a project emerged in the above discussion through not only the project of Amanda, but that of Lisa’s. While Amanda sought to expand children’s knowledge of school by creating a “typical classroom”, but failed to build on the children’s prior knowledge and understandings, Lisa disregarded the connection between the topic and dramatic play within this initial project by maintaining the typical housekeeping theme. For me, significance lies in their respective responses to the discussions pertaining to this topic as well as to their implementation of this first project as a whole. For Amanda, she continued to perceive implementation of the Project Approach as either she fully implemented a project or she didn’t and failed. Similar to Amanda, Lisa also stated, “Sometimes I have trouble letting go” (participant observation, 11/11/2011 and viewed her role in facilitating this first project through a critical lens, “definitely could have, should have, I think revisited the kitchen”. Contrary to Amanda, Lisa viewed this experience as “a learning process” posing the question “what can I do next”?

Lisa’s attitude towards this first project as a learning process is visible in her documentation of the school project. When reflecting on a video she showed the group
of her gaining the children’s prior knowledge she stated her realization that the children’s experiences in the school were limited to their specific classroom. This knowledge provided the context upon which she built experiences that built on this knowledge while expanding upon their understanding of their school as well as engaging them in the process of inquiry. “They didn’t ask questions before, now they are” (participant-observation, 11/11/2001). She also learned that she “could ask more questions or guide the conversation more” as the means of supporting “a successful project [that] is student driven” (Lisa, reflective journal, 12/9/2011, artifact). Lisa understood that “the teacher is not removed from her role as an adult, but instead revised it in an attempt to become a co-creator, rather than merely a transmitter, of knowledge and culture” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.125). While Lisa opened herself and the classroom to the vulnerability of project work and the doubts and mistakes that emerge out of the process of engaging in learning, she also allowed for the “surprise and curiosity, all of which are necessary for true acts of knowledge and creation” within inquiry-based practices (Rinaldi, 2006, p.125).

**Dialogue.** The value of the reciprocal learning process and the collective nature of knowledge found within the classrooms between the teacher and children proves to be a crucial component of study groups as well. Negotiated learning, according to Forman and Fyfe (1998), is the process of making meaning through the sharing of stories, engaging in conversations, uncovering of beliefs, and analyzing current knowledge through which community of learners are formed. It is this process of communal involvement that a level of shared understanding is negotiated and a body of knowledge is developed (Forman & Fyfe, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). Knowledge, no longer static
and confined to a study of facts, takes on an organic nature, “continually in motion (Wenger et al., 2002, p.10)

I saw the collective nature of the co-construction of knowledge on various levels within each teachers’ respective classrooms which carried over into our study groups, primarily through the medium of language. The discussion documented above illustrates the possibility for dialogue in the study group and a place to encounter multiple perspectives on teaching and learning as the means of entering into the learning process and developing a collective body of knowledge (Rinaldi, 2006; Wenger et al., 2002). This dialogue, recorded early on in the year of our study, consisted primarily of teachers reflecting upon their first project experiences of this year, but built upon their past experiences and knowledge. Sharing such experiences with the group, required of all the participants to open themselves to the process of negotiating their personal knowledge with that of the groups. The group, whether Amanda liked it or not, opened her to the possibility that it was through too much teacher direction that the children lost interest and posed the question what if you “could have asked how, if we were going to make our school in here, what could we put in” (Lisa, participant-observation, 12/9/2011)? Amanda’s personal knowledge translated into her practices, had been confronted within the context of this dialogue in our study group, illustrating the potential for transformation in practices within the group (Rinaldi, 2006). It was up to Amanda to negotiate others’ understandings and ways of knowing with her own.

**Autonomy within the Study Group.** The dynamic nature of knowledge within the space of the study group did not eliminate the role of the individual in this process (Wenger et al., 2002). For the process of negotiated learning to work within the study
group, autonomy on the part of each individual was a necessary component. I knew that I couldn’t just tell Amanda to change her dramatic play area or that she had to build experiences only around the playground. But what happened is that within the space of the study group she and all of us were open to other possibilities and potentials presented to us by others upon which we could build, accepting or rejecting knowledge and meanings that didn’t match our own. Very different from traditional teacher education spaces where teachers are provided “the formula” for implementing the knowledge and content produced by someone else, the study group served as a pedagogical space upon which we developed collective knowledge, but maintained our autonomy in the personal process of deconstructing, co-constructing and re-constructing our personal knowledge and meanings. The autonomous nature of the study group encouraged dialogues, debates and controversies.

For both Kailey and Kami, the autonomy of their role within this space meant their rejection of the topic of school altogether. For Kailey, the decision to not go with the school topic was based upon observations made by the staff. Janet describes it in this way:

“The project did not go in the direction that we were directed to do. We started out trying to investigate the school but the children were interested in the leaves and trees. We spend a lot of time outdoors with our children and this is where their interest was. Children were very excited about the changing colors of the trees. Our children are not new to the building, they are there all year long so I think that was where the problem was. The children go on walks every week and love to pick up “treasures” along the way and children started bringing in leaves as they changed colors” (Janet, reflective journal, 11/11/2011, artifact).

Basing their project topic on the interest of the children, Kailey and her assistants chose to move forward with a topic that encouraged the children to build on the children’s
observed curiosity in leaves and trees, rather than pursue the school topic which “they were directed to do”.

This decision had multiple meanings for Kailey and the study group. While grounded in teachers’ own understanding of the children’s prior knowledge and past experiences with the outdoors this was a topic that they had pursued multiple years in the classroom. While the topic of school proved unsustainable given the children already knew the building, “they were there all year long” claiming that there was nothing new to learn, the topic of trees and leaves proved valuable even they “go on walks every week” (Janet, reflective journal, 11/11/2011, artifact). There was a sense of familiarity and comfort in the topic of leaves and trees that in my mind helped Kailey and Janet “ensure predefined outcomes and exclude the possibility of being surprised and unsettled” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.18).

And here is where I found myself struggling as facilitator, not because they chose not to engage in the topic of school, for me that was truly a starting point just to keep them moving forward and if they were able to initiate their own interest then all the better. But it was the feeling that Kailey always relied on topics and past experiences as a crutch, resulting in a lack of depth in the process of inquiry. Multiple means of engagement and representation of leaves and trees such as drawings, rubbings, measurement and making predictions provided the context for deeper inquiry for the children and the co-construction of new meanings. Similar to Amanda, Kailey was unable to sustain the investigations. Similar to the children “picking up new treasures on walks every week”, by our second full study group session Kailey stated they “had shifted gears and were not on leaves anymore” (participant-observation, 12/9/2011,
artifact). The sense of temporality in Kailey’s approach to teaching that lacked sustainability in project work.

Crucial to Kailey’s narrative is the autonomy provided her within the space of the study group to enter from her perspective and make the choice to return to a topic of familiarity. The question I had to ask myself is how can the space remain autonomous, but elicit the types of interactions that will support deeper inquiry and capture the fundamental principles of social constructivism (Forman & Fyfe, 1998)? What proved difficult was realizing that I had to relinquish the role of “trainer” while find the means of facilitating the study group “by assigning responsibility to the practitioners [participants] themselves to generate and share the knowledge they need…[providing] a social forum that supports the living nature of knowledge” (Wenger et al., 2002, p.12).

For me, this meant finding participants actively engaged in the study group and willing to seek opportunities to challenge, debate, disagree and question. According to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) the best community of learners encourage and welcome strong personalities. Early on I discovered the strong personality of Kami who faced conflict and controversy as part of the learning process and the means of problem solving.

I still remember Delores approaching me apprehensively in my office as we planned the November 11 meeting to give me a ‘heads up’. She said, I just wanted to let you know that Kami’s documentation will not be on the school topic, but on bodies. She went on to try and justify Kami’s choice to not engage in the school project, as if I had set rules not meant to be broken. If that had been my intent, then for Kami, it was a rule to be broken. When I revisited this first project with Kara much later she laughed while
stating, “I think it was just the fact that you told us we were all going to do a school topic that made me not want to do it” (personal conversation with Kami during member check, July 2013).

Kami chose the topic of bodies as her initial topic, a topic which she had begun to engage the children in even prior to our first study group session. I never viewed this as some form of defiance, but as her approach to teaching and learning becoming visible in her practices. For Kami, she “always believed in you have to go off the children’s interest and this [the Project Approach] is just having a better understanding of going deeper into your investigations and really focusing on the kids questions over you know (laughs) teacher directed stuff which is hard, it is hard, it’s a big shift, a big shift” (Kami interview, 4/4/2012). Building on children’s interests, Kami’s shift and subsequent practices were driven by a strong and competent image of the children and having “high expectations for her kids” (Kami interview, 4/4/2012).

For Kami “teaching is being a supportive figure in the classroom that guides and supports students’ ideas and interests” (Kami reflective journal, 10/14/2011). Driven by this image of the child, Kami faced similar struggles as Amanda, but with different outcomes. From our first session Kami mentioned her barrier as being able to maintain a focus given the “preschool mind, once one project is started their interest jumps/changes” (Kami reflective journal, 10/14/2011). Later during her interview when talking about this same issue she puts it back more on herself stating “my mind can bounce left and right, all over the place” (Kami, interview transcript, 4/13/2012) reflective of Amanda’s reflection that she is “too wishy-washy in my head to not to have a plan…I am like all over the place” (Amanda, interview transcript, 4/13/2012). While
this led Amanda to be more directive in her project, for Kami it meant trying to pursue all of the interests of the children in connection to her project on bodies and led to experiences ranging from the brain and heart to Humpty Dumpty, protecting the body and healthy eating and restaurants). While children gained knowledge and had experiences that built upon their interests, the project pursued so many different directions Kami struggled to keep “it sustained” (participant observations, 11/11/2011 & 12/9/2011). The end result of Kami’s initial topic on the body turned into a number of short stories rather than one good story, resulting in Kami struggling to know when to end the project and posing the question of “how to end a project” (Kami, reflective journal, 12/9/2011, artifact).

**Phase One Summary**

“One of the primary tasks of a community of practice is to establish [a] common baseline and standardize what is well understood so that people can focus their creative energies on the more advanced issues” (Wenger et al, 2002, p.11). While I could continue to question and get stuck on the consequences of introducing a pre-selected topic for the group to begin our study, the relevance lies in the emergence of threads upon which I and the participants could build upon as we deepened our inquiry into teaching and learning through the Project Approach. Through this initial project investigation common threads emerged out of the narratives of the teachers and their respective classrooms pertaining to definitions of learning; views of curriculum as teacher directed or child initiated; sustaining inquiry; and autonomy all of which weave in and out of each, creating their own patterns within the individual narratives of the teachers. These unique patterns of each teacher frame their personal knowledge and the role their
epistemological beliefs begin to play in their implementation of the Project Approach in their classrooms. It is upon these patterns that I sought to focus my energies on as we advanced into our next projects and our deeper inquiry of Phase 2.

It was within the space of the study group and the possibilities such a community provided that allowed such threads and unique patterns to emerge. The study group became a place for all of us to encounter individual narratives and to engage in dialogue, enabling us to be active participants in the learning process and co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of “skills or techniques” for implementing the Project Approach. While collaborative in nature, the study group did not negate the individual, but began to open us to the potential of a pedagogical environment open to the debates, discussions and constructive criticism that naturally occur when autonomous individuals come together and form a collaborative network. A network open to the possibility of exploring new modes of thinking and approach teaching and learning (Rinaldi, 2006).

We entered into Phase 2 with questions generated within this initial phase ranging from Amanda still pursuing the problem of the Project Approach not matching her perception of teaching and Kami’s question of finding closure in projects through more focused inquiry to Lisa’s question, what can I do next time to further the children’s experiences? These questions provided the context for our further inquiry into the Project Approach in our study group and served as a framework within which I began to look beyond the conception of practical knowledge as “strictly knowledge of how to do things” in order to complete a project to deepening my understanding by showing “what
they do with this knowledge [and] the unique ways in which they hold and use it” (Elbaz, 1983, p.14).
Chapter Five

Phase Two: Collaborating to Learn

“There can be spaces of excellence where diverse persons are moved to reach toward the possible. Through the exercise of imagination, individuals can gain that sense of significance that enables them to realize that “there is always more to experience, and more in what we experience than we can predict” (Greene, 1995, p.184)

The previous chapter introduced our yearlong study of the Project Approach and served as the means of establishing the prior knowledge, experiences, understandings and knowledge we were bringing into the space of the study group and to our inquiry and investigation into the Project Approach. Through reflective practices, documentation of classroom experiences, dialogue and the generation of questions we built the foundation for the next phase of our inquiry as the means of sustaining the process of negotiated learning. This second phase of our inquiry searched for answers to the questions we had already begun to pose, resulting in the raising of new questions as we individually and collectively negotiated new meanings, understanding and knowledge of teaching, learning and the Project Approach (Katz and Chard, 2000).

The tension between the theory of teaching and learning and the lived experiences of early childhood educators became more prevalent during this phase of our inquiry. Building on prior experience, understandings and an established common ground, new denominators came to play a very pertinent role as we furthered our study of the Project Approach that affected us individually and collectively. The following chapter is my personal recollection, documentation, response and interpretation of what occurred within our study group as all of us sought answers to our individually posed questions and
responded to the collective knowledge being co-constructed and constantly re-constructed within the pedagogical space of our study group.

It is within this second phase that I was able to construct new knowledge, meanings and understandings of personal knowledge and how teachers hold and use it through deeper reflection and analysis of the differences relevant to the specific participants in the study group (Elbaz, 1983). While emergent in nature during the initial project investigation, it is within this phase that I discovered and subsequently analyzed the orientations of Amanda’s, Lisa’s, Kailey’s and Kami’s personal knowledge. This analysis was grounded in Elbaz’s (1993) identified five orientations: orientation to situations; personal orientation; social orientation; experiential orientation; and theoretical orientation. These will be clarified and defined throughout this chapter and further contextualized through the emerging narratives of our study group.

**Debriefing and Posing Questions**

Moving forward often means revisiting that which came before in order to debrief the past, understand the present and inform the future (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Prior to our meeting on January 13, 2012 I found myself posing the questions: where are we now; what do I want this group to understand and know by the end of the year; and what are the questions and issues of the group that can move us forward or prevent us from moving forward? In my personal reflection I kept coming back to Amanda’s question, “is this approach right for me” (Amanda, reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact)? My return to this statement became a starting point for our ongoing study. While specific to Amanda’s narrative, there was this sense of disequilibrium in all of us to some extent upon the completion of the initial project. By this point it was quite
apparent that contrary from the typical teacher professional development with delineated and structured content, skills and knowledge, we were engaged in a study where we were all required to navigate our own path and ways of knowing that resulted in doubts, uncertainty and questions. Contrary to traditional thinking of teaching and learning as linear, our specific inquiry at this point was “constructed through contemporaneous advances, standstills and ‘retreats’ that [took] many directions” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.132). I found myself asking questions quite similar to that of Fiona’s at the closure of their school project in Lisa’s room, “why didn’t it go farther?”, but was forced to return to Lisa’s response, “it’s a learning process, what can I do next” (participant-observation, 12/9/2011, artifact)?

The dynamic process involved in the advances, standstills and retreats within our group proved difficult to navigate and were contrary to my original theory of study groups as providing the pedagogical context for always advancing. There were many times I felt myself aware of the fact that if I could have transmitted the necessary skills, strategies and knowledge that would have led to each teacher fully implementing and sustaining project-based approaches in their classrooms, I would have. In a sense I tested this by pre-selecting the first project topic as the means of quickly getting the teachers started, have them learn the three phase structure and have each of them complete a project within a particular frame of time. It was through my own failure to standardize and direct the work of the group that I came to realize there was so much more to the experiences of these teachers engaged in the study and implementation of the Project Approach into their classrooms than I could have ever predicted (Greene, 1996). By acknowledging the differences and tensions within all of us I worked towards a
narrative understanding of “who we are and what we know” (p.26) and how the individual situations of the participants during this data collection period as well as the collective situation of the study group pulled out the personal practical knowledge in each of us (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

It was just these tensions between theory and practice, expectations and reality and the non-linear path of our inquiry that drew me back to the question posed by Amanda of whether the Project Approach was right for her or not. Knowing Amanda for a number of years and her ability to implement project-based practices in her classroom I began to wonder about what situations affected her personal knowledge and prevented her at this point from embracing such an approach and seeing the value of the experiences provided the children through projects? I became drawn by the question of the temporality of the space of this particular study group and the specific situations of each participant during this particular time frame that either moved them towards project-based practices or to shift in the direction of more traditional teacher-directed, passive learner practices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). I began to formulate my own questions such as: what is at the core of each teachers’ practices that moves them towards more inquiry-based approaches or more teacher directed practices; how do the daily experiences and individual situations of teachers affect the participants core beliefs in teaching; and how can the study group provide the space for teachers to negotiate their personal understandings and knowledge of teaching and learning? Resisting my own temptations to merely transmit script and procedural knowledge of the Project Approach, such questions opened a new space for me to further explore the complexity of the advances, standstills and retreats as the content of practical knowledge.
Five Orientations of Practical Knowledge

Elbaz (1983) defined the content of teachers’ practical knowledge using five orientations to indicate “the way practical knowledge is held in active relation to the world of practice” (p.101). The five are: orientation to situations, personal orientation, social orientation, experiential orientation and theoretical orientation. Situational orientation is constructed in response to particular situations; personal orientation refers to the role of personal meaning and character on personal knowledge; social orientation structures the social reality of knowledge; experiential orientation recognizes the role of experience in how knowledge is acquired; and theoretical orientation is the way theory drives all of the practices of teachers. These five orientations frame phase 2 of my analysis and inquiry into how teachers’ personal knowledge impacts and is impacted by their participation in a study group focused on the Project Approach.

Theoretical orientation. The topic of theoretical orientation was not explicitly addressed with participants in the study group or in other data collection such as interviews, but in each narrative was something that could be inferred within the participant’s practices, documentation reflections and interviews. Theory, viewed as something broad in nature is something that directs and guides individual practices on a daily practice and thus proved pertinent to this study (Elbaz,1998). Theoretical orientation is that component of personal knowledge that touches upon and affects all other orientations, “determining the contours of practical knowledge” (Elbaz, 1983, p.102). Building off of Elbaz’s construction of personal knowledge (1983), I was able to view theoretical orientation as the driving force behind teachers’ actions.
If You Could Teach Any Way You Want, How Would You Teach?

Narrative analysis of the data from our inquiry further substantiated Elbaz’s claim (1983) that theoretical orientation was the aspect of personal and practical knowledge that framed all other orientations and informed teaching practices in response to the Project Approach. Asking myself the question of what is the core, what drives teachers’ daily practices, I was drawn by the data that substantiated response to the question, data that revealed the role of teachers’ theory as substantive. From this I was able to further code two main threads: perceptions of teaching and teachers’ image of the child as key components of teachers’ theoretical orientation that impacted teaching practices.
Perceptions of Teaching, Image of the Child and Teacher Practices. As we moved from our initial project inquiry into the next phase, I reflected back on my decision to pre-select the first topic for the teachers, justifying this very teacher-directed approach right from the beginning as helping the teachers move forward. In my reflections I wrote: “I can’t believe how easily I was able to become more teacher directed to reach my own aims of ‘moving us forward’. Is this not exactly what I claim to oppose in my work and yet I model right away for the participants practices of what not to do. Why was it so easy for me to go against my own theories?” (personal reflection, 1/10/2012). I articulated this further in my interview with Lisa where I discuss the selection of the topic on schools stating:

“we thought it was a good idea just because it would help, it would give a common thing to share and it was supposed to be a mini one so that you would just go through step, phase 1, phase 2, phase 3 and then move on to your own, but it really didn’t work out that (Lisa: yeah, yeah) I mean, you got a project out of it, but it’s that, too teacher-directed (Lisa: yes)

(Interview transcript, Lisa 4/27/2012).

The realization being that if I acted contrary to my personal theories, beliefs and understandings am I merely making assumptions about teachers’ epistemological beliefs, do they also act contrary to their personal theories and beliefs” (personal reflection, 1/10/2012)?

My own questions led to my posing reflection prompts to participants focused on: if you could teach any way you want how would you teach; does the Project Approach match this; if you were asked before you went into teaching what you thought it meant to
be a teacher, what would you have said (Reflective prompts, January and February agendas)? Participant responses opened up a dialogue through which I could view the relationship and tensions between participants’ theory of teaching, their implementation of the Project Approach, and an emerging thread in relation to teachers’ response to the daily reality of the classroom. Analysis of these tensions showed predictable patterns where for some participants’ practice mirrored their individual theory and personal knowledge, but in others, disconnect between theory and practice emerged. It was within the narratives focused on theoretical orientation that I was able to see the connections and interplay between theoretical orientation and orientation to situation; experiential orientation; social orientation and personal orientation (Elbaz, 1983).

**Living in the Tension: Theory to Practice**

**Amanda.** In response to the prompt pertaining to how Amanda thought about teaching prior to going into teaching she stated:

*Teaching was sitting at a desk doing work with the teacher directing the classroom.*

*Teaching preschool is playing and teaching them without them realizing they are learning* (Amanda, reflective journal, 2/10/2012).

These two sentences written in her journal illustrated a dichotomous thinking about teaching and learning which became visible in her practice. Amanda’s conception of teaching, informed by her prior experiences teaching elementary school, as being the manager of children’s learning reflect approaches to teaching as a transmission model of instruction where the skills, knowledge and facts are taught through direct instruction. This prior theoretical orientation seems in direct opposition to her understanding of her own present role in teaching preschool and her current ideas and beliefs of teaching and
learning in connection to the Project Approach. On two separate occasions in response to the questions pertaining to how the Project Approach supports her beliefs and theories of teaching and learning she referred to the investigative nature and hands-on learning that occurred through project work (Amanda, reflective journal, 1/13/2013; Amanda, written response to interview questions, 5/2013). “I like the idea of researching and questioning the children, letting the children choose the topic” (Amanda, written response to interview questions, 5/2013). The tension between these two opposing views on teaching and learning manifested themselves within the practices of Amanda during this year.

During the year of our study group, Amanda struggled to practice within this tension, continuously shifting between projects and teachers’ past approaches to teaching. We saw this within our initial project where she observed, documented and built upon the children’s interest in playgrounds while simultaneously resorting to more comfortable, teacher directed practices through the design of the dramatic play area and other experiences connected to the school topic. Contrary to the understanding of teachers as moving forward along a continuum, Amanda moved back and forth between tradition and innovation. Fullan (1982) describes this as a hybrid form of innovative practices where teachers embrace and implement elements of inquiry based, but only those that already fit into one’s past and present understanding of teaching and learning. While Amanda engaged in projects, elements of her implementation continued to be based upon her pre-existing personal knowledge of teaching, resulting in pendulum swings back and forth between, teacher direction and inquiry.

While evident in our initial inquiry, these tensions became more apparent and visible in her second project. Amanda sought to “give a sense of belonging and being
safe. To help children learn and succeed at their own pace” (Amanda, reflective journal, 2/10/2012). Amanda’s second project reflected just this as her topic emerged out of the children’s questions pertaining to Howard (pseudonym) a new student in the classroom with severe cerebral palsy.

“As part of our project, the morning class wanted to know about a child in the afternoon class with disabilities. They had seen his walker, special chair, toys and tools. They had many questions about Harvey and wanted to know how and why he was different from the rest of us. Howard’s mom, Holly, came in to the morning class to answer the questions and stayed for the afternoon class to read Howard’s story and answer questions” (Amanda, documentation of second project). Building a project off of the inclusion of Howard with a topic of “me”, Amanda not only built off of the interest and questions of children, but wanted Howard to feel a sense of belonging in the class, supporting the theories and practices of the Project Approach. But at the same time, she reverted to more teacher-directed, explicit experiences such as person of the day where “each child was chosen to be the person of the day. That child got to sit in a special chair, read their “homework” to the rest of the class and had special privileges for the day. The other children respected that child while they learned about them. Each child really enjoyed being the person of the day, and those other children learned so much about their friends” (Amanda, documentation of second project).

For Amanda, she had changed the content of her curriculum through her focus on student generated topics of interest, but was unable to adopt the processes of project based teaching, resulting in the project going in numerous directions that were teacher directed and outside of the realm of children’s prior experiences and ultimately led to a
lack of continuity of experiences within the project (Clark, 2006; Dewey, 1938). Her classroom environment further reflected the fragmentation of experiences in the classroom. While there was some evidence of the topic on “me” visible in the presence of ‘person of the day’ board and drawings of families, the environment with a teepee in the dramatic play area and other disconnected materials did little to sustain students’ engagement in the topic. Aside from teacher-directed instruction during circle time focused on the person of the day, there was little evidence of the project within the daily practices and experiences of the classroom (classroom observations, 2/2012).

Project work requires what Dewey (1938) defined as continuity of experience. “The principle of continuity means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality” (Dewey, 1938, p.35). While Amanda was able to facilitate investigations that emerged out of the children’s thinking and ideas, showing a more developed understanding of project base work, her prior experiences also led her to continue to rely on practices such as “person of the day” and return to habits of what she knew worked for her previously, leading to disconnected experiences (Dewey, 1938).

In order to move forward in project based work, connectedness proves essential (Dewey, 1938). Amanda’s separated practices led to the compartmentalization and categorization of knowledge, skills and experiences within her “me” topic rather than integrated experiences that built upon past knowledge and understandings of the children and their present questions. The conflict between Amanda’s prior and existing personal knowledge and beliefs on teaching and the change required of her within project-based work made it difficult for Amanda to build upon the children’s existing knowledge and
questions that would further expand their understandings and open new fields of inquiry and knowledge (Dewey, 1938). Such discontinuity of experiences affected Amanda’s ability to substantiate the quality of experiences for children (Clark, 2006; Dewey 1938), as well as her own sense of efficacy in implementing project-based approaches in her classroom. The shift from her pre-existing theoretical orientation impacted her shift towards a more child-centered, project based theoretical orientation, creating tensions and a sense of inadequacy in her ability to implement projects. “The ‘concept’ of project work is awesome” only if “you are confident in our ability to lead it” (Amanda, written response to interview questions, 5/2013).

The question which I had to ask myself in response to Amanda’s narrative to this point was, does she want to implement the Project Approach in her classroom. While she stated her lack of confidence in implementing projects, I was drawn by her statement “if no one was telling me how to teach I would teach very similar to how I teach now” (Amanda, reflective journal 1/13/2012). Was the theoretical shift towards inquiry and research with the children externally imposed, would Amanda even be engaging in project-based practices if she didn’t feel this was the way her agency was moving and telling her she needed to implement into her classroom practices?

Kami. Kami mirrored Amanda in her response, “If I could teach any way I wanted to I [would] continue with what I’m doing. I love the Project Approach and see great value in it. I just would like to be more proficient in this approach to get the most out of it within my classroom” (Kami, reflective journal, 1/13/2012). While Amanda’s and Kami’s narratives intersect in their statements pertaining to maintaining their current teaching practices if allowed to teach anyway they wanted, the commonalities ended here
as they had very different perspectives on teaching and took very different paths in their implementation of the Project Approach. While Amanda pulled out only the research and questioning as components of the Project Approach that matched her epistemological beliefs on teaching and learning, separating inquiry from her other teaching practices and merely adding the Project Approach as part of her to do list, Kami saw these same elements as the “main focus for how you set up your classroom and basically teach”. For Kami, the Project Approach helped her have “a better understanding of going deeper into your investigations and really focusing on the kids questions” (Kami interview transcript, 4/13/2012) resulting in her own desire to “be more proficient” as the means of having her classroom benefit from the complete value of project-based practices in her classrooms and “getting the most out of it” Kami, reflective journal, 1/13/2013). At the same time she acknowledged the difficulty in making the shift away from teacher directed “stuff, which is hard, it’s a big shift, a big shift” (Kara interview transcript, 4/13/2012).

For Kami the Project Approach “fits perfectly” with her personal knowledge of teaching and learning. Kami viewed learning as “forever and ongoing, it’s exploring, it’s creating, it’s trial and error” and the teacher as “being a supportive figure in the classroom that guide and support students ideas and interest” (Kara, reflective journals, 1/13/2012 & 2/10/2012). Kami’s theoretical orientation on teaching and learning, like Amanda’s, was impacted by past experiences (experiential orientation) and the personal meaning she had placed on the Project Approach (personal orientation). While Amanda referred back to her work as an elementary teacher as shaping her perceptions of teaching, Kara discussed her experiences in her teacher education program and how they supported her understanding of the Project Approach.
“They didn’t talk about the Project Approach at all” but they really focused “on the kids’ interest and how you can build off that...they were basically saying, really find the kids’ interest and build off of that and we had a to make activities to meet their interests and then we had to align them [to the standards]” (Kami interview transcript, 4/13/2012). Whereas Amanda’s past experiences proved in contradiction to her current practices, there is a correlation between Kami’s theoretical and experiential orientation that provides the context for the principle of continuity of experience as Kami is able to take her experiences in her own teacher education and begin to apply and modify them in her own practices and implementation of the Project Approach (Dewey, 1938). The question remained how Kami’s theoretical orientations and continuity of experiences affected her present experiences in the classroom, how they promoted or retarded her growth in project-based practices and could she in turn provide a continuity of experiences for the children in her classroom to promote growth (Dewey, 1938).

Kami’s second project on cars, a topic based on observations of children’s interests, began with the generation of questions upon which Kami built upon and provided experiences leading to new knowledge. I began to see the shift from merely selecting a child initiated topic grounded in children’s interest to sustaining topics and the acquisition of new skills and knowledge in classroom observations of Kami and her classroom.

“You guys from looking at those pictures [photos taken of different gauges and the parts of the inside of the car] generated, which means made a whole lot of questions and I wrote them on this board, remember? Well I erased them and I move them over here to our list and what it says is, questions. See that question mark? Those are our questions Marinna (pseudonym for student), and it says, your first one was what would happened if you didn’t have windows, lights, doors, seatbelts, and horns? Those were some of the questions. Now, we’re going to pass out these pictures again and see if you have any
It is here where I saw Kami not only establish Phase 1 through topic selection and the documentation of their prior knowledge, but sustain the children’s interest by sparking their curiosity and developing positive dispositions such as initiative towards learning (Dewey, 1938; Katz & Chard, 2000). Such practices provided the context where “every experience is a moving force” (Dewey, 1938, p.38) towards the seeking of answers to the questions generated in phase 1, generating new questions and gaining new information, knowledge and skills for the children (Katz & Chard, 2000).

Contrary to Amanda’s disconnected experiences and lack of sustainability of projects, Kami established a continuity of experiences by not merely generating questions on the project topic, but by actively engaging in inquiry-based practices as the means of seeking the answers. Evidence of this could be found within Kami’s documentation of experiences including photos, transcriptions, videos, discussion time and dramatic play. For me this was most visible in the dramatic play of children and small group investigations in Kami’s classroom where the children gained knowledge and skills while also independently engaged with the materials and concepts provided to support their topic investigation, demonstrating their capabilities and socially constructing new meanings, knowledge, and skills. The following two participant observations provided a mere snapshot of children’s engagement in the car topic through their play and small group investigation (See Figure 3).
Harry: well, I have to change the tire now
Kami: why did you have to change the tire?
Harry: because I have an extra tire.
Kami: what happened, what happened to the tire that made you want to change it?
Harry: it popped.
Kami: It popped? And why do you, what’s that for hunter (pointing to a paper towel roll he’s using symbolically to change the tire, a larger cardboard cylinder)
Harry: well, it’s my screwdriver so I can do it
Kami: oh, you’re right, I wonder if it ran over a screw, if that’s why it popped?
Sometimes that’s how Ms. Kami gets flat tires.
Harry: I forgot to screw it. I forgot to put the screws in.
Kami: you forgot to do what?
Harry: I forgot to put the screw in the back.
Kami: oh, you forgot to put the screw in the back? I hope you do, because we don’t want that tire to fall off
(Kami classroom observation, 3/15/2012)
Kami: Now Mary and Rose (pseudonyms) when you guys investigated how many nuts a tire had what did you guys find?
Mary (see Figure 4): we found with the nuts, I draw in, and a four.
Kami: well, what was the five for?
Mary: the 5 was Ms. A’s nuts (teacher assistant) and the four was your nuts.
Kami: your right, and what did you find Rose?
Rose: I found that nuts were supposed to go in tires (see Figure 5)
Kami: it goes inside the tires, you’re right, you drew a circle and then you drew the design of them.
(Kami, classroom observation, 4/12/2012)

As mentioned above this is merely a snapshot of what occurred within the classroom during Kami’s implementation of her second project, providing an alternative narrative to Amanda’s and further inquiry. Whereas both Amanda’s and Kami’s project emerged out of student generated topics and questions, there is a clear delineation between the experiences of the children in their respective classrooms. For Amanda, there continued to be a greater tension between competing teaching approaches and methods evident in her own teaching practices that sought to move towards inquiry based learning, but continued to rely on more conventional, mainstream approaches and resulting in a discontinuity of experiences. Kami began to make connections between her past and present theory and practices, creating a shift towards project-based practices and supporting Dewey’s (1938) conception of continuity of experiences, leading to positive growth, attitudes and habits in Kami as well as the children. It’s within these shifting and evolving epistemological beliefs on teaching articulated and made visible within their reflections, classroom practices and implementation of their second projects that another
essential element of Amanda’s and Kami’s theoretical orientation emerged, the image of
the child.

**Image of the child**

*There are hundreds of different images of the child. Each one of you has inside of yourself and image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to the child. This theory within you pushes you to behave in certain ways; it orients you as you talk to the child; listen to the child; observe the child. It is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image*” (Malaguzzi, 1994, p.3).

Evidence of the impact of teachers’ image of the child on teachers’ approach to implementing projects began to surface within our initial phase, reflective in statements such as Fiona’s, “*the project as a whole I thought was a little difficult for the children to comprehend*” (Fiona, reflective journal, 12/9/2012), supporting her feeling that the first project failed and didn’t go far enough (participant observation, 12/9/2012). This became increasingly evident as all teachers began their second projects and further inquiry into the Project Approach. This proved to be a common thread that ran through each narrative, surfacing within reflective journals, discussions and interviews.

Further reflection led me not only to how the image of the child was central to teachers’ theoretical orientation, but more specifically, it was their image of preschool children, ages three to five. When asked to visually and descriptively represent the child, participants used words such as self-confident, explorer, communicator, empathy, independent thinker, and problem solver, portraying a competent and capable image of the child. It was within their classroom practices that their theoretical image of the child began to shift based upon their personal, experiential, and situational orientations.
Kami noted a barrier within this second phase of inquiry as “a preschoolers’ mind. Once one project is started they’re interest jumps and changes” (Reflective journal 2/10/2012). The difficulty in focusing in on one topic in an effective way that would result in deeper inquiry and knowledge with the children was a thread that emerged repetitively and throughout the year. Similarly, the inability of the children to focus their interests was mirrored in Kami’s own practice, “my mind can bounce left and right, all over the place” (Kami interview transcript, 4/13/2012). It was through the phases of the project and generating questions that began to focus her practices and the experiences of the children.

In response to a question pertaining to understanding the three phase structure of the Project Approach Kami responded:

I think it helps because I think before we were doing projects we were kind of jumping from phase to phase and never really focusing on okay, what do the kids know, what do they want to know, and then going into research......we have new things going on all the time, but it’s, it helps to focus, and the questioning I think right now helps us to focus as to what the kids need to know…I’ve been very much a, whatever the kids interests are in what we kind of build on, but it’s changed because now it’s the, I guess the deeper investigation, understanding and more, it was a lot of the kids things and the kids would have to create the stuff, but now it’s kind of understanding that the kids still have to lead it more instead of posing the question”. (Kami interview transcript, 4/13/2012).

This was a significant shift in Kami’s theoretical orientation and personal knowledge. The shift from following every interest in young children to more focused, deeper investigations impacted her implementation of the Project Approach.

It is when the children’s questions became the driving force of the project that Kami portrayed a very different image of the preschool child from her initial, illustrated in the following classroom observation:
Now yesterday we looked at all sorts of pictures, who remembers what kinds of pictures we were looking at?

Children: Ms. Kara's car

Kami: the pictures of my car, all the different parts of the car that you guys observed and every, what part is this (shows photo)?

Children: the steering wheel

Kami: the steering wheel, what part was this (shows photo)?

Children: the engine or the motor

Kami: what part was this (shows another photo)?

Children: the gas, the gas tank

.....

Kami: now, you guys, from looking at those pictures, generated, which means made a whole lot of questions.....I made a list, and what it says is questions, see that question mark? Those are our questions and it says, the first one is what would happen if you didn’t have windows, lights, doors, seatbelts and horns? Those were some of the questions. Now we’re going to pass these pictures out again, and talk about it and see if you have any new questions you want to add.

.....(children look at the pictures and discuss)...

Kami: do you see anything in that picture? What do you notice in that picture? What do you think that is?

(as the children look at the pictures, one child poses the question)

Child 1: what if you don’t have these?

Kami: oh, do you know what we would call those? What do you think we should call them?

Child 2: it tells you how much gas you got.

Here Kami models a question

Kami: what would happen if you didn’t have gauges?

Child 3: no, it tell you how fast you go

Kami: oh, how we have a couple of ideas. One said it tells you have much gas it has, someone else says it tells you how fast you go.

.....Kami has them revisit the photos...

Child 4: this little one tells you how fast you go.

Kami: you think the little one tells you how fast you go. What about the big ones?

... Children talk, looking at pictures, sparking discussions (see Figure 6)
Child 5: This one, how much the motor spins (pointing to a gauge in the picture)
Kami: that is interesting. Did you hear Lauren (pseudonym)? Let’s listen to Lauren because he had some interesting facts about this picture...do you want to stand up and share it with our friends? He is our expert in this picture. Lauren, will you tell what this part was?
Lauren: how fast you go.
Kami: how do you know that this is for how fast you go?
Lauren: Because I have one of them ones in my truck and this moves and my dad tell me it says, this one moves, this one how fast you go.
Kami: interesting, Lauren knows a lot about cars. Now Lauren was also talking about this circle one. And he’s an expert on this gauge, tell us what this means. What’s that little small circle for?
Lauren: that’s for the gas.
Kami: now how did you know that’s for the gas?
Lauren: because there’s a gas right there.
Kami: he noticed that there’s a little gas right there. Now, what would be the dark circle?
Lauren: the gas is almost out?
Kami: that’s for when the gas is almost out? What about this circle here that’s hollow?
Lauren: that means it has a lot.
Kami: that means it has a lot? And Lauren also knew what this other circle was for?
Lauren, will explain that to our friends.
Lauren: that one tells us how fast the motor spins. And if it goes to zero it’s not moving and if it goes to 1 it’s moving, if it goes to 2 it’s moving slow, if it goes to eight it’s moving fast.
(participant-observation of Kami, March 2012)

This particular event and the knowledge she gained of her children was so important for Kami it resurfaced during her interview. “Kids were asking about the circles on the car for the gauges and a little boy went through a complete description as to each one and the other one I’m like, really, that’s what it’s for, it’s for the motor, he’s like telling you how fast your motor’s spinning so when you go faster your motor spins faster and it goes up higher” (Kami interview transcript, 4/13/2012).

The image of the child presented above and throughout Kami’s second project was far removed from the “preschooler mind” where interests merely jump around with no focus. Through her second project and a deeper understanding of the phases and guiding
teaching practices on students question, Kami was able to make connections between her theory and practice resulting in Kami setting “high expectations for my kids so, sometimes with my assistants they’ll tell me, oh, they just did this and I’m like, yeah, but I know they can do more” (Kami interview transcript, 4/13/2012).

Amanda also had the children pose questions related to the topic of me, questions such as “why do some people wear glasses?”, “Does everyone have pets?”, “why do people have wheelchairs?” and “what does everyone do when they are home” (Amanda project documentation, 5/2012)? Rather than allowing the children and their questions to guide her practices and build knowledge, she instilled the person of the day, her response to building respect in her classrooms. Contrary to Kami’s high expectations for the children, Amanda’s was an image lacking in maturity and competency.

“We have a kid that has pretty severe ADHD, and then we have a [child] that has um, physical behavior problems. You know he’s like stabbing people and, yeah he took an entire wad of pencils and stabbed two kids in the back with them. You know, so he’s challenging and then you have Howard who is severely handicapped, it’s just, we’re just lucky to get through the afternoon, you know, you know and keeping them contained in the classroom” Amanda’s deficit model led to more teacher directed, disconnected learning experiences. This was furthered by her perceptions of preschool children. “I think that if I was an elementary school teacher maybe this would work better. Because sometimes three year olds just, they don’t just spit out cosmic wonderful things...I mean, I just think that, you know, a higher functioning thinker would do better with this kind of work” (Amanda interview transcript, 4/13/2012). This deficit image of the preschool child deterred Amanda from fully implementing the Project Approach.
Lisa. While recognizing the challenges of teaching preschool, Lisa opposed a deficit image of the child through the process of furthering her understanding her role and the children’s role in her continued implementation of the Project Approach. “The young three year olds, that was a little bit challenging at first but then when I read in one of my Project Approach books, um, that’s by Sylvia that you could word it a different way like instead of tell me something you know about you know, animals, just giving a question here, um, you just say, they just have you word it a different way and once I did that (hits table) they were able to answer and then I gave a suggestion and they were like, “YEAH” (Lisa interview transcript, 4/27/2012). Lisa’s navigation of her own role as the teacher in posing questions and the importance of shared ownership in planning project experiences with the children is significant to her personal narrative as well as her implementation of the Project Approach.

When I went into teaching “I would have said that teaching was helping children learn about letters, numbers, etc.” (Lisa reflective journal, 2/10/2012). Lisa’s original perception of the teacher reflects a traditional image of the teacher with a focus on academic skills and explicit instruction of particular knowledge and skills. Within the context of our study group and the implementation of her second project she found herself confronting these same conceptions in others understanding of teaching as she found herself in positions where she was required to defend her current project-based practices. While there was a significant shift in Lisa’s personal knowledge of teaching and learning, she found herself needing to validate the powerful image of the child and the potential of young children to many individuals, including her husband. When discussing her second project with her husband he stated, “why would you do this with
young children, shouldn’t you teach them the ABC’s and 1, 2, 3’s” (participant observation, 1/13/2012)?

Lisa “wanted EVERY child to have a place where they feel accepted, appreciated, heard and loved” (Lisa reflective journal, 2/10/2012) by setting up an environment that provides “opportunities and engages children’s minds to learn” (Lisa survey, 5/2012), leading her to the Project Approach which “does fit inside my ways of teaching” (Lisa reflective journal, 1/13/2012). The significant shift from learning the basic academic skills to providing significant experiences where “children use their imaginations, thinking and problem solving skills” (Lisa reflective journal, 1/13/2012) resulted in the children being more motivated and engaged, increasing the participation of both Lisa and the children in their second project. It was within Lisa’s second project that I saw her ability to really engage the children in webbing, to identify and focus the interests of the children, to ask more open-ended questions and to increase the children’s capacity to ask questions (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2011). Children’s active participation “in the planning, development and assessment of their own work” (Katz & Chard, 2000, pp.3-4) is emphasized in the Project Approach and led to Lisa’s ability to extend and sustain a project.

Lisa’s shifting view of her role as the teacher in project work articulates her ability to navigate her present theoretical orientation and the progressive, theoretical perspective of the Project Approach into her classroom practices. “Now I have to say that teaching is about guiding, you take the back seat most of the time unless you’re giving more direction. I would describe it as sitting behind someone as they drive and occasionally taking the wheel, hand over hand but still allowing them to drive. It’s about
Lisa’s ability to both allow for child-initiated experiences while recognizing her role in scaffolding and taking a lead role in directing the course of their project led to learning experiences worthy of the children’s time (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2011; Katz & Chard, 2000).

Lisa’s perception of her role as moving between explicit and implicit teaching and learning experiences was made evident in her second project. Given the autonomy to self-select her second topic, Lisa and her children began to engage in a project on tools. Lisa’s initial web illustrated limited, prior knowledge of tools in the children’s experiences. Such awareness led her to the conclusion that “the children’s current knowledge of tools was that they are used for building” (Lisa project documentation submitted 5/2012). Lisa built upon the children’s prior knowledge of tools by centering her initial discussions surrounding the types of tools there are and how they are used (observations of Lisa, 2/10/2012; Lisa’s project documentation submitted 5/2012). This led Lisa to invite a number of “experts” to tell the children about their tools and how they use them. Beginning with their knowledge of carpentry tools, Lisa then extended upon their knowledge of tools to gain new knowledge, skills and understandings inviting a nurse and vet practitioner to share the “tools” they use in their work with the children.

It was at this point that Lisa observed “the children’s knowledge was broadening. The evidence of learning exhibited was through their play, conversations, and drawings. The interest in tools began to take over our entire classroom” (Lisa documentation, 5/2012). Lisa had found the means of building sustained engagement in a topic through the implementation and use of features of the Project Approach such as the three phase structure, webbing, the inviting of experts, and the generation of questions. Sustained
experiences and thinking are the result of the teacher and children being invested in the
project and the outcome of content leading to learning (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004).

It was within the context of Lisa’s tool project that she increased her understanding of the
Project Approach and expanded upon the opportunities for herself and the children to
plan and discuss the progress of the project, reflect on the learning occurring and building
the capacity of sustained experiences.

*We revisited the web to see if our questions had been answered. Most of their questions
had been addressed in some way. The children were using their new knowledge gained from resources.*

*So where do we go from here?*

*We had come to our first barrier. Our topic was too broad. It was evident in the
children’s play that their interest remained high with building and construction tools.
Therefore, we presented the questions. If we know that tools are used for building, could we actually build something? If so, How?*

(Lisa documentation, May 2012)

By removing herself from the traditional role of teacher as expert, Lisa engaged the
children in a deeper understanding of tools through the application of their knowledge
and skills to a new situations. Guided by the children’s questions, Lisa facilitated the
following teacher guided inquiry.

*The children decided they would construct a house for our classroom pet Teddy.*

*We began by researching the steps to building. We found out that architects draw blueprints before beginning to build.*
The children drew individual blueprints of their idea of an ideal house for Teddy. We discussed his needs (food, water) and his interests (chewing, exercising).

(Lisa documentation, May 2012)

Guided by the question of how to build a home that will work for Teddy, the children engaged in numerous experiences and test homes, building the capacity in the children to plan, build, reflect and revisit resulting in the design of a home for Teddy (see Figure 7).

Lisa: tell us about Teddy’s house

Child 1: Um, Teddy’s house is pretty good and it’s pretty fun.

Lisa: it’s pretty fun, what does he have to do in his house.

Child 1: Um, he has, he has to do, he has to do, right there he, he, there’s his porch, right there’s his porch, and, and that’s his back porch and he has to crawl out at night and sneak in his house and, and the front part.

Lisa: Oh, okay he, because we know he comes out at night (Child 1: yeah) he’s nocturnal.

Child 1: yeah

(Observation, 4/2012)
Lisa’s tool project supported her theoretical orientation focused on a strong image of the child and epistemological beliefs mirroring those of the Project Approach. Similar to Kami, the phases and features of the Project Approach kept her from jumping from phase to phase, increasing the children’s and Lisa’s capacity for sustained shared thinking (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2011). No longer an either/or situation, either she takes control of the classroom or lets the children direct the curriculum, Lisa found a way to work within the tension by sometimes taking the back seat and other times taking control of the wheel (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2011).

Kailey. The role of the phases, structure and organization of projects proved relevant to Kailey’s narrative as well. Kailey’s epistemological beliefs of teaching shifted from being “creative, innovative, caring and fun” when entering the field to the “same as before plus intentional, having a plan to allow students to explore a deeper knowledge” (Kailey reflective journal, 1/13/2012). This statement showed her
understanding of the role of organizing experiences in learning and yet this proved an area in which she continued to struggle in her daily classroom practices. Kailey built upon many experiences based upon the children’s interests, but she lacked the ability to sustain and extend projects.

It was during study group sessions that Kailey’s inability to focus her practices and the children’s experiences became more visible. Kailey viewed her role as the teacher as giving “every child a learning experience to grow with. To broaden horizons. Tools to succeed” (Kailey reflection, 2/10/2012). Contrary to Lisa’s realization that she both needed to step back and direct in order to support children’s ability to grow, Kailey took a more hands-off approach to the planning, seeing her role more as the observer, watching “the children having fun in the process of learning” (Kailey reflection, 2/10/2011). Kailey’s practices were heavily weighted on implicit learning experiences guided by the children’s interests which included music, cooking, building and wood (classroom observation, 2/17/2012). It was the lack of more explicit instruction, curricular structure and focus on a common topic of study that led to multiple topics and experiences, but no completed project.

Kailey’s practices were informed by her observations of children at play, but struggled with the practice of intentional, ongoing documentation and assessment of experiences as the means of informing her teaching. When discussing the phases and documentation, Kailey stated, “we do some of it, that, you know, beginning process, talking about it with the kids, knowing what do they want to know, um but then, actually having time to fill out the thinga ma jiggies [documentation forms on connected to the phases]” (Kailey interview transcript, 4/13/2012) doesn’t happen. In the context of
inquiry-based practices, documentation serves as a memory for both the children and teachers which is “interpreted and used for its value as a tool for recalling; that is as a possibility for reflection” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.62) supporting the process of developing shared meaning between the teacher and the children.

The Project Approach, while in no way a prescription for teaching, requires a level of intentionality and responsiveness on the role of the teacher as the means of structuring children’s experiences through an in-depth study of a specific topic (Katz & Chard, 2000). For Kailey, it seemed more like a rule book. When asked about her perspective on her study of the Project Approach and ability to implement such practices she stated, “I think it’s just following the book a little better, I guess” (Kailey interview transcript, 4/13/2012). “I think if you have a guideline of like, okay this is what other people do, you know this is the kinds of steps. You know and we know this was kind of a guideline but like not having to fill it out. Like great, if you want to fill it out fill it out, if you don’t want to fill it out that’s fine” (Kailey interview transcript, 4/13/2012).

Mirroring Amber and the idea that she thinks “that all of us here are doing some form of project work, I think we are, that’s just how preschool runs...[but] when we put a label on it and you need, ok, this is Phase 1, Phase 2 and Phase 3, sometimes we don’t always do that in order”, making the differentiation between labelling “what we’re doing is Project Approach rather than just building on experience which is what I think all of us do anyhow” (Amber interview transcript, 4/13/2012).

**Beyond Theory in Practical Knowledge: Multiple Threads of Orientation**

One could draw the conclusion from the above narratives of Amanda, Kailey, Kami and Lisa that the argument for epistemological beliefs and teachers’ conceptions of
knowledge directly impacts how one teaches rings true (Brindley, 2000; Marra, 2005; Windschitl, 2002). I too began to consider the possibility given the fact that those teachers whose current personal knowledge most matched the theoretical conception of the Project Approach appeared to be more capable of sustaining projects, while participants who struggled to negotiate particular elements or conceptions of their personal knowledge of teaching and learning with the theory and application of the Project Approach fell short of implementing a full project. While taken from each of their individual contexts, if I merely stopped the narrative here there would be an unintended objectivity to my analysis. Seeking to maintain validity to my measures, it proved essential for me to make visible the understanding that “a narrative, curricular understanding of the person is an understanding that is flexible and fluid and that therefore recognizes that people say and do different things in different circumstances and, conversely, that different circumstances bring forward different aspects of their experience to bear on the situation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, pp.25-26). In order to do this, I had to shift my narrow focus on only theoretical orientation and zoom out in order to acknowledge the fact that teachers’ personal, practical knowledge depends on one’s situation for we are all “what the situation ‘pulls out’ of us” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, p.26).

**Multiple Orientations of Teachers’ Knowledge**

Participants’ theoretical orientations emerged within the context and structures of the study group, but provided only one lens upon which to view teachers’ epistemological perspective on teaching and learning. From a theoretical orientation perspective there was evidence that for Kami and Lisa there was more congruence of personal knowledge
and theory to project implementation than for Amanda and Kailey. At the same time there proved to be no significant disconnect or incongruence of epistemologies with the Project Approach in any of the participants. Matters pertaining to teacher direction, child initiated experiences and lack of sustainability affected the teachers’ narratives and project implementation on some level, resulting in multiple levels of engagement in topics and ongoing inquiry, but none of which could have fully prevented any of the participants from engaging more fully in projects (Doyle, & Ponde, 1977-1978; Hendrick, 1997; Katz, 1997). With congruence of theory to practice considered significant criteria for implementing more innovative curricular practices and the data not showing any significant correlations between the two, it proved necessary to move beyond theoretical orientation and explore more deeply additional orientations to personal knowledge that proved significant within the context of our study group (Doyle & Ponde, 1977-78).

Further inquiry did not eliminate the role of theoretical orientation, but also did not allow it to be a single factor in determining teachers’ ability to implement or struggle to implement a complete project. I came to the realization that while theory may drive practices, the participants’ personal situation and individual experiences played an equally important role in teachers’ ability to respond to and implement inquiry based practices. This understanding drew me to the conception that “teachers’ knowledge is oriented to situations” (Elbaz, 1983, p.15). While up to this point I looked primarily at the participants as the key role players in whether teachers engaged or didn’t engage in projects, the following section explores the tensions between situations, experiences and
personal orientations of both the individual participants and the group that impact teachers’ personal knowledge and implementation of projects.

**Emerging Tensions within and between Narratives**

“This year was a really big transitional year, for me. I don’t know about Elaine but I mean, like for me with having a baby, being out for six weeks, starting six weeks into the school year, not really knowing the kids at all and u, it being a federal review year which was a lot of stress on all of us, um having two classes instead of one, things were a little quicker, it was just a big transitional year for me…things were, things were just crazy this year, so we made it through” (Amanda interview transcript, 4/13/2012).

Amanda was asked to undergo huge shifts in her practices during this year as she shifted from what she knew, a full day childcare classroom to a morning and afternoon class with two different groups of children. “I mean the morning class, couldn’t ask for, really better class…they’re really calm, they’re all docile, you know they do what they’re told…but the afternoon class we have a kid that has pretty severe ADHD and then we have a kid with pretty severe ADHD” (Amanda interview transcript, 4/13/2012). For Amanda she found herself facing so many new experiences within her classroom and personal life that she was just getting “through the afternoon.” For Amanda, projects just became one more thing to add to her day.

The multiple shifts required of Amanda within this year directly impacted her implementation of project based work as she sought to make sense and meaning of a new situation and role which seemed in direct opposition to her past. Amanda voiced the tension between her past and current experiences when discussing how in previous years “we had all the time and things moved at a slower pace” where we “got things done,
things were better...with everything rushed this school year and everything being so stressful this school year that it was hard to kind of concentrate and keep focused on something” (Amanda interview transcript, 4/13/2012). Amanda found herself having to relearn and renegotiate her personal knowledge of what she had come to know as teaching. For Amanda her current experiences and situation were not cumulatively connected in any way to her past, affecting her ability to implement projects even at the level she had done in previous years (Dewey, 1938).

Amanda’s individual narrative disconnected her previous experiences of projects from her current reality and projects became just one more thing she was being asked to do during this stressful, transitional year. “I think we did well last year, it’s, you know, it’s just I couldn’t throw myself totally into it like I did last year because of the time constraints” (Amanda interview transcript, 4/13/2012). When discussing whether she saw herself returning to projects in the future Amanda reflected on her current situation stating “I think my biggest problem this year was my own personal hang ups and the time constraint. I mean, this year has been really, really, I mean, I have worked here for three years and have never felt more stressed than this year. So I mean, I don’t know if that’s going to lift now” (Amanda interview transcript, 4/13/2012). She articulated further apprehension in continuing to engage in projects within the near future in her comment that “I may need a couple of, I mean over the summer I might become, you know, rejuvenated and all that good stuff, but I mean, honestly I couldn’t tell you, I don’t, I don’t know, I don’t know if this is totally the way that I would do things” (Amanda interview transcript, 4/13/2012). For Amanda, many more connections between projects
and the reality of her daily experiences and situation would need to be in place in order for her to again throw herself into projects.

Amanda highlights the significance of continuity of experiences when discussing Lisa’s participation and project work. While Amanda saw her own personal situation and experiences as a barrier to her ability to implement projects, she stated how “you know Lisa was also taking classes at school and where they were learning about the Project Approach so I mean, a lot of what she did was like homework for her and stuff you know; I don’t have time to go home and do awesome documentation boards” (Amanda interview transcript, 4/13/2012). Lisa mirrors this connection between her school experiences and current situation when talking about her project, stating “being able to meet with a professor and gain insight and feedback on the Project Approach and our project was very supportive” (Lisa final reflection, May 2012). For Lisa, the interconnectedness between her theory, practice and projects extended beyond her classroom and the study group to her experiences within the context of her bachelor degree.

It was within these stories that I began to see the role of teacher education experiences as a significant thread woven throughout our collective narratives from the beginning of our study. This brought me back to our first study group session with Cathy and her discussion on how as a director of university lab school for early childhood educators she has to "teach to the standards’ so ….students can really ‘see’ them. I have 1-2 weeks of planning and the students plan activities that are, most often, unrelated to my objectives, needs in the classroom, or to each other’s activities. Weeks and days seem, somewhat, disconnected” (Cathy, reflective journal, 10/14/2011, artifact). “And
that’s how we’re taught, you know, when you go to university” (Amanda interview transcript, 4/13/2012). This objective-driven teaching led to the inability to make the connections between project experiences and the required standards and learning objectives. While this was the educational experience of Amanda, Lisa’s education supported inquiry-based approaches and required of her to implement the Project Approach. For Kami, while they didn’t call it the Project Approach, her teachers “were basically saying, you know, really find the kids interests and build off of that...so that we could see, you don’t have to teach to the standards” (Kami interview transcript, 4/13/2012). Amanda viewed her prior educational experiences as inconsistent with the Project Approach, while Lisa and Kami found their teacher education as congruent with the Project Approach further supporting their engagement in projects within the classroom.

For both Kami and Lisa, their teacher education experiences supported Dewey’s (1938) “principle of the continuity of experience or what may be called the experiential continuum” (p.28) by creating a strong connection theory, knowledge and practice. Their continuity of experience linked their personal teacher education experiences, current personal knowledge of teaching and the Project Approach evidence of which could be seen in their project implementation and ongoing classroom practices. The experiential knowledge of both Lisa and Kami provided the context for them to facilitate projects that allowed for continuity of experiences for the children in their respective classroom while authentically reaching and assessing the standards and objectives required of them as early childhood educators.

“I’m not worried about hitting those standards, I’m more worried about what’s going on in our classroom” (Kami interview transcript, 4/13/2012). For Kami, she knew
that they would naturally hit learning objectives as she talked about having “a set of standards that we know we’re going to be covering so when we’re, as we’re observing we know that these kids are going to be hitting this through these activities or through this study, but then some of the spontaneous stuff that occurs we document and then backtrack to see what happened” (Kami interview transcript, 4/13/2012). Kami’s ability to both anticipate the objectives and standards that may be reached through the project experiences as well as facilitating the understandings and meaning gained by the children illustrated her ability to conduct project work in her classroom (Clark, 2007).

Good projects provide the context for the acquisition of knowledge and the application of academic skills, while providing meaningful experiences that engage children in the process of learning (Katz & Chard, 2000). Projects are not “the kind of objective-driven planning that characterizes much direct instruction, where the objectives can be operationalized and pre-specified in considerable detail. Instead, planning for project work involves the imaginative anticipation of the prior experience level of interest” (Chard, 1999, p.3). Lisa’s documentation of her second project clearly shows how projects can build on current interests of the children while still clearly meet not just one or two objectives, but all thirty-six curricular objectives (see Table 4 and 5).
Table 4

Tool Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Beginning</th>
<th>Moving Forward</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After setting out plastic tools in the block area, the children began to pretend to build and fix things. They hammered away on blocks and twisted plastic wrenches and screws. As a result of the popularity of the area, we decided to begin discussing tools. We began a web of what we already knew about tools. We also wrote down questions of what we wanted to investigate about tools. We concluded that the children’s knowledge of tools was that tools are used to build and fix.</td>
<td>We decided to invite a carpenter to show the children his tools and demonstrate how to use them. Soon after, our plastic tools were replaced with real tools. To investigate leading to a question, “What other kinds of tools are there?” we invited two more experts in to demonstrate their tools. One expert was a nurse. Another was a parent who recently graduated as a Veterinarian Technician. Both experts allowed the children to have direct contact experiences with the tools. The children had an idea to turn our dramatic play area into a doctor’s office one week and a vet office after our vet tech visit. The children’s vocabulary and use of the tools were expanding rapidly. We revisited our questions and first web. We investigated through experts, direct contact with various types of tools, books, video, and internet. Our first barrier arrived as our topic appeared to be a bit broad. After planning and reflection we noticed the children’s conversations and play was still focused on building. We posed a question to the children, “If we know that tools are used for building, could we actually build something? If so, How?” Then, their grand idea to build a home for Teddy came about. The children participated in planning through conversation, research, and drawings, gathering materials, and the actual construction of a home for our pet hamster.</td>
<td>After presenting the home to Teddy, the children put together a final reflection web and decided to present their home to their families and the rest of the school. A place was chosen to put the homes and documentation on display in the hallway where all the families enter. The children created signs to announce the instruction to “Use Eyes Only.” We also sent a note home to the families to announce the grand display. Shortly after, Teddy escaped in the middle of the night and the children began building traps in the block area and creating signs to post around the school. The idea to set out bait food in a trap was put together. Signs of Teddy’s survival were evident through missing bait food and chewed crayons. Teddy reappeared and was captured 7 days later. We discovered he had built his own home using an old broom, a tissue, scrap bedding found on the floor, and dust bunnies. The children concluded that the only tools used during his survival home were his “hands and mouth.”</td>
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Table 5
Connecting the Project Creative
Curriculum and Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBJECTIVE</th>
<th>PROJECT WORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a Manages Feelings</td>
<td>Social aspects of work, team work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b Follows Limits and Expectations</td>
<td>Manages project work by following rules of classroom, limits on types of project work (example: only 4 children will fit to paint Teddy house on one side)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a Forms relationships with adults</td>
<td>Children discuss with teachers details of their lives in connection to tools and their current knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b Responds to Emotional Cues</td>
<td>Identifies basic emotions of classmates during Teddy’s escape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a Balances Needs and Rights of Self and Others</td>
<td>Cooperates, shares ideas and materials for webbing, investigation questions, field work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b Solves Social Problems</td>
<td>Manages shifts for turn taking during construction of the homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Demonstrates Traveling Skills</td>
<td>Hunt for Teddy through classroom, school gross motor room, hallways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Demonstrates balancing skills</td>
<td>Crouching, ducking, and bending during Teddy search</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a Uses fingers and hands</td>
<td>Hammering nails into wood and boxes, experimenting with various tools such as whisks, tongs, clamps, compass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b Uses writing and drawing tools</td>
<td>writing notes, webbing, drawings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8a comprehends language</td>
<td>Responding to discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8b Follows directions</td>
<td>Follows directions for use of various tools, constructing the home for Teddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9a Uses expanding expressive vocabulary</td>
<td>Communicates past experiences, contributes ideas for construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9b Speaks clearly</td>
<td>Group Discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9c Uses conventional grammar</td>
<td>Group Discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9d Tells about another place and time</td>
<td>Communicates past experiences with tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10a Engages in Conversations</td>
<td>Engages in group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10b Uses social rules of language</td>
<td>Takes turns in conversation of group discussions and reflections, asks questions, comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11a Attends and Engages</td>
<td>Works on field work, investigations, Sustains attention to project over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11b Persists</td>
<td>Practices using new or unfamiliar tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11c Solves Problems</td>
<td>Brainstorms ideas about how to find or trap Teddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11d Shows curiosity and motivation</td>
<td>Participates in the investigation of tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11e Shows flexibility and Inventiveness of thinking</td>
<td>Uses creative ideas to construct Teddy home, use tools in various ways other than intended use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12a Recognizes and recalls</td>
<td>Tells about previous experiences during memory drawings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12b Makes Connections</td>
<td>Uses tools in correct manner after experts visit and demonstrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Uses classification Skills</td>
<td>Tool Graphing: We graphed tools used by each family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14a Thinks symbolically</td>
<td>Drawings of Teddy, blueprints, signs of his escape, memory drawings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14b engages in dramatic play</td>
<td>DP area: pretends with doctor’s office, vet office, and construction site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15a Phonemic Awareness</td>
<td>Identifying rhyming words during books about tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15b Notices and discriminates alliteration</td>
<td>Describing different tools and which words begin the same way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16a Identifies and Names Letters</td>
<td>Identifying letters during our blueprints and signs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16b Uses letter sound knowledge</td>
<td>Asking How do you spell, “Teddy, Missing, Help.”…etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17a Uses and appreciates books</td>
<td>Uses various types of books to research tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17b Print Concepts</td>
<td>Creates signs for Teddy, Indicates where written words are on blueprints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18a Interacts during read-alouds and book conversations</td>
<td>Reading Books about tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18b Uses emergent reading skills</td>
<td>Re-reads book, blueprints, uses picture cues during tool investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18c Retells Stories</td>
<td>When speaking to Parents or Visitors, retells story of what happened to Teddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19a Writes Name</td>
<td>Signs drawings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19b Writes to Convey Meaning</td>
<td>Creates signs for Missing Hamster, Notes to Teddy, List for Materials needed for Teddy House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20a Counts</td>
<td>Counting Tools, tallying tool graph, counting blocks for test homes (how high, how long)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20b Quantifies</td>
<td>Quantifying numbers of Tools, during the tallying of tool graph, counting blocks for test homes (how high, how long)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20c Connects numerals with their quantities</td>
<td>Tool Graph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21a Understands spatial relationships</td>
<td>Teddy hunt-searching different places, during construction of homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21b Understands Shapes</td>
<td>Describes tools, during construction of homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Compares and Measures</td>
<td>Uses measurement tools, makes comparisons with blueprints, test homes, and actual construction of Teddy home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Demonstrates knowledge of patterns</td>
<td>Describes potential routes on a map of Teddy’s escape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Uses Scientific Inquiry skills</td>
<td>Observing, exploring, manipulating, organizing, discussing, investigating during whole project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Demonstrates characteristics of livings things</td>
<td>Talks about Teddy’s needs, discusses his behaviors during testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Demonstrates knowledge of the physical properties of objects</td>
<td>Describes tools during exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Demonstrates knowledge of earth’s environment</td>
<td>Discusses possibility of Teddy’s escape to the outdoor back yard and potential outcomes in the environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Uses Tools and Other Technology to perform tasks</td>
<td>Using various tools, researching information through internet, designing a home for Teddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Demonstrates knowledge of Self</td>
<td>Discusses family and uses of various tools after family homework returned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Shows basic understanding of people and how they live</td>
<td>Through discussion of how families use different tools, tools are used for various jobs, assigning responsibilities for project work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 Explores change related to familiar people and places</td>
<td>Discusses amount of time or day Teddy had been missing, reflects on previous webs and questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 Demonstrates Simple Geographic Knowledge</td>
<td>Discusses/ Describes Teddy’s escape and potential whereabouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 Explores Visual Arts</td>
<td>Memory drawings, drawings of blueprints, and drawings of Teddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 Explores Musical Concepts and Expression</td>
<td>Experiments with vocal tones during group speaking with microphones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 Explores Dance and Movement</td>
<td>Using cautious movements during search of Teddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 Explores drama through actions and language</td>
<td>Dramatic play area-represents ideas through drama with doctor and vet office</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**From Individual to Collective Tensions**

Again I could easily conclude the analysis at this point. The reader may already be clearly differentiating between the participants able and unable to sustain projects in their respective classrooms. We have already seen how with Kailey we see a teacher who provided numerous quality experiences but failed to connect them; Amanda had so many of her own new experiences based upon her new situation that resulted in a disconnect between her past and current personal knowledge. Both Kami and Lisa appeared able to more competently implement projects given their theoretical orientation as well as the continuity of experiences that further shaped their personal and experiential knowledge of the Project Approach. Here the story could end, but I would be leaving out a crucial component, the role of administration and other external factors.

“For many teachers, the Project Approach can seem to be a complex way to teach…Projects are easier for some teachers to implement than for others for a variety of reasons. These individual differences may be related to teachers’ prior teaching philosophies, practices and experiences, or the institutional, collegial or administrative contexts in which they work” (Katz & Chard, 2000, p.162). To this point this story has focused primarily upon individual differences in relation to the participants’ theoretical orientation and the shifts which occur between personal theory and practice, the symbiotic relationship between the two, and the role of both experiential and situational knowledge in teachers’ personal knowledge. I have failed to address in any meaningful
manner the administrative and external context in which they work. The following
section concludes this chapter with a focus on the group’s collective experiences and
social orientation and the tensions created between the administration of WOSS,
teachers’ personal knowledge and project implementation.

“One of our barriers was just the lack of, the lack of actual planning” (Lisa
interview transcript, 4/27/2012). Time identified by teachers as crucial to projects and a
barrier to innovative practices was reinforced within the context of our study group
(Bramwell-Rejskind et al., 2008). Project-based work requires a great deal of time and
while participants were prepared to take the time they did not feel that they were
provided sufficient time to both implement projects into the classroom and still be
accountable to all of the other demands placed upon them on a daily basis. “I think that
they [administrators] know they’ve overloaded us” (Amanda interview transcript,
4/13/2012), but this did not result in teachers being provided more time to support their
work. The result being various levels of stress, lack of efficacy in projects, and the view
that the expectations placed upon them by administrators and lack of administrative
support for their work were barriers to moving forward in projects.

“If WOSS was completely supportive of this approach, we should be given
sufficient time for planning, reflecting and preparing” (Lisa final reflection, May 2012).
The issue of time brought to the surface a more significant factor and that is
administrative support for the Project Approach. While in theory WOSS made the claim
that the intent was to move the entire agency towards project-based learning, the
participants in this study group felt isolated and in some cases punished for their project
work. The practices of the administration did not mirror their theory, leaving the
participants frustrated and in some cases further shifting towards more conventional approaches. The cost-reward relationship did not make the time and energy required of them to adopt or be fully invested in projects worthwhile as they saw few or no rewards for their efforts (Katz, 1997).

This issue came to a head within our February study group session as the time for their third checkpoint season, a quarterly assessment recording period in their particular agency. In addition, there was tremendous pressure as their entire agency was going through a federal review process to maintain their Head Start funds, experiences that greatly affected the study group as well as the experiences and situations of the various classrooms. Midway within the study group Lisa voiced her frustration during our discussion with the lack of support for the work they do in projects and the agency’s apparent praise for teachers who had completed their assessments and uploaded on time. Lisa’s claim being that the teachers who had ‘completed’ their work merely uploaded ‘the required stuff’ to be done with no connections between the classroom and assessment. The question raised was is it only about getting it done in the eyes of the administration or do they really seek quality, developmentally appropriate practices within their classrooms? This question led to discussions around the disconnect between administration and teachers, lack of external understanding of the Project Approach, and a clear sense of uncertainty in all of the participants that the Project Approach was viewed positively by both the administration and parents (Katz, 1998).

Discussion began around issue of documentation and the requirements of the failure of their current assessment system to differentiate quality documentation from superficial or standardized documentation. Tammy (teacher mentor) raised the question
of whether it’s an issue of reaching more objectives and goals within their projects or is it a matter of having time to get it in the system to which participants responded:

Kami: I think we do hit a lot of it, I just think it’s the time to do the assessment that we do into Teaching Strategies Gold (L and A: yeah) I think we all probably have a ton of assessments that we do, it’s just now putting it into the computer system, finding the time to put it into the computer

Fionna: maybe we could hire people to put it in (laughs)

Researcher note: The issue at hand was not that they didn’t have the assessment required by the program/fed etc. but about finding the time to put it into the system

... L: No you have lists and lists of things we document, that you, it’s just T: the time to put it in
K: I feel like you get a lot, a lot of documentation and it’s almost like you get so much documentation you have to try and weed out what’s important for them and what’s not important for them.

(Participant-observation, 2/10/2012).

Kami’s referral to the administration as ‘them’ illustrated a disconnect between the administration and the teachers, raising the question of administrative awareness of the documentation and assessment within the participants’ respective classrooms to which Delores (teacher mentor) refers to in the study group discussion, comparing the classrooms of those teachers just getting it done to the intentionality she saw in the participants’ project documentation.

The evidence of the projects in your classrooms tells a lot about what’s happening in the classrooms, so visible in your classrooms as compared to other classrooms. When I go in (to other classrooms) I can’t see the connections between the lesson plan posted in some rooms and what’s actually being seen, I can be there for 3 hours and still say, I don’t see it. In contrast, those in this group show intentionality, it is visible, you can see it in the web, the discussions, the intentionality of displays on the walls what you do is so much more meaningful.

(participant-observation, 2/10/2012)
Delores’ comment mirrored Kami’s belief that “I’m not worried about hitting those standards, I’m more worried about what’s going on in our classroom” (Kami interview, May 2012) in the fact that project-based work is visible within the classrooms. Not that the standards and objectives were not reached, but that the focus was on the quality of experiences provided children in the classroom and the intentionality of the documentation and assessment of such experiences as made visible to Delores. For the teachers, there was disconnect between their documentation and the required assessment of the agency.

“Right, definitely. And I think it should be, just keep doing what you’re doing, because if, if they were really doing their job, they would know everything was already in place and they wouldn’t have to be drilling and drilling and, you know” (Lisa interview transcript, 4/27/2012). Unfortunately the exact opposite occurred prior to the federal review.

“With the re-competition every week we were getting information about okay, you can go outside, okay you can’t go outside. You can play on this equipment, you can’t play on this equipment. So the teachers were really getting flip-flopped with a lot of different roles and things that they, ‘cause it’s interpretations and so then they started really over interpreting and then…and right before that we had the supervisor’s going out and interviewing us” (Kami’s interview transcript, 4/13/2012).

By relying on drilling there was a significant shift in the entire agency towards more explicit, directive practices as the means of getting through the review and following the right rules to complete task. This shift in practice proved detrimental to the entire study group as there seemed a lack of valuing the learning that was taking place both in their classrooms and in the study group in relation to the Project Approach, the inability to provide the time to support projects, and the addition rather than removal of barriers to support projects (Wenger et al., 2002).
For Amanda the lack of support was not limited to the administration, but also parents. In response to Kami who felt that she was at least finally getting more parent support having established rapport in prior years Amanda responded with:

*that’s awesome that you feel that way, but, this year I didn’t feel that because I’m coming from a childcare setting where I see those people every day and I can have conversations with them. You know they know what they’re doing. This year, with the two classrooms that’s really been hard for me, not because I have two classes, but because the parents are so go, go, go, go, they got a here, they got to go there, they don’t have enough time to sit and talk um, that it’s hard for them to buy into this because they’re like, why do they want to know about their family, the already know about their family. You know, and they don’t associate that with learning, they want them to sit down and write their name, to recognize all of these numbers, to, I mean we just talked the other day because we had a parent call me and ask what is my kid learning in your classroom and I was livid, I mean, I was so mad and I mean, that is the first time anyone has ever questioned me about what I was doing in my classroom and I felt really personally attacked…I mean, I feel that what we’re doing is important it’s just selling that to parents, I mean the parents could look at that picture of the little girl at the gas station and be like(makes gesture with hands like so?) it’s a drawing, but why aren’t those numbers correct? You know, I mean it’s just, I don’t know it’s frustrating* (participant-observation, 2/10/2012).

For Amanda there was a lack of administrative, family and educational support further disconnecting her prior experiences and successes with the Project Approach. I found myself asking the question who wouldn’t resort back to traditional teaching methods (personal reflective journal, 2/11/2012). Not only were her, past teaching methods of teaching more grounded in her personal teacher education experiences, but now both parents and administrators placed similar expectations upon her practices, resulting in a lack of continuity of experiences towards projects and Amanda’ understanding that the effort required of her to implement projects given the numerous barriers was not worthwhile (Katz, 1994).
“To discover what is really simple and to act upon the discovery is an exceedingly difficult task. After the artificial and complex is once institutionally established and ingrained in custom and routine, it is easier to walk in the paths that have been beaten than it is, after taking a new point of view, to work out what is practically involved in the new point of view” (Dewey, 1938, p.30). Dewey believed that experiences build upon one another, each one affecting the other. For all participants, this year was exceedingly stressful, resulting in experiences that either acted contrary to teachers’ personal beliefs or further supported shifts away from project based learning and towards traditional approaches to teaching.

**Further Understanding and Findings: Multiple Responses, Multiple Narratives**

Concluding this chapter proved difficult given the complexity of the multiple narratives emerging, merging and transgressing from one another as I went about the daunting task of untangling the multiple threads which led to further complexities within the telling of this story (Beattie, 1995). The question of what led some teachers to persevere in projects while others moved away from such approaches was extremely complex. It was through our deeper inquiry into the Project Approach throughout the year of our study that led me to a deeper understanding of teachers approach to projects that was far removed from of a simple analysis of epistemological beliefs and the direct correlation of theory to praxis.

The narratives of the participants during our further investigation into the Project Approach illustrated how the participants’ personal knowledge was informed by past experiences, theories and practices that shaped their perceptions of teaching and learning and influenced how they navigated the expectations placed upon them by the Project
Approach. This was further complicated by their specific social environment and the external beliefs, understandings and forces that further impacted the teacher beliefs and practices. It was within the space of the study group that I was able to explore how this specific group of teachers held and used their personal knowledge and the shifts that occurred within the course of our study group.

“Once granted the ability to reflect upon their practice within a complex context, teachers can be expected to make their choices out of their own situations and to open themselves to descriptions of the whole” (Greene, 1995, p.12). This chapter sought to show the process the teachers went through as they reflected upon their practices framed within their theoretical perspectives, individual situations, and experiences. The study group provided a space where participants had the autonomy to choose the degree to which they engaged in projects based upon their personal knowledge, specific situations and the continuity and cumulative nature of their experiences. For Kailey there were no significant shifts in her theory or practice of engaging children in multiple experiences based upon children’s interests given that this is what she had come to know as the Project Approach; Amanda moved back and forth along the continuum between explicit, directive and project-based approaches based upon both past and present experiences; and Kami and Lisa who were more able to sustain project work as they extended upon their past experiences and put their personal, theoretical perspective on teaching and learning into practice through projects. The following chapter will now discuss from the participants’ point of view the meanings they made out of this year through their discussion on their projects, the role of the study group in this process, and the personal, implications in relation to their future engagement in the Project Approach.
Chapter Six

Discussion: Phase Three and Sharing the Story

The previous two chapters told the story of our yearlong study and investigation into the Project Approach seeking to tell the story and ongoing process of a specific group of educators engaged in the study of the Project Approach. I went into this study looking through the lens of personal practical knowledge in the context of a study group consisting of a specific group of early childhood seeking to implement projects into their classrooms. This focus provided insight into how teachers past experiences and current situations in the classroom were shaped by and impacted by their personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). The purpose and intent of the following chapter is to allow the participants to reflect upon and share their experiences of this inquiry into the Project Approach. My intent is to allow the voices of the participants to be made known as the means of maintaining fidelity and reliability in this research as they discussed and reflected back upon this yearlong study and discuss the Project Approach; the study group; shared their stories and the possible implications for their future practices.

I find it necessary to precede this chapter with a disclaimer. This chapter serves as phase three of our inquiry, the concluding phase meant to bring closure to our group
and individual inquiry (Katz & Chard, 2000). While this chapter summarizes from the perspective of the participants what they learned within this year it is also important to recognize that learning is never finished (Katz & Chard, 2000). For some of the participants this year was only the beginning of their engagement in projects, for others a stopping point, but there was no conclusive end. I viewed our inquiry into the Project Approach through the lens of Katz and Chard (2000) when discussing how learning on “any topic is never really finished; there is always more to learn. A topic is merely set aside until the next time it is encountered, either within or outside the school context” (p.129). As the reader, I ask you to view this conclusion through a similar lens.

**Personal Reflections**

“I think this year was just super stressful” (Amanda interview 4/4/2012). The acknowledgement of it being a stressful year was repeated numerous times and throughout all of the participants’ narratives. It was the additional stress that many voiced were barriers to fully engaging in projects and for some took away from the joy of teaching and learning with young children. “Maybe if we didn’t have that stress some of us wouldn’t have thought, oh, just another thing we got to do. And unfortunately that was the sad part about it, because we didn’t, ’cause there were points where, this is so fun, the kids are like, ah, we need to fix this, get some tape, get some, you know” (Lisa interview, 5/9/2012). It was finding some balance by recognizing and documenting the ‘fun’ and wonder of teaching and facilitating projects within the stress of this particular year that proved crucial to teachers’ level of self-efficacy and project implementation.

**Documentation, Projects and Self-Efficacy**
Documentation is an “integral part of the procedures aimed at fostering learning and for modifying the learning-teaching relationship” (Gandini, 2006, p.63). Ongoing documentation within projects shape the experiences of classrooms and make visible the inquiry process and investigation for knowledge and shared meanings. For Lisa and Kami, the ongoing documentation of their project provided a context for reconstructing and revisiting their projects within the study group, giving meaning and direction to their practices and the learning process. Documentation opened a space for them within the study group and in their respective classrooms to communicate the ideas, insights, joy, fun and experiences that occurred within the project.

“I gotta tell you this story. So we’re eating, he’s been gone for a week, right? And then we’re eating snack here and little Lexi says, never talks, “Miss Lizzy, I saw Teddy”.

Laughing. I said in my head, “no you didn’t”. “I go, oh, did you?” Because I didn’t believe her. And then Olivia jumps up, “there he is, he’s behind the refrigerator” (Lisa interview, 5/2012). Sitting at a table with Lisa and Fiona there was a true sense of joy and fun in their faces and tone of voice as they shared the story of the conclusion of their second project on tools and construction. As they shared the details of what happened with Teddy and the children, I felt as if the tension of the previous conversation on the enormous stress and pressure of this past year had been negated by this project story that gave meaning to their daily practices and project work.

Upon completion of the construction of a home for Teddy and his testing it out:

- *Teddy escaped from his aquarium residence in the middle of the night!*

- *Rumor was “He may have been looking for a not boring house.”*

- *The children created signs to inform the school of his escape.*
• WORRY STRICKEN, they constructed “traps” in the block area with food and water to lure him back home.

• Evidence of Teddy’s survival came in chewed up crayons and picked through food. (Teddy is a picky eater.)

• 7 days later, Teddy returned during his favorite time of the day...SNACK TIME.

• An animal cracker was placed as bait, Teddy was lured (of course!) and brought back home safely. BUT TO OUR AMAZEMENT.....

We discovered that Teddy was able to make his own home with materials gathered from the classroom. He used a tissue, scrap bedding from the floor, and a broom that fell behind the refrigerator. We like to think that Teddy may have been searching for the homes we built and placed on display. Teddy is now home safe, under lock and key. (Lisa project documentation, shared 5/2012, artifact).

It is through documentation that teachers are able to “leave traces that make it possible to share the way children learn” as well as “preserve the most interesting and advancing moments of teachers’ professional growth” (Rinaldi, 1998, p.121). Lisa’s ability to observe, document and make visible to herself and others the process of the children’s learning in her tool project showed that projects work, supporting her sense of self-efficacy to facilitate inquiry-based work and willingness to share it with others (Smith & Gillespie, 2007).

For Kami, documentation was an ongoing process of learning how to take “a lot, a lot of documentation” and then “weed[ing] out what’s important” (Kami interview, May 2012). The value of documentation was not for her the mere ability to get it in on
time for checkpoints, but was validated within her body project when parents and families began to recognize the skills and knowledge the children were gaining through their inquiry into bodies.

I think our parents have bought into it more this year, like last year we just kind of started a lot of the projects and we still had some parents who wrote they wish there was more um, basically the sit down instruction, the ABC kind of thing on their reflection at the end. Whereas this year when we shared all the stuff they did with the body, a lot of the parents were just so overly impressed and shocked with what their kids did. Even with their creation of the skeletons, they were shocked, the fact that we let them use the computer to make their book. My kid did that, my kid typed that. (participant-observation, 2/10/2012).

The response of the parents confirmed her own understandings of projects and proved worthwhile of the time and energy she put into documenting projects, building a stronger sense of efficacy in project work and further motivating her to continue (Katz, 1997).

The correlation between documentation, project implementation and self-efficacy was a thread that wove through all participants’ narratives, but with varying results. While for Kami and Lisa we saw how documentation validated their efforts and projects as worthy of their time, for Amanda it just added to this year’s discontinuity of experiences and merely one more thing asked of her to do. “I just wanted to show you this so we have proof because every time….I just printed this stuff off because I wanted you to see that we actually did stuff because I feel like I came every time [to the study groups] I was like, but you know, I wasn’t like really doing anything” (Amanda interview, 4/4/2012). Documentation for Amanda was not integral to her teaching practices or illustrative of the children’s meaning making. I realized that much of her documentation did not even include photos of her own classroom, but stock photos, illustrating a lack of intentionality. For Amanda during this year documentation served
no other purpose than to fulfill yet another external expectation and obligation necessary for completing the year.

Amanda’s inability to perceive the value of documentation to inform her daily teaching practices and to validate project work was only reinforced by the parents’ responses to her project on families.

“they don’t associate that with learning, they want them to sit down and write their name, to recognize all of these numbers, to, I mean we just talked the other day because we had a parent call me and ask what is my kid learning in your classroom and I was livid, I mean, I was so mad and I mean, that is the first time anyone has ever questioned me about what I was doing in my classroom and I felt really personally attacked” (participant-observation, 2/10/2012).

Contrary to Kami’s experience of documentation bridging the gap between the Project Approach, her perception of teaching and learning and parents’ expectations for their children’s learning, Amanda’s experiences further confirmed her shift towards more traditional, teacher directed experiences. They wanted their children learning their ABC’s and 123’s. Parents were questioning the value of project-based learning and challenging the competency of Amanda as a teacher. For Amanda, it became a much more personal matter as this was no longer just a question of self-efficacy in projects, but as a teacher.

Every Experience Acts as a Moving Force

Amanda’s story is significant to understanding the phenomenon of why some of the participants developed a greater sense of self-efficacy and capacity for implementing the Project Approach while others did not. Her shift this year away from projects
illustrates Dewey’s (1938) principle of continuity and the impact of experiences on her narrative in connection to the Project Approach. Having witnessed Amanda’s practices and knowing her potential for project-based practices I watched her turn away from projects towards more traditional practices as her situation this year required of her a great deal of change. Adjusting to a morning and afternoon class after years of having a full day childcare classroom; learning how to include a child with severe needs; having to deal with the pressure from parents to “teach” their children; being a new mom herself; and going through the agencies stressful federal review, Amanda was suddenly faced with a year that challenged her and her teaching practices. The disconnectedness of her experiences with projects this year in contrast to the past resulted in a lack of cumulative project experiences for Amanda and her conception that she “did something wrong” (Amanda interview, 5/2012). For Amanda, it was not a lack of experiences, but experiences lacking continuity with her past experiences with the Project Approach that affected her implementation of projects during this year.

For Kailey it was not an issue of disconnect, but an artificial connectivity. In fact, she seemed rather comfortable given her position at the school as being the “project” teacher in her center, resulting in what Clark (2007) and Fullan (1982) define as false clarity. False clarity refers to the misperception and assumption that teachers are doing projects, when really they have only made surface changes such as content (i.e. curriculum is driven by a topic), but has little to do with adopting the processes necessary for really supporting project work (Clark, 2007). Evidence of Kailey’s failure to adopt the processes of the Project Approach can be seen in Kailey’s response and resistance to the phases and structure of the Project Approach. “I think if you have a guideline of like,
okay this is what other people do, you know these are the kinds of steps. You know and we know this was kind of a guideline but like not having to fill it out (paperwork documenting the phases of her project). Like great, if you want to fill it out fill it out, if you don’t want to fill it out that’s fine” (Kailey interview, 5/2012).

When describing teaching Kailey describes how “it gets hard because we get pulled in so many directions because we have so many people coming in, you know and it doesn’t always, and then it’s like you get lost or put on hold you know” (Kailey interview, 5/2012). This conception of being pulled in so many directions is mirrored in her projects that provide numerous experiences, but lacked in sustaining focus on a single topic. While the Project Approach was congruent with her theory of teaching and learning, her current practices were not consistence with inquiry-based practices, resulting in multiple child-initiated experiences, but no sustained focus on a single topic. “We can do a couple of things that are engaging. Say like we’re doing an investigation over here and they bring something out or they’ll go, oh my gosh, I have to go do it and I have twenty million children coming round this one table where you might have three million other things planned” (Kailey interview, 5/2012). The result being multiple experiences that “while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another” (Dewey, 1938, p.26)

It was within Kami’s and Lisa’s narrative that I was able to see Dewey’s (1938) experiential continuum where “an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future, continuity works in a very different way. Every experience is a moving force” (p.38). Kami and Lisa, while also being pulled in numerous directions,
were able to make significant connections between their daily practices and project work.

“I don’t think they’re (the teachers struggling with project work) making the connections with what they’re doing with the objectives and I don’t know if it’s lack of documenting it, like they’re forgetting to document these certain events or it’s just they don’t have, I don’t know, have the time to plug it in” (Kami interview, 5/2012). Kami and Lisa did not isolate the Project Approach from the rest of their work or expectations place upon them, but viewed projects as the thread that connected theory with practice and supported a curricular perspective to naturally embed objectives and goals.

Dewey’s (1938) principle of the experiential continuum or continuity of experience goes beyond the boundaries of our study group. Significant to Kami and Lisa’s narrative is the fact that there were experiences that further confirmed projects as a valid curricular approach and worthy of their energy and time required of them to implement. Both their experiences within their teacher education programs as well as the parents’ response to the Project approach and their viewing the academic value of such an approach further substantiated their efforts. It was the connected and cumulative experiences both within the study group and outside of the group that built capacity in both Kami and Lisa to sustain and document projects as well as develop their sense of efficacy as a project teacher.

Continuity of experiences proved particularly significant to participants when faced with what Dewey (1938) deemed “dead places” (p.38). I came to know and define dead places as the key principles that prevented individual teachers within this year from moving forward in their implementation of the Project Approach. For this particular study these ‘dead places’ were defined by participants as lack of time and the
discontinuity between systematic requirements and projects. Time, crucial to each participants’ narrative within this year, provided a starting point for further discussions of the programmatic and formal systems within which each participant worked and how one’s previous and present experiences allowed one to navigate these systems.

Time

“One of our barriers was just the lack of, the lack of actual planning ... actual planning and reflection time” (Lisa interview, 5/2012). I chose Lisa’s narrative purposefully given the fact that she was able to implement and sustain a project during this year, but still faced adversity as she had to learn how to navigate her project work within the ongoing expectations placed upon her as an early childhood educator. For Lisa, “Not having the time to document what we did was also something that I would like to have more time to do” (Lisa interview, 5/2012). Documentation, central to the inquiry-based approaches and the process of planning and reflection had already been shown to affect the project practices of all the participants during this year. For Kami and Lisa it helped them make the connections between projects and learning goals and objectives, for Amanda documentation became just another source of failure given her inability to get it done and for Kailey, it became an option, one which she chose not to do at all and wanting it to be an option. Each of these perspectives on documentation affected participants ability to implement projects in their classroom and thus, essential for teachers to sustain project work.

So the question and source of frustration for the participants was, if the agency truly backed the Project Approach, then why didn’t they support participants with the adequate amount of time to feel accomplished in their project work? Teachers like Lisa
struggled to “make” time to document the project experiences. When discussing the
documentation she had done for her tool project she states “something happened where I
was able to do that whole board, oh snow day. That’s what it was. There was one snow
day and with that one snow day I said, I’m going to do all of my documentation” (Lisa
interview, 5/2012). This “fitting in” time for documentation may have worked for Lisa,
but wasn’t seen as a possibility for someone like Amanda who saw Lisa’s documentation
not as something to inform her teaching, but to complete her homework. For Amanda,
she didn’t “have time to go home and do awesome documentation boards” (Amanda
interview, 5/2012). The haphazard way of getting documentation completed only
because of snow day, a day unexpected and unplanned, in the end doesn’t support
anyone’s ability to sustain projects.

Participants expressed overall frustration with the agency and the lack of support
provided them to successfully implement projects. The teachers felt there was only a
surface level support for project-based approaches by the agency and administration with
little or no understanding of the processes involved and necessary for successful project
work (Clark, 2007). The levels of frustration escalated throughout the year, culminating
with our final study group session. The intent for this session had meant to be a space to
share what had happened throughout the year, complete the documentation of their
projects and discuss how to move forward. The conversation quickly shifted to the
following dialogue of which I have provided only excerpts, but excerpts intentionally
chosen to provide a voice to the participants and illustrate the administration thread that ran throughout the course of this year and affected all of the participants, the study group
and implementation of the Project Approach. In the words of Lisa and Fiona, it was “the good, the bad and the ugly” (Lisa interview, 5/2012).

Kami: we’re always trying to plan new things and it isn’t always necessarily the planning, but it’s the setting up for it.
Tammie: so it’s not necessarily putting it on the form
Kami: it’s the setting up to do the activities and then do what you want to do, because I mean, I, I don’t like to roll over the same thing all of the time, I want to keep it new for the kids, but it’s setting up those new, you know, getting things around to go with your observations, I mean I’ve got all this stuff
Tammie: so you have this, the project work embedded in your lesson plan
Kami: yes
Stacey: because that’s one thing I’ve noticed in some groups is that they so separate project work from the rest of their curriculum that it’s like they’re doing double time, it’s like oh this is the project work but then I have to do my lesson plans and so if you are at least able to embed that into your lesson plans you’re one step forward in that area just because you don’t want to double up if you don’t need to double up
Kami: I wish we could go back to our old lesson plan forms because I felt like they were easier and more general and they didn’t take as much time to try and, you could actually write in.
Tammie: you mean the actual write in?
Kami: yeah, I thought that was a lot easier. As you’re thinking about it throughout the week you just write it in and then you don’t have, it’s too hard to fill it in and then try to type the stuff in when you have to see the changes and stuff.
Tammie: hey, those are the strategies I like to hear because if that is something everybody says, oh, you know, why can’t we just work on, you know, why can’t we work on our lesson plans throughout the week because that’s what project work would encourage then...
Amanda: but we don’t have time to do it throughout the week
Tammie: you don’t have time?
Lisa: yeah
Stacey: do you any time at the end of the, you don’t because I’ve seen you guys transition and there’s like, really there’s not time to say what did you see, where could we go tomorrow,
Kami: and I think it would be nicer if it were posted like that, a blank one, paper with those questions, because they could just jot down one the thing, an activity for that area.
Stacey: did any of those forms I gave you, there was the one that was Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and something that you could put out in your centers like even put it in the block area, put it in your dramatic play area and if you happen to be over there and you observe something jot it down and at least you have that piece of paper, on
Friday you can go back over it and look over it as a staff or as the lead teacher, depending on how it works and use that as a kind of impetus for how it works too.  
...there’s also this one that says what kinds of things are you going to anticipate and who’s going to document it so you work as a team and say you are going to collect, you know, if I’m doing group discussion. Let’s say Kami is going to do group discussion you’re going to take down notes so that we can look back over them. That kind of reflective piece

Tammie: I think that you guys do that, I’ve heard discussion, I’ve heard you guys, I’ve heard conversations that I am going to do this at large group and you’re going to document what’s going on.

Stacey: how much time do you have to go back over those notes too?

Tammie: that’s what I’ve heard you guys say a lot though, it’s not collecting the data, but it’s sitting down and reflecting on it and getting it into the computer and then doing something with it that, like, I think you’ve really doing a good job of mastering the skill of how to observe children in the action, how to observe out of the action and just getting all of that information in the room, it’s not like shouting out at you, sometimes, but then how do you actually use what you’ve gathered

Lisa: and I think a lot of times the reflection time doesn’t come until checkpoint, because you’re taking the observation and plugging it in because you’ve got all of these observation plugged in and then I don’t reflect on it until the end of the checkpoint when I’m finalizing and get my class profile and I’m like wow, here’s like 10 kids that need math, you know.

Stacey: Can you see that as being, some way how to do an ongoing reflection, would the project help because you are kind of throughout the process of the project you are trying to decide what to do, what skills they’re learning does that help or (silence) no.

Tammie: I think that’s natural though, because I mean there are so many things that you’re trying to object-, objectives you are trying to cover in the classroom. And projects are going to cover a lot, I mean, obviously they’re not going to cover everything, or every objective that’s on our teaching strategies so I mean, I think that’s realistic to think that okay quarterly okay I’m going to look and see what areas as a teacher, I just generally cover these because you know we’re just generally going to be good at like naturally incorporating rhyming or naturally incorporating science or even you know, we just do that, but some things you do miss because that’s just not in...so I think that’s, I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing because you do, quarterly, need to say okay I need to pick this up here, you know and incorporate more, you know, in my project more..

Stacey: yeah, because it might even help you in your projects and say, you know we really need to do oh let’s say, building that incorporates math skills more.
Tammie: but obviously it would be so ideal if you had Fridays or a day during the week to sit down as a team and reflect as a team and say what can we, how can we take them further, because that’s what everybody wants you to do
Stacey: they just don’t give the time to do it
Kami: I wish we could work all day Fridays.
Stacey: that’s what, they’re talking about hours, they’re stuck on how many hours did you say (referring to the assistants)
From group: five
Stacey: five
Kami: and they (assistants), in five hours cause you know they’ve got home visits they’ve got to do, they have to enter their observations, do all their things too if they have the eight hours like I do that gives us that extra time to actually sit and plan.
Lisa: because if they (assistants) do home visits during the week then they have to have off on Fridays and then you don’t have a team on Friday.
Kami: so the eight hours are nice and then, when I feel we do get the chance you know all the stuff they have to do too and how much time it’s going to take, you don’t want to take up too much time with the meetings. You have our meeting, then the supervisor meetings and then every other person wants to meet with us.
Stacey: so this came up a little bit last time, do you see Project work as just being one more thing you’re asked to do or is it connected.
Amanda: It’s connected.
Lisa: both
(participant-observation, 3/2012)

I found myself asking whether I could justify statements such as “you do project work and it’s kind of learning experiences, but the Project Approach is really, there is a structure to it so that yeah, you could do project work, but are you, is it the Project Approach, because that’s asking you to go a little farther I think and so that’s where the difficulty maybe is. All of you have great experiences for children, but when you get to the project Approach it is a little more intense, intentional and it does take what you’re missing... that time to collaborate as team” (participant-observation, 3/2012). As facilitator outside of the agency, I faced the dilemma of helping the teachers move forward in the implementation of the Project Approach while navigating within a system that did not fully support such practices. The three hours a month set aside was not
sufficient. “I think that it would have been beneficial to see more of what people were doing...It seemed like three hours would be enough sharing time but really I’m not sure if, if it was...I mean, not saying that I wanted it longer, but, well, I mean, short or long, I wasn’t saying the time frame I was just saying like, I guess just more, like I even wrote it on here, like viewing other project work” (Lisa interview, 5/2012). The ability to collaborate and the level of intentionality necessary to work within the structure of the Project Approach continued to be a struggle and an issue needing to be revisited for all participants, yet when possible, again the teachers found the time. Amanda when discussing the need for “more one-on-one time” also mentioned how Lisa “gave me um, powerpoints from her teacher at school, those helped, um because they were more like the checklist thing. Like this is what you do in Phase 1, this is what you do in Phase 2, this is what you should have by Phase 3” (Amanda interview, 5/2012) furthering her understanding of the phases and supporting her development. But the teachers did not see this as encouraged or supported by their agency and again, occurred only when they found the time.

Tammie: Because realistically I think this group is in a good place, because if you think about it, it is a big part of it is the collaboration and is reflecting on what you’ve done throughout the week and a lot of the discussion piece of it and are we there yet? You know, are we at the point where we are trying to push that up in our level of priority list because you know we have all of these priorities that we have in our agency and we have are we there yet pushing that, kind of.
Stacey: and is the agency pushing it for you because I hear a lot, that they want everyone to be doing projects...
Amanda: no, no, I think they choose what they want you to do and the times they want you to do it.
Lisa: yeah. I think that they want there to be collaborative team meetings and reflection of each week, but what’s happening is I’m doing. I feel like I’m doing the project, I’m with kids and because there’s no time for them to meet with me so, I’ve done it all, I don’t want to say alone, because they’re there too, but I’m I mean, planning aspect of it, you know, by the way you know on Wednesday we’re going to create Teddy houses and start with the build and then they’ll say okay and help with that.
Stacey: But did they have the time to say, hey did you notice anything, I, I wasn’t that, what did you see the kids doing, where can we go, that kind of dialogue
Lisa: right
....
Stacey: do you ever have time to like reflect over your videos or is it like oh, got it.
Amanda: yeah, kind of
Lisa: that’s what it is, yeah, that’s it.
Stacey: because it’s nice that you have these tools but if you don’t have that time to look over it and go back over it and you obviously aren’t supposed to do it at home so..
Kami: I feel like individually you can reflect, like I look back over the videos I take and reflect. And I look at their stuff (assistants) that they have, but.
Stacey: not together
Kami: yeah, and as far as the agency goes, they’re more about pushing up the intentional planning and the individualization and having each kid’s name on the lesson plan in all the areas that they don’t care about Project Approach. That’s my personal feeling on it.
Lisa: I would agree.
Kami: just make sure everything plugged into the kids goals, make sure
Lisa: it’s all on paper
Kami: yes
(participant-observation, 3/2012)

The Study Group: Why are We Here?

The discontinuity voiced within the narratives of the participants above was mirrored in my personal reflections. I came to view the tension created by the administration between their own theories and practices as a challenge to the validity of the study group and ultimately, to the Project Approach. “I mean, why would you put so much effort into study groups and a focus on the Project Approach if you only planned to act contrary to processes necessary for making it happen” (personal reflective journal, 5/30/2012). I began to question the validity of the study group when teachers still had to seek out their own time to complete work and “do it all” in terms of planning projects or “individually reflecting” upon the projects after making the time to document?

At one point I began to question the study group as a significant model for professional development in the current early childhood field or at least within this
agency. This was validated early on by one of Elaine’s reflective journals where she writes, “I am reflecting on all the work I have to get done and the fact that I am sitting in this study group for three hours. I can only work five hours today” (Elaine reflective journal, 11/11/11, artifact). Lisa further validated this sense of discontent when sharing “there’s a teacher here that does aspects of the project work, but not the Project Approach, she’s a wonderful teacher and I’ve known it for many, many years and finally got recognized for the teacher that she really is, but she doesn’t do the Project Approach so what I’m saying is are we wasting our time doing this if someone who doesn’t do the Project Approach does so completely awesome” (participant-observation, 3/2012). The time and effort required of a teacher to engage in the study group and implement projects was not viewed by Elaine as getting her work done and for Lisa did not prove rewarding enough to make the Project Approach a clearly positive endeavor (Katz, 1997), exposing a crucial flaw to the structure of the study group within this particular agency (Wenger et al., 2002).

For Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) the strength of communities of practice, in this case a study group, depends upon the members as well as the leadership. For the participants and me the cultivation necessary to support study groups and this particular model of professional practice was not done with intentionality. Participants did not feel the work they were doing to be valued and the agency did not provide the adequate time or resources to move the group forward, encourage more participation or remove barriers the participants faced in their daily practices (Wenger et al., 2002). For the participants the goals of the study group to implement and sustain projects within their classrooms appeared to not be in alignment with the main goals and foci of the
agency in this year. As a result, the study group failed to have the impact and did not contribute to each participant’s development as a project-based teacher.

To Share or Not to Share

Similar to teachers’ role in the Project Approach and the fact that there “is no single way to incorporate project work into a curriculum or teaching style” (Katz & Chard, 2000, p.3) when it comes to cultivating communities of practice there is “nothing that organizations can or should do” (Wenger et al., 2002, p.13) leaving things open to interpretation. For WOSS they provided the autonomy and turned over the “responsibility to the practitioners themselves to generate and share the knowledge they need” (Wenger et al., 2002, p.12). What the agency failed to do in the eyes of the participants was to fully encourage projects by failing to provide an environment with the adequate resources for each participant to prosper and lacked the administrative processes to authenticate and value the work of these teachers (Katz, 1998). This was not due to a complete disregard of the agency for the work the teachers did, but a lack of fully understanding their role in the process of negotiation within study groups (Wenger et. al. 2000). They were still learning how “to understand and work with these processes and dynamics” (Wenger et al., 2000, p.14).

This was most clearly articulated for me during the final weeks of the school year when the agency invited the entire staff to recognition day, opening up a space for individuals to give a voice not only to share their projects, but the possibility to give a voice to the administrative decisions and to further impact the internal processes of the agency (Wenger et al., 2002). To which the participants responded:

Kailey: I would prefer not to
Amanda mirrored Kailey’s response, but elaborated stating, “I don’t, I don’t really feel comfortable getting up and saying...I don’t want to get up there and present something I’m not happy with. And I’m not the kind of person to say “Hey, I did something wrong, these are my barriers” to which I responded but “if they’re looking for [more] projects [in their classrooms] they have to see what things get in the way of teachers being able to do it like you never had your Fridays. Because one thing about project work is you have to have the time to work as a team and you didn’t have it” (Amanda interview, 5/2012).

The importance of understanding and sharing the barriers as the means of moving forward resurfaced in my interview with Lisa and Fiona

Fiona: as a teacher assistant and really I, I almost feel like I have to apologize for us again because we were so stressed that it’s too bad it, it kind of took away the fun, at times.
Lisa: yeah, I apologize too.
Fiona: I feel like you got a real bum rap ‘cause
Lisa: I know, I felt sorry for you
Fiona: you know, I feel like you, you know, you didn’t get a good feedback from us because
Stacey: well, I did and I didn’t.
Fiona: and that’s not fair
SP: because you, if I’m looking to see what it takes to support teachers in Project Approach you have to know the good, bad and ugly.
L: and you got the bad and the ugly this year, I’ll tell you

But I didn’t get the bad and ugly, what I got was the truth. I began this journey seeking some single factor that would move all teachers forward in the Project Approach. But it was out of the pedagogical space of our study group that I truly gained insight into the complexities and tensions that exists within the theories and practices of teachers seeking to navigate projects into their daily practices. I admit that originally my thoughts mirrored Amanda’s in not wanting to expose what could be viewed as a failure. The
study group failed in moving everyone forward in their efficacy, understanding and implementation of project-based work for which I also felt I should apologize. As facilitator wasn’t it my role to build capacity in the teachers, just as the participants felt it was their responsibility to build capacity in young children to make meaning of their world? What we all had to realize is that it is the barriers that move us forward in this ongoing process of becoming teachers.

*Tammie:* even if you did surface project work, even if you didn’t do the full Project Approach, you’re doing so much more than just, you know teaching a unit, teaching a theme or not trying to take a child deeper, I mean, that’s what I think about this group. I mean even if a project might not have followed every single phase or might not have you know, incorporated the curriculum model of this and that this group is doing so much more with thinking and reflecting and all that then a lot of staff are doing and so that’s the benefit of being in a study group and that’s what I got out of it (participant-observation, 3/2012)

*Kami:* awesome, yeah I’ll present (Kami interview, 5/2012)

*Lisa:* I got to thinking about it and I don’t mind sharing (Lisa interview, 5/2012).

And she did, ending her presentation with the following:

*The children engaged in an in depth investigation project using every sense and developmental area possible. It was child driven and helped us teachers involved change the way we view teaching as we became investigators with the children* (Lisa project documentation, 5/2012, artifact).
Chapter Seven

Implications: Where Do We Go From Here?

Two Voices within a Teacher
I’m an early childhood teacher
I think of my work as
Very demanding very stimulating
It’s as if I’m
An air traffic controller an architect, designing an environment for discovery

The learning environment I create is clean and organized
I’m always buying new curriculum materials and learning games
I arrange things with discovery and beauty in mind, choosing things from nature And loose parts for play in the classroom

If I could just
Get the children to sit still and listen
I could take time to sit and listen to them
Teach them what they need to get ready for school
Discover their questions and encourage their curiosity so they’ll be excited about learning

There’s so little time
To get everything I’ve planned done
To experience the wonder of childhood

I know it’s important to observe
Each child has to be assessed for their progress
Each child has so much to teach me. Watching closely I see so much growth unfolding

I so want
Parents to see me as the parents to delight with me
A legitimate teacher in what their children are doing
I have so much I want so much of my curriculum
Making Connections

I began this dissertation seeking to find my own way in the field as I tried to navigate my personal epistemologies with my preconceived conceptions of academic research. Even though theoretically my work was grounded in a constructivist approach to knowledge as a living process, I had come to correlate educational research with models that quantify experiences by seeking variables with statistical significance. I found myself trying to match what I perceived to be institutional expectations for what is termed research, orienting myself within the situation of a doctoral program in education. It was only when I challenged myself to go beyond the boundaries of what I perceived acceptable, taking a narrative approach to research and viewing knowledge and understanding as fluid and flexible that I was able to uncover the emerging threads that impacted teachers’ implementation of the Project Approach and participation in the study group (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). It was through narrative that I showed these threads not as separate parts, but as a whole that wove a rich story, bringing a deeper meaning and understanding of the difficult and ongoing process of navigating and negotiating within the space between the two voices of teachers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Curtis & Carter, 2000; Malaguzzi, 2001). Narrative allowed me to acknowledge the tension and differences in all of us and find my way in research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).
My experience mirrored that of the participants that you the reader have just personally navigated through in the preceding narratives of this work. The call of this research for a narrative perspective reflects the call Kami, Lisa, Amanda and Kailey felt towards inquiry-based practices and the implementation of the Project Approach bringing them to the space of the study group. What happened within that pedagogical space, told in detail throughout this dissertation, provided insight into the phenomena that affected and impacted a specific group of early childhood educators epistemological beliefs, pedagogical practices and individual classrooms, the findings of which call attention to the processes, threads and possibilities relevant to the field of early childhood education and the implementation of future inquiry-based practices in the current field of education.

What proved crucial and meaningful within the narratives in this research was Dewey’s (1938) experiential continuum. To explain I must first return to my original intent to find the common denominator that would prove significant to teachers’ implementation of projects that drew me to the research on epistemological theories. What I came to find is that while theory does drive practice there is much more complexity to the phenomenon of sustaining project-based work than merely being epistemologically ready to adopt and support constructivist approaches to learning (Marra, 2005; Windschitl, 2002). By approaching this research and epistemological perspective through the lens of personal practical knowledge, I was able to understand the tensions that occur between one’s theoretical perspectives and the role of individual experiences within teachers’ social and personal contexts, impacting participants’ implementation of projects. The more continuity between teachers’ individual experiences, their personal practical knowledge and project work there was during the
course of this year, the more there was a sense of self-efficacy and ability to sustain project work.

I came to view Dewey’s (1938) concept of experiential continuum not in a linear form, vertical or horizontal, but concentric. Kami and Lisa’s narratives both illustrated the ripple affect where each experience built upon the prior, building capacity for inquiry-based practices. They were able to negotiate their role as facilitator with the child at the center, guiding their collaborative inquiry and ongoing process of emergent curriculum, content and knowledge. This was all supported by their personal continuity of experiences and epistemological understandings of such teaching and learning practices. For Kami and Lisa, not only were they able to make the connection between the Project Approach and the expectations for learning of young children, there were additional experiences that further proved the relevance of projects to teaching and made it worthy of their time and effort (Katz, 1997). It was the connectivity of experiences for Lisa and Kami that helped them overcome the barriers to their project implementation that arose during the course of this year.

External Experiences Relevant to the Experiential Continuum

An experiential thread relevant to both Kami and Lisa’s project work was their past and present educational experience. Both had been exposed within their own teacher education programs to child-centered approaches and for Lisa specifically to the Project Approach. Contrary to Cindy at the beginning of our story who viewed her position as a teacher of early childhood educators as having “to ‘teach to the standards’ so...students can really ‘see’ them. I have 1-2 weeks of planning and the students plan activities that are, most often, unrelated to my objectives, needs in the classroom, or to each other’s
activities. Weeks and days seem somewhat disconnected” (reflective journal, October 2011, artifact), Kami’s experience as an early childhood education student provided her the opportunity “to see you don’t have to teach to the standards, you can teach to the kids’ ideas” (Kami interview transcript, 4/13/2012). The connection between one’s own educational experiences and practices proved relevant to the participants in this research and calls to question the role teacher education programs play in conventional, teacher-directed approaches to teaching or more innovative, constructivist approaches. If teacher education experiences continue to be dominated by methods and definitions of teaching and learning based on merely academic centered practices, teacher dominated classrooms, and standards-driven practices, there was a lack of congruence, making the shift necessary to implement inquiry-based practices more difficult (Labaree, 2005) and calling for a shift in teacher education.

This calls for a shift in teacher education practices that could begin by placing the child at the center of teaching and learning. Teachers like Kami and Lisa placed the children at the center of their practices, making the connections between the experiences provided within the project and the content, skills and knowledge deemed worthy of knowing for young children. The Project Approach becomes the means for reaching the standards that naturally emerge out of the context of the quality of experiences, a very different approach from the practices where standards drive the classroom experiences.

Kami and Lisa’s ability to document illustrates this shift from standards-driven practices to standards-based curriculum. This was then made visible within the ongoing documentation collected throughout the year as they were able to “visualize children’s learning processes, their search for meaning and their ways of constructing knowledge. It
enables the connection in every day work of theory and practice” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.16).

It was through the documentation of Kami and Lisa that parents and others began to see
the true capabilities and capacity of children way beyond the mere ABC’s and 123’s.

The understanding of individuals outside of the classroom resulted in a greater sense of
self-efficacy and furthered the sustainability of projects for Kami and Lisa.

But documentation requires time and this leads to a significant barrier to project-based
work and to the role of institutions in this process. Viewing the study group as the
means to an end, the end being all teachers will engage in and implement project-based
practices, WOSS failed to see any additional responsibilities on their side for making this
happen. “Organizations can do a lot to create an environment in which they can prosper:
Valuing the learning they do, making time and other resources available for this work,
encouraging participation and removing barriers. Creating such a context also entails
integrating communities in the organization – giving them voice in decisions and
legitimacy in influencing operating units, and developing internal processes for managing
the value they create” (Wenger et al., 2002, p.13). Study groups need to be viewed as a
part of the institution, part of a whole. Without consideration of the whole institution,
study groups depend too much on the participant of the members with little emphasis on
additional resources to make project implementation possible (Katz, 1997).

If WOSS or others institutions seek to further support project based work through
the facilitation of study groups, study groups must be viewed as a part of the whole and
provide the additional resources necessary to support change. In this case the primary
threads were: time; valuing the work of project-based teachers; and program-wide
support for inquiry-based practices. Agencies need to clearly illustrate projects as a
priority to build sustainability. If teachers believe the arduous and difficult process of implementing projects into their daily routines is of little value by administration and institutional processes, building capacity in teachers who merely get the assessments done or engage children in meaningful processes but don’t engage in projects, study groups focused on inquiry-based approaches will fail to have little impact on practices. The agency must also be cognizant of furthering the continuity of experiences through their own practices. Without institutions further building upon the experiential continuum teaching becomes a checklist that one must prioritize and projects are often at the bottom of the list, viewed as an additional stress or expectation placed upon them.

This is what we see in Amanda’s narrative. In opposition to the continuity of experiences of Kami and Lisa, we see the fragmentation or disconnect of experiences. While her recent past teaching experiences did support her ability and efficacy in project-based work, her past teacher educational experiences and present situation in the classroom were far removed from making any connections. Amanda felt that she was being pulled in numerous directions, all vying for her time equally, but also requiring prioritizing. Projects continued to move down her list of priorities as experiences continued to contradict such practices, illustrating the importance of the continuity of experience in building the capacity for the Project Approach. When experiences became fragmented and disconnected, practices became teacher-directed, the child was put off to the side in order to meet the expectations placed upon her in relation to the goals and objectives to be met; family expectations; and administrative value and support illustrating a clear shift away from the Project Approach towards models where content is fragmented and disconnected.
Agencies, institutions, programs and schools seeking to engage in and implement inquiry-based practices like the Project Approach need to provide experiences in congruence with such an approach. While it is not possible for institutions to eliminate the past experiences of teachers like their prior education, they can play a tremendous role in supporting teachers actively seeking to implement projects and constructivist approaches in early childhood classrooms. Institutions can further build teachers’ continuity of experiences and help teachers put their theories into practices. Building on teachers’ continuity of experiences includes valuing what the teachers are trying to do; providing the necessary resources to support the teachers; and finding ways within the organizational structure of the program, agency or institution to further link theory, practice and external expectations (Doyle & Ponder, 1977-78; Katz, 1997).

Agencies like SSOW and other educational programs need to continue to value study groups on multiple levels. Social structures such as study groups can serve as a pedagogical space where participants take responsibility “for fostering learning, developing competencies, and managing knowledge” (Wenger et al., 2002, p.11). In addition, what proved pertinent to this narrative in particular is the power of study groups and communities of learners to serve as a place of encounter, “room for people to dialogue, it provides an excuse to do so” (Rinaldi, 2006, p.197). We need to value not only the actual time allotted for teachers to meet and collaborate within the space of the study group, but to view the study group as a sounding board for participants and others to enter into a learning environment in which each individual’s voice is heard and knowledge is constructed, co-constructed and reconstructed (Rinaldi, 2006). It was within the pedagogical space of our study group that I was able to observe, record and tell
the narratives of teachers engaged in implementing the Project Approach, making visible the complexity of their tales. Such a space opened me and the participants and hopefully the readers to the barriers, understandings and knowledge of both the Project Approach and the process of engaging in projects that can support further endeavors in such practices.

Rethinking Elbaz’s Model of Personal, Practical Knowledge

Going into this research, I could have taken numerous directions and perspectives upon which to build my conceptual framework and base this research. It was within the emergent nature of the research process itself that I came upon Elbaz (1983) and her model of personal, practical knowledge that both shaped and informed my study, directing me away from direct correlations to the complexity of epistemological beliefs and practice (see Figure 8). But, it was through the data collection, analysis and telling of this particular story and individual narratives that I found the need to reconstruct her model. Each narrative reshaped the model based upon participants’ experiences. These findings transform Elbaz’s model in meaningful ways that both impact and inform the implications of this study.
Elbaz’s model as seen above, was grounded in the conception that theory drives practices, informing and informed by orientation to self, personal orientation, experiential orientation and social orientation (Elbaz, 1983). Kami and Lisa’s narratives had the most congruency with Elbaz’s original model. Given their continuity of experiences there is a reciprocity and connectivity amongst the five orientations, leading to their ability to implement projects and sustain them within their practices. Kami’s model proved the most balanced (see Figure 9).
What we saw with Lisa is a similar model where theory continued to drive her practices, but there were times when her social orientation and orientation to the situation in her program often impacted her practices, resulting in her questioning her theory and the amount of time invested. Elbaz’s model lost some sense of balance throughout the course of the year for Lisa (see Figure 10).
Most telling to this research though is Amanda’s narrative where the model is completely reconstructed. Given the discontinuity of her experiences educationally, experientially and throughout the course of this particular year, what we see is not only an imbalance amongst the five orientations, but a complete re-organizing of the model itself. Her narrative within the space of this research and her teaching practices were not driven by theory, but by her personal orientation. She was thrown into such a disequilibrium during the course of this year that she shifted into survival mode, causing her to act contrary to her theory and her practice was driven by her personal experiences both in the classroom and in her personal life. Additionally, there wasn’t the connection within the five orientations to counter the numerous changes she faced within the course of this year, resulting in her inability to implement or feel a level of self-efficacy in her implementation of the Project Approach (see Figure 11).
Figure 11. Amanda’s model of practical knowledge

(* Given the lack of data for Kailey, I felt I was unable to interpret Kailey’s model)

Implications and Recommendations

So what does this all mean? Here is what I take away from this experience:

- **It’s time to listen to the good, the bad and the ugly.** In my interview with Lisa and Fiona they were apologetic when discussing the course of this year and the study group and stating that I got the “good, the bad and the ugly”. My response would be, that’s exactly what we need to hear if we ever hope to move forward in inquiry-based approaches like the Project Approach. Not only does this support facilitators like myself, but I feel is crucial to teachers setting out to implement projects in the current field still dominated by mainstream, standardized practices. Often when teachers set out to do projects they are provided examples of finished,
polished, and documented projects with no mention of what it took to get there and the barriers faced during the process. If the intent is to make more significant shifts towards project based learning then teachers need to know the truth. This is not easy work they are about to set out on and they will face many roadblocks along the way, some of which can be seen within this particular story, but others which have yet to be documented and recorded, leading to my next point.

- **We Must Move Beyond Single Variables of Measurement.** This research calls for additional studies that provide further insight into the complexities of implementing and sustaining inquiry-based pedagogical practices as well as studies of epistemological beliefs. It is my hope that this research illustrates the dangers of making direct correlations and calls for methods such as narrative analysis that expose the messiness of teaching between theory and practice. Measuring “epistemological readiness” does not account for the role of experiences and the constant movement between alternative approaches to education. Through a qualitative research lens we can no longer just state, this is why projects don’t work in the early childhood field today or just stop at a single collection of data. This narrative analysis calls for additional, longitudinal studies that further explore the phenomenon of curricular perspectives like the Project Approach.

- **Stop Doing Only Lip Service to Inquiry-based.** Building capacity for constructivist pedagogical practices will not work if we continue to merely state the need for projects and inquiry-based practices, but don’t sufficiently back such practices up with the resources, support and approval necessary to make such
work worthwhile (Katz, 1997). If programs like WOSS continue to state the Project Approach is the direction they wish to move, but then under additional pressures put projects on the backburner for the sake of more standardized measures, we cannot expect teachers to truly undertake the time and energy required of project work when the result is primarily negative. This leads to false outcomes as teachers discard such practices as not worth the time or not valid. Disconnect between theory and practice proves too difficult to overcome.

- **Teacher Education.** This research invites teacher educators to be cognizant of our role in teachers’ continuity of experience. The narratives found within this research only provide a quick glance into a more troubling question of how we prepare teachers for the field and the impact this has on their ability to implement project-based work. The disconnect from constructivist approaches to education found within the teacher education experiences in the narratives of Cathy and Amanda proved significant to their ability to sustain practices. Teacher educators have the responsibility to the field of early childhood education to model best practices not only in theory, but in practice. There must be a significant paradigm shift from standards-driven, isolated content, teacher-driven and efficiency models of teacher education programs to support quality pedagogical practices.

- **Study Groups Provide a Space to Document These Experiences as the Means of Moving Forward.** This brings me back to the role of the study group, a variable I originally sought to be the catalyst for moving forward. While study groups do not magically gain results and in this case did not bring all the participants to the Project Approach it opened up a whole new dialogue
connecting epistemologies, practices and implementation of the Project Approach. We cannot depend on one single catalyst to create a paradigm shift towards constructivist, inquiry-based practices, but we can see study groups as a valuable part of an entire mechanism that moves us forward and further sustains project work, which in the case of this story, is exactly what it did. We must continue to provide spaces like study groups that: Provide teachers a voice in their own education; scaffold educators’ practices; and model alternative professional development grounded in the concept of emergent knowledge and learning.

Moving Beyond this Situated Study: One Scene within an Ongoing Story

The question remains, do these implications mean anything or are they just research jargon? It would be possible for me as the researcher to determine this the end with a definitive conclusion, but this proves difficult given my personal experiences and knowledge that this did not occur in isolation, but within a larger context. This narrative set out to tell the story of personal practical knowledge grounded in the conception that “to understand the personal, one needs to ask questions not only about the past or the present, or the future, but about all three” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, pp.24-25). Understanding that narrative is a “kind of life story, larger and more sweeping than the short stories that compose it” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p.24) I view this research in the same manner. I have been able to provide details of the past and at the time of data collection the present, but it proves necessary to also discuss the future. The narratives go beyond this particular context and dissertation, serving as merely a short story within our ongoing narrative that seeks to continue to impact the present as well as the future.
So the question I address here and with which I conclude is, what happened after this dissertation?

I didn’t enter into this process in isolation and neither could I just walk away and leave it upon completion of the ‘research’. I struggled during the writing and analysis of this study to isolate what happened within the space of data collection when in actuality the work never stopped. Separating the past, present and future proved quite complicated and while it is my hope that I was able to accomplish this task, I also find it essential to discuss the parameters beyond the research.

As prefaced in chapter 6 we must always recognize the fact that learning is never finished (Katz & Chard, 2000) as well as understand the fluidity of knowledge and experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Since the completion of the data I have continued to work most closely with Kami and Lisa. We continue to meet monthly to engage in discussion, the sharing of projects and the posing of questions that continue to move us all forward in the Project Approach. Both have presented at conferences, sharing their work with others. In the fall of 2012 both Kami and Lisa presented their project work at the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) conference in Atlanta, Georgia with Dr. Chard, Judy Harris-Helms, and Yvonne Kogan. Such experiences further built their sense of efficacy, enabling them in the upcoming year to now mentor other teachers within their agency, building capacity for project-based work.

And the agency continues to navigate their role in supporting and sustaining projects not only for Kami and Lisa, but the agency as a whole. In a recent meeting, administrators, teacher mentors, Kami, Lisa and I had a meeting to discuss the upcoming
year and how to further support their project-based work. Kami and Lisa were provided adequate time to voice their needs and goals for the upcoming year, giving legitimacy to the Project Approach and building the internal processes necessary to move forward (Wenger et al., 2002). When administration was given the floor to state their goals for the upcoming year the response was, whatever it takes to continue to move forward. And the administration is doing just that. Not only have they found the need to set aside the time for Kami and Lisa to move forward, they too have taken steps to build capacity. Kami and Lisa will now be mentoring three additional teachers in their program to further project work within their centers; they will be provided the space and time to continue their ongoing study of the Project Approach; and the administration has come to me asking for their own study group as the means of further supporting the Project Approach in their centers. While not instantaneous or quantifiable, such stories show the possibilities and capacity for projects in the classroom.

It was within this recent meeting that Amanda was mentioned. Her administrator has stated how she still felt Amanda was a project-based teacher to which Lisa responded, “Amanda came to me last week and said, “I think I’m ready for project work now”. Now two years after the beginning of our initial study group, Amanda was ready, showing the organic nature of personal practical knowledge and the nature of the narrative within this research to never define or confine, but to continue to move within the space of the two voices of the teacher based on experiences.

It is this narrative and understanding that is so important to recognize within the field of education as well as research. We are always seeking efficiency within our practices; for research with a significant variable that impacts change; in early childhood
teaching practices that reflect the capabilities of the child, but meet all the objectives and
goals deemed necessary; the list goes on and on. It is my hope that the narrative you have
read illustrates an alternative to educational research, epistemological beliefs, and
teachers’ engagement in inquiry-based approaches.

As an early childhood education faculty and early childhood consultant I am
frustrated by the measures so often used to define “success” or “growth”. It is time to
pay attention to what happens between the lines and take the time to observe, document
and tell the stories in order to move forward. We need to stop the efficiency model of
labeling and engage in more narrative inquiry to gain a deeper understanding that can
inform our practices and build the capacity for project-based practices. When we stop
isolating teachers and begin to investigate more deeply the systems within which they
work then we open up a space that moves beyond prescribing teachers and their practices.
This shift begins to describe the reality of teaching and learning and working within a
system that often counters constructivist approaches to education and pushes the limits of
pre-determined, mainstream paradigms in teacher education, educational practices and
educational research. We must continue to challenge norms as the means of living in the
tension and constructing new alternatives to pedagogical practices.

**Walking the Labyrinth**

During the process of writing this dissertation I had the opportunity to completely
get away for five days and stay in a place where I was able to focus on writing and
finding clarity in my thoughts. I was amazed by what I was able to accomplish, but was
struck by the irony that early childhood educators seeking to also move forward in
project-based work are never given this time of removal, focus and reflection. Given
their daily reality, so wrought with demands, pressures, expectations and stress I am struck by how they are just able to make it through each day, let alone find the time to build quality, inquiry-based experiences that will affect children much beyond these early experiences. We need to find ways to continue to support such work and celebrate the work teachers do on a daily basis and to begin to question those practices that detract rather than promote quality experiences centered on an image of children as capable, competent and able all while being cognizant of the fact that this takes time. While current early childhood educational practices seem to be focused on single variables that lead to instant results, building the capacity for curricular approaches like the Project Approach requires time and space. Teachers need time to be intentional and to make a more permanent shift towards more innovative approaches. Teachers need an ongoing space in which to do this type of work, of which study groups provide one such pedagogical context.

**In Conclusion**

I end with a small narrative of my own. During my five days away, I was able every evening to walk a labyrinth. For anyone who has walked one before you may understand my own frustration the first evening when I kept thinking finally I am at the center only to find the path once again bringing me out to the borders of the labyrinth. I found myself contemplating on how this reflected my experiences to this point in my work with early childhood educators engaged in project-based work and the process of writing this dissertation. I was always so eager to see the final results and some magic variable that would get them all there as fast as possible that I failed to slow down and see the complexity of their narratives. This research did just that, forced me to slow
down and weave in and out of understandings with no end in sight, only the ongoing process of navigating between: the two voices of the early childhood educator; theory and practice; convention and innovation as we seek in both pedagogical research and practice to move forward in our understanding of best practices in teaching and learning.

We just have to willing to continue on the path and walk it with an open mind.

*This labyrinth has only one path so there are no tricks to it and no dead ends. The path winds throughout and becomes a mirror for where we are in our lives... walk it with an open mind and open heart...*

*Walk it at a slow pace. There are three stages of the walk...*
References


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Appendix A

Demographic Survey

Name:

Chosen pseudonym:

Educational level (circle one of the following):

High school diploma or GED  CDA  Associates Degree  Bachelor’s Degree  Master’s degree

Did any of your formal educational experiences address project work or inquiry-based learning? If yes, explain what.

Number of years in the field of early childhood education:

Number of years at current center:

Number of years working on projects:

List the projects topics you have done so far:

On a scale of 1-10 (1 being the lowest, 10 the highest), how would you rate your satisfaction with your project work to this point)?
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

**Standard questions:**
What is your understanding of the Project Approach at this point in your study?

Discuss your previous projects and how you feel about their success and your ability to facilitate them?

How does the Project Approach make you think about teaching and learning?

How does it support your ideas and beliefs of teaching and learning?

How does the Project Approach fit into the curriculum of your current classroom?

What aspects of the Project Approach do you feel most comfortable?

How does the study group help or not help your progress in learning how to support projects?

What would further support your understanding of the Project Approach?

What would you like us to discuss at the study group meetings that would help you grow in your understanding and implementation of projects into your classroom?

Are there any materials you feel would further support your work in projects?