

## Making High-Quality Early Childhood Settings Visible: Life at Little Garden Preschool

Ruslan Slutsky, *The University of Toledo*, and  
Stacey Pistorova, *Little Garden Preschool*

### Abstract

This article explores the role early educational environments play in shaping a child's first school experiences. The authors call for more intentional support and consideration of early childhood environments and the possibilities for the positive developmental outcomes they provide. Review of the current literature on quality early childhood settings, discussion of the variables that are key agents in promoting a quality early childhood setting and experience for young children, and a case study of a quality preschool environment is highlighted to illustrate and support this argument. Advocacy for authentic early childhood experiences in quality preschool classrooms provides a strong foundation for redefining educational practices and is necessary if we are to provide a foundation for future development and positive outcomes for all children.

### Setting the Context

This paper was a partnership between the authors (Ruslan Slutsky and Stacey Pistorova) and Little Garden Preschool (pseudonym) where Pistorova was cofacilitator of a Reggio Emilia study group and program assistant for the preschool program and Slutsky served as research partner. Little Garden practices the Reggio Emilia approach, which Pistorova and Slutsky were both interested in. In addition,

they both wanted to study further the components of quality classroom environments not only in theory, but also in the practices of a specific preschool staff engaged in a study of an early childhood approach that supported quality environments and viewed the environment as a "third teacher" (Malaguzzi, 1998). Given that Pistorova as a practitioner had daily contact with a preschool that viewed the environment as third teacher and we both sought to collect more data to support quality environments, both authors collaborated in a qualitative research project on quality early childhood environments. Pistorova began to collect the data as she had daily access to the preschool, while Slutsky was responsible for coding and organizing the data. Once all the data was collected, both authors took on the task of writing the manuscript.

Throughout the data collection process, we continuously discussed the Reggio Emilia approach that was being implemented at Little Garden Preschool. As data was coming in and coding was beginning to take shape, our discussions began to shift from a mere dialogue on the principles of the Reggio approach to more evidence-based components of quality environments and the high-quality experiences that we were documenting within Little Garden Preschool. The staff of Little Garden Preschool engaged in their own studies about the concepts

and theories related to quality, early childhood classrooms, and the Reggio approach. Their research further deepened our understanding of the process through which a group of early childhood professionals engage in when seeking to implement high-quality practices at their center.

The intent of documenting and recording the process of a Reggio-inspired preschool by both authors was to bridge the gap that often occurs between theory and praxis. The two authors met several times a month, discussing the project of implementing the concepts and research related to the Reggio approach and the components of quality early childhood environments. Participant-observation notes, documentation, and interviews challenged both authors to think about quality in different ways as we negotiated between the theory behind quality and the individual context of the experiences of children and teachers at Little Garden Preschool. From the data, we extracted elements that pertained to quality and incorporated them into the paper.

Below is the paper that came about as we discussed what we saw and heard in the data in combination with the elements we already knew from research that were critical in creating high-quality environments for young children. We wanted to write a paper that spoke not only to the components of creating high-quality environments, but also provided examples of what a quality environment looked like. The vignettes from Little Garden Preschool used throughout this paper provide the reader a glimpse into the process through which the authors underwent in their own investigation into quality environments and the classroom experiences that occur between teachers and children.

### **A Day in the Life of Little Garden Preschool**

*Children are greeted by name as they enter the Little Garden classroom, moving about to interact with both the adults and other children while waiting for the rest of the class to filter in. The children are found interacting in the large group area, some telling each other or a teacher a story while others are engaged in building with blocks and working on*

*puzzles. Children participate in a daily routine that begins with play. Following a transition time, children engaged in a period of large group work, where they participated in song or were presented with various roles for the day (i.e., weather reports and snack helpers) and voted on a question of the day. The teacher then introduces new materials added to the classroom such as a new book in the listening center, new rocks and minerals in the science center, and new computer software. Children then scatter throughout the room for an hour-long period of free choice. During this time, children played in the housekeeping area or on the computer, had a snack, or engaged with materials in the mini art studio. All the children were engaged and pursued their current interests, from dolls to airplanes to cooking. Each child was given the opportunity to work at his/her own ability level and to develop and reinforce skills at their own individual pace. For example, at the art table children were all engaging with the same materials — paper, glue, sequins, and glitter, but children can be seen at various levels, from just developing cutting and gluing skills and color sorting, to creating collages that develop into a night image and a penguin. Following this period of free choice, the children went outside where they ran and played on the playground and socialized with peers. Once in awhile children come to the teachers and engaged in conversation. Upon returning to the classroom, the children gathered as a large group to revisit the day and engage in shared reading before going home.*

### **Introduction**

We hope the above vignette has a sense of familiarity to it, while simultaneously providing an introduction for both researchers and practitioners to a high-quality environment. Children playing, classroom routines, engagement in art, and snack time are common staples of the early childhood classroom. The question then arises as to what defines quality within early childhood environments, and how can one differentiate levels of quality within preschool settings? What does it mean when someone labels a classroom as one of quality, and why may this particular classroom be considered high quality?

Such questions require a deeper understanding of the role early educational environments play in shaping a child's first school experiences. By discussing variables that are key agents in promoting quality early childhood settings and experiences for young children, this paper seeks to set standards upon which the early childhood field may base practices and shift from questions such as what is quality to what does quality look like in an early childhood environment? The paper below will discuss the evidence-based components of quality (teacher education and salary, teacher-child ratio, physical environment and inclusion, and language-rich environments) in collaboration with vignettes of how each is addressed in Little Garden Preschool to provide the reader a context for how components of high-quality environments can be negotiated.

### **Advocating for Quality**

As the amount of time spent in educational environments outside the home for children under the age of 6 continues to increase, the need for intentional consideration of quality early childhood environments as being essential to providing a foundation for young children exists (Espinoza, 2002). Advocacy for authentic early childhood experiences in quality preschool classrooms provides a strong foundation for redefining educational practices and is necessary if we are to provide a foundation for future development and positive outcomes for all children.

For many children the child care center has become the social context in which early development takes place. Due to the changing structures in family and the focus on dual incomes, for most children the child care center has become the place where they first learn to interact with others, engage in early learning and language development, and experience a school-like environment (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Enrollment for children ages 0–5 in child care is no longer an exception, but has rather become the norm. According to the 2000 Census, 49.3 percent (3.7 million out of 7.7 million) of 3 and 4

year olds in the United States were enrolled in preschool (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The fact that children are spending significant amounts of time away from their home and primary caregivers should be a clear indicator that the quality of experiences they encounter in preschool and child care environments is paramount.

With this in mind, educators must make every effort possible to ensure that our youngest children are in settings that support and provide quality experiences. Promoting quality early childhood environments can support parents and caregivers who historically have tended to focus on practical aspects that include proximity to home, cost, and the hours of availability of a preschool when choosing a program for their children (Bradbard, Endsley, & Readdick, 1983). Their focus upon practicality fails to illuminate the key components of a preschool environment that helps promote a child's well being and future academic and social success. One may not be aware of the complexity of choosing a quality school environment and the positive or negative implications this decision may have on the growth and development of a child (Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, Sammons, Melhuish, Elliot, & Totsika, 2006).

In the following sections, we will discuss the evidence-based variables of a quality early childhood setting: teacher education, teacher salary, teacher-child ratio, physical environment, inclusion, and language-rich environment in juxtaposition with vignettes from the Little Garden Preschool to illustrate environments that support and provide quality experiences. The vignettes of Little Garden Preschool provide a context in which practitioners, caregivers, and parents can "see" the evidence in action. We now enter into the life of Little Garden Preschool to gain a better understanding of quality early childhood settings and as the means of comprehending the components of quality environments that lead to authentic learning experiences for all children (Early, Bryant, Pianta, Clifford, Burchinal, Ritchie, Howes, & Barbarin, 2006).

## Addressing the Components of Quality Early Child Care Settings

### *Teacher Education and Salary*

Research on child care quality has often focused on teachers as the cornerstone of the quality debate, suggesting that high-quality teachers, those with an educational background in early childhood or a related field, have classrooms that rate higher with respect to overall classroom quality (Espinoza, 2002; Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes, & Cryer, 1997). Teacher knowledge of early childhood education and development without question is an important factor in determining the overall quality of a classroom and the impact that it has on learning and development. High-quality and developmentally appropriate early childhood classrooms expose children to nurturing relationships and appropriate early learning experiences, while children in low-quality care settings are time and again exposed to hazardous and unstimulating environments due to a lack of teacher knowledge to be able to appropriately respond to children's emerging needs (Barnett, 2004).

The inconsistency of teacher education can currently be found throughout the nation with respect to early childhood settings (Barnett, 2004). Whereas legislation requires a minimum of a bachelor's degree and licensure for elementary education teachers, there is no universal standard for prekindergarten teachers, leading to a great deal of variability in states and across programs in relation to teacher education, training, and credentialing (Pianta, Howes, Burchinal, Bryant, Clifford, Early, & Barbarin, 2005).

Empirical findings show the positive effects of formal teacher education on child outcomes. Research has found that teachers with a four-year degree can better facilitate an environment that is higher in quality, more supportive of the children's social/emotional needs, more child-centered, and more sensitive to interactions with children and families (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996; Phillipsen et al., 1997; Barnett, 2004). These findings suggest that teacher education is a critical variable when discussing the quality of early childhood environments.

The role of teacher education and qualification leads to additional discrepancies found in preschool teachers' salaries and benefits. In September 2002, the median salary for a kindergarten teacher across the United States was \$43,152. In comparison, a preschool teacher's median salary in the U.S. was \$21,332. Teachers' assistants in programs such as Head Start earn even less, an average of \$14,162 (Barnett, 2003). The discrepancy in salaries (between kindergarten and preschool teachers) is one of the major factors negatively affecting prekindergarten environments. Inadequate salaries may lead to the hiring of less effective teachers and higher teacher turnover rates of preschool teachers, both of which compromise the quality of early childhood settings (Barnett, 2003). According to Barnett (2003), the lack of suitable pay and benefits threatens the possibilities for high-quality programs.

The question of teacher education and salary in relation to quality proved relevant at Little Garden Preschool. The staff at Little Garden Preschool understands the role of education and the concept of teacher as learner. This is reflected in their formal education as well as their continuing professional development and growth. The classroom staff at Little Garden Preschool consists of one teacher trained in early childhood education, one trained in special education, and a paraprofessional. In addition, the classrooms are served by support staff that include an itinerant intervention specialist, a speech pathologist, a school psychologist, an early childhood coordinator, and a program assistant (coauthor Stacey Pistorova). In the classroom observed, the early childhood teacher held a master's degree plus 15 credit hours post-master's degree, the special education teacher held a bachelor's degree, and the paraprofessional held an educational paraprofessional license. The rest of the supporting staff had master's degrees.

The salaries of the staff at Little Garden reflect their educational and professional level. Their salaries are comparable to qualified K-12 teachers in the district. This has been noted by numerous staff members as being essential to teacher retention and low turnover rate. The early childhood teacher in the classroom we observed had

been there for 15 years. Such longevity creates a stable setting that is conducive to providing quality care experiences.

The educational level of the staff provides a foundation in child development and early childhood practices. Additionally, further opportunities for staff to continue to build their educational foundation are provided through ongoing professional development. These include support for inclusive practice, the role of the arts in the classroom, assessment measure, and the study of the Reggio Emilia approach. Such professional development opportunities help the staff to develop and understand the importance of a high-quality early childhood environment and how to sustain it. In addition, such professional development experiences enable teachers to provide children with learning opportunities that are in synchronization with development, always focusing on the child as the cornerstone in the teacher-learner dynamic.

*“Teachers are life-long learners. The staff continues to grow through opportunities for collegial dialogue and study” (Little Garden Guiding Principles).*

The authors were drawn to this above statement found in the guiding principles of Little Garden Preschool. The Guiding Principles written and upheld by the teaching and administrative staff illustrate their cognizance of the fact that continuous teacher education leads to higher quality in early childhood care. The role of continuous and ongoing professional development proved essential to the staff at Little Garden and was evident within their participation in a Reggio study group. As cofacilitator of the study group, I (Stacey Pistorova) was able to document and participate within a community of learners engaged in the ongoing process of questioning, researching, and reflecting on our daily practices with young children as the means of seeking greater quality in the program. As authors, we discovered that the emphasis this particular staff placed on teachers as “life-long learners” extends beyond research measures. While the degrees and salaries of staff directly correlated to research on early childhood quality, we came to view their perception of ongoing and sustainable educational experiences as significant.

### ***Beyond Education and Salary***

When defining early childhood and advocating for quality care, we came to the realization that we cannot stop here in our analysis. While both teacher education and competitive salaries have been linked to high-quality preschool environments, Early et al. (2006) warn against placing all the emphasis on such structural standards (salary and teacher credentials) as they may not necessarily lead to better child outcomes or higher quality preschool settings alone:

It may be that having a bachelor’s degree will prove to be a necessary condition for attaining high quality, but education and credentials by themselves are not sufficient. Instead, program administrators must institute measures to track quality in terms of what happens to children in the classrooms on a daily basis to ensure that these programs meet their goals of improving outcomes for all children (p. 193).

If quality relates more to what actually takes place in the classroom (Bogard, Traylor, Takanishi, 2007), then we knew we must further establish other important research-based criteria. The vignette of Little Garden Preschool (presented at the onset of this paper) illustrates the experiences of young children in a preschool setting that takes seriously the role of the environment in facilitating relationships and supporting the interests and learning of all children (Maxwell, 2007). The experiences facilitated by teachers of Little Garden Preschool result from their understanding the impact of teacher-child ratios on the learning process (Goelman, Forer, Kershaw, Doherty, Lero, & LaGrange, 2006), inclusive environments (Buysse, Wesley, Bryant, & Gardner, 1999), and rich environments facilitating language and other academic skills (Justice, 2004). Respect for a quality environment that is reflective of the community and the individuals within that classroom leads to quality experiences supportive of teachers, families, and children.

### *Teacher-Child Ratio*

In order to answer the question of what actually occurs in the classroom it is necessary to look at the surroundings, experiences, and interactions of children when entering into the physical space. According to Goelman et al. (2006), the quality of the interactions is largely impacted by the number of teachers available to interact with the children. Additionally, experiences are impacted by the quality of those interactions between the caregiver and the child.

The possibility for more positive experiences for children tends to increase when there is a larger number of adults in the classroom. Again, if we look at Little Garden Preschool, the teacher-child ratio in the classroom is never more than 1:7, but often tends to be as low as 1:4. Parents, service providers, and other individuals are invited and encouraged to be a part of the classroom environment and are often seen interacting with the children and assisting them in the least restrictive environment. Preservice teachers from local universities and colleges in the area complete their college practicum in the classrooms of Little Garden. The open environment invites and encourages adults to be a part of the preschool setting, which helps lead to more child-adult interactions and also educates adults on the role the environment has on children's development.

In the Little Garden Preschool, we were able to observe a great deal of small-group work and one-on-one support for individual children. In addition, the staff engaged in an inquiry-based curricular approach. Based upon the Reggio approach, the staff with the children investigated topics of interest to the children, often lasting from 4 to 12 weeks. For the authors, this supported the understanding that implementing appropriate teacher-child ratio is critical to a high-quality setting (Goelman et al, 2006). With a low teacher-child ratio, there were more opportunities for the teachers to engage with the children in multiple contexts and groupings while providing ample time for children to be deeply involved in topics that supported not only their cognitive development, but social and emotional development as well.

### *The Physical Environment and Inclusion*

*Teachers are partners in children's learning. Teachers listen to children's ideas and provide occasions within the environment for discovery and learning (Little Garden Guiding Principles).*

The physical environment of the classroom is the academic and social context where children interact with peers, teachers, and parents. Within this social context, the environment is viewed as the "third teacher" and understood to be a significant indicator of quality for all early educational experiences (Malaguzzi, 1998). The environment has the potential to become an extension of the community and promote learning. When the environment is perceived with such intent, it has the potential to illustrate the value we place on all our children, their families, and the teachers within a community of learners. The environment becomes more than simply a space, but also takes on the role of a third teacher.

Children create meaning for themselves when they have opportunities to make sense of their world through the rich and complex relationships they develop with people (Cadwell, 1997). Creating an aesthetic space that reflects the children and the community supports and stimulates the relationships and interactions of children within their cultural context. For Tarr (2001) this becomes a call to move away from the typical American classroom consisting of:

...flatly colored, outlined, stereotyped images of the posters and bulletin boards [that] talk down to children and assume that they are not capable of responding to the rich, diverse images and artifacts, including images from popular media culture that the world's cultures have created. Even objects found at home — vases of flowers, comfortable furniture, real dishes and tools, collections of natural materials or treasured objects — are not typically considered essential items in an early childhood classroom. When nature is allowed into the classroom, again it is

often decontextualized in the form of planting a seed in a paper cup, or caring for a class hamster (pp. 35-36).

We were both drawn to how Little Garden Preschool does just as Tarr proposes above, *from a real dresser and lamp found in the dramatic play area to an alphabet in the writing center designed from photos taken in the community, one feels a sense of the children, families, and community as well as the values of the teacher.* The classroom serves as an open forum for dialogue that embraces the potential of each child and the intensity in which they explore and engage in the seeking of meaning that cannot be exclusive of their culture, values, and families. The environment never becomes static, but rather is constantly changing, reflecting an image of respect for all members of the classroom community.

*The daily experiences children encounter within the classroom of Little Garden Preschool scaffold learning for all children. The environment provides the context for play, allowing for inclusive practices where children are able to work and play at their own developmental level, but are also challenged and scaffolded in ways that lead to further development. Little Garden Preschool serves children within the classroom with special needs ranging from speech and social concerns to moderate autism and Down syndrome. Careful consideration and planning of the materials available to students in the classroom plays a key role in facilitating the learning experiences of all the children within the classroom.*

An observer into the classroom, even a researcher, would find it difficult to clearly delineate children on an individualized educational plan from what education deems “typically” developing children. The staff provides an environment that promotes safe and challenging exploration and encourages all children to take risks and develop a sense of efficacy and competency (Maxwell, 2007), allowing each child to work at his or her potential. It was clear to both researchers that this early childhood environment was enhanced through inclusion (Buysse et al., 1999). Observations of Little Garden Preschool illustrate the benefit of an inclusive environment that does not seek to measure a child’s ability, but rather to

further the child’s potential to build upon individual skills and strengths within a social setting.

The importance of the physical environment leads to an understanding of how it promotes competency and learning. The affective and physical setting of a classroom provides a space where children can play and learn at their own level. The physical environment scaffolds children’s learning and challenges them to reach a higher level of functioning (Vygotsky, 1986). Quality interactions in a carefully planned classroom setting offer each child the opportunity to interact and work at his/her developmental level and potential.

The teachers’ abilities at Little Garden to facilitate a classroom setting that is supportive of each child’s potential benefits the overall quality of the classroom as each child’s development and experiences are taken into full account (Gandini, 1998). According to Buysse et al. (1999), inclusive classrooms score significantly higher on classroom quality rating scales, as positive developmental outcomes are the result of supportive classroom settings with an educated staff. Constant consideration and adaptation of classroom practices and of the physical environment help establish experiences and settings that are beneficial to children’s development and learning.

Our research at Little Garden Preschool illustrates how teachers can, by providing a physical space with appropriate materials, facilitate an environment that serves as a learning opportunity for all children. A quality environment that teachers constantly rethink, reconfigure, and support with materials allows the teacher to step back and support the children to take ownership of their ideas and apply their skills to the best of their ability. The close attention paid to the environment itself and how interactions and learning occur provide the children a social space where they can begin to use the environment as a learning tool.

### ***Language-Rich Environments***

*The documentation of children’s activities makes children aware that what they say and do is valued (Little Garden Guiding Principles).*

When the classroom environment is transformed from just a physical space to that of a third teacher, we can find:

*Children move freely throughout the room, some sitting quietly and reading a book while others are busily engaged in building a fortress out of blocks. A group of boys playing in the housekeeping area is observed spinning a bowl on a table and cooking “meatloaf” for their picnic. They discuss their recipe, and you can hear the “ding” of the microwave timer before they sit down to eat their meal. Several of the girls are in the loft where the babies are. One of the girls has brought her baby down to the large carpet and laid down on the floor, placing the doll up her shirt. At this time, she is called to snack. She proceeds to pull the doll out of her shirt. She hands the doll to one of the teachers playing on the floor with a group of boys. As she walks by she hands her baby to the teacher and asks her to take care of her new baby for her. The teacher carefully takes the baby in her hands and rocks her as she continues to play a game with the other children. After about 15 minutes, the teacher takes the baby and places her back in the crib in the loft area. The girl later asks, “Where did you put my baby?” She was told the baby was sleeping in the bed.*

*At the art studio area there are about three or four children gathered, each working on their own project. There are materials for collages on the table. They have been working on these a great deal recently. One girl is intensely working on something and when she completes it, she hands it to the teacher at the table. She has taken a black piece of paper to which she has added orange pieces of paper for eyes, a beak, and two wings. She then puts two black circles in the center for eyes. When she hands it to the teacher, she says, “Here is a penguin for you.”*

By following the children’s lead and documenting the learning process, the teachers of Little Garden seek to further enhance experiences and scaffold learning through choices of materials and consideration of the environment. Researchers and practitioners can see how the teachers at Little Garden strive to create an environment where children can communicate their ideas and build upon them through various means: from oral

and written language to play and the visual arts. Through centers, such as the mini-art studio, the teachers provide a space for students to actively engage in literacy and the construction of knowledge. Children work out their ideas through the materials within a social context. The staff of Little Garden Preschool understands that young children’s motivation comes from an intrinsic desire to communicate ideas and develop meaning. The classroom reflects the children’s needs and strengths, the community, and teacher values and skills.

The richness of quality adult-child ratios in a positive, social classroom setting with attention paid to physical organization create language-rich environments (Justice, 2004). In such settings, children are able to manipulate and develop literacy skills through the social experiences allotted by positive quality early childhood experiences. Social interactions provide the context necessary for building meaning through the facilitation of language (Andresen, 2005; Owocki, 1999; Neuman & Roskos, 1997).

Quality environments have the potential to promote literacy in authentic ways when they become spaces that facilitate the interests and ideas of the children. Conversations, texts, and narratives naturally emerge through social interactions between teachers and children, children and other children, and children and materials. Classroom materials such as visual art mediums and dramatic play artifacts further develop literacy skills within the context of play (Andresen, 2005; Slutsky & Danko-McGhee, 2003; Eisner, 2002; Owocki, 1999). A social community of learners create and find meaning through relationships with others and physical materials. Such experiences are developed in classrooms that consider the potential of the environment to facilitate quality literacy events (Roberts, Rabinowitch, Bryant, & Burchinal, 1989).

### **From Theory to Praxis**

Little Garden Preschool provides the context for bringing theory to practice. This particular program illustrates the potential of an early childhood environment that encompasses and considers characteristics of quality early

child care. From teacher education and salary rate to the physical and affective environment for typically developing and special needs children, Little Garden Preschool supports an environment that serves as a tool to help facilitate social interaction, play, and language for all children. Staff and teachers of Little Garden Preschool recognize the possibility and potential of the classroom environment to provide authentic and quality learning experiences.

Entering into Little Garden Preschool provides a glimpse into a preschool environment that supports the holistic nature of the setting and the interplay of all components of quality. It is with intent that the teachers of Little Garden Preschool approach the classroom setting based upon their understanding of the potential of the environment to serve as a third teacher. Guided by the fundamental principle that the image of the child is one of potential, curiosity, and interest in constructing their learning, Little Garden Preschool illustrates what is possible in early childhood environments that place the child first.

## Implications

A quality early childhood environment proves complex in nature, but also essential to providing a foundation for young children. As program assistant and facilitator of the Reggio study group, I (Stacey Pistorova) was originally charged with the mere assessment of the Little Garden Preschool environment through the implementation of the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), a widely used observational measure of early childhood environments. Based on results from the ECERS, Little Garden Preschool averaged a score of 6.57 out of 7.0. According to the ECERS, Little Garden is a very high-quality early childhood environment.

But just as evidence-based components of quality early childhood environments provide a framework upon which we can measure preschools, simply knowing a score does not move us to that deeper question of how do we build capacity for high-quality environments in early childhood classrooms? A score tells us that it is a quality

setting, but we have no qualitative way of understanding how it is good. In addition, isolating or providing a checklist for best practices cannot give a clear picture or understanding of quality early childhood environments. The vignettes from Little Garden Preschool presented in this paper helped us as researchers move beyond a number and evidence-based components of quality, moving us towards a deeper understanding of what quality really is in an early childhood setting.

Intentional support and consideration of early childhood environments and the promise of the positive developmental outcomes (cognitive, social, emotional, physical, linguistic) that quality environments provide to children need to be taken more seriously. In order to do so, more collaboration and advocacy for qualitative research merging theory to praxis within quality preschool classrooms is necessary. The components of quality — educated teachers, quality teacher-student ratios, inclusive environments, and language-rich environments that facilitate the construction of knowledge for all children — have little meaning without contextual knowledge. In addition, quality environments provide a strong foundation for redefining educational practices by re-envisioning the physical space as a third teacher. Parents seeking a preschool or early childhood setting for their children need to familiarize themselves with the components of quality that contribute to the overall quality of an early childhood program, including the physical space. We believe that Little Garden Preschool provides a space for researchers, practitioners, and parents to begin a more serious dialogue on what is quality in early childhood environments.

## Final Reflection

### *Stacey Pistorova's Reflection*

When I became a member of the staff at Little Garden Preschool a year prior to the data collection, I knew I was entering a school environment that supported inclusion, had a well-educated staff, and was engaged in a study of the Reggio approach, an approach to education that

strongly supported my personal educational philosophy. In addition, as a parent it was a preschool environment in which I enrolled my own daughter because I felt welcomed by the staff and believed it to be a space that would support her in her own individual development. In a sense I would say I had a gut feeling that Little Garden Preschool was a quality program.

But it was my own investigation of our daily interactions and practices through the data collection within Little Garden Preschool that deepened my understanding of our preschool program that I felt to be quality and supported the evidence-based components of quality preschool environments. As mentioned previously, I was originally asked by the early childhood coordinator to conduct the ECERS on Little Garden Preschool. It was the coordinator's intent to find a starting point upon which to base some goals and objectives for the staff and upcoming year in relation to the classroom environment. And yet our score, while not perfect, was close enough to consider there to not be a need for any improvement. But what occurred was quite the opposite.

I think those of us in education and in the classroom on a daily basis tend to do things automatically, without consideration or reflection on why we do it and how it supports young children. When we as a staff discussed the results of the ECERS and we looked more closely at the research on quality environments, we engaged in deeper inquiry, reflection, and consideration of our classroom environment and how the environment helped us develop and create relationships between the children and ourselves as well as between the children and the classroom environment. While the score and our discussion around the elements of ECERS allowed us to see our strengths and acknowledge what we were doing, it also provided the context for dialogue of how to move forward in the process of supporting a quality classroom.

I think that the collaboration between theory and praxis, the university, and the classroom based upon the data collected provided a space for applying research into practice. As a staff we began to question our practices,

our interactions, and our curriculum with intentionality. Collaboratively, we moved beyond a mere checklist of the elements of quality classroom environments towards a deeper understanding of our own practices and classroom while engaging in dialogue beyond the walls of our classroom with Slutsky and the larger context of the field of early childhood education. It was through such shared discussions that we move towards a deeper understanding of quality education.

### *Ruslan Slutsky's Reflection*

When we first started to discuss our research on quality environments we had no idea on how complex the data and the process would be. Pistorova and I had at the onset only focused on elements of quality that are most prevalent in the current research, more specifically teacher education, salary, turnover rates, and ratios. But through the research and Pistorova's data collection, our own definition of high-quality environments had begun to change and grow more complex. We were now thinking about ways inclusion makes an environment more quality and the literacy-rich environments that Pistorova introduced me to. As we started to rethink what makes an environment high quality, I started to think about what really defines quality in early childhood classrooms and how such an environment can be demonstrated to others. It became important to me to not just talk about quality environments but to also demonstrate how quality looks in a typical early childhood center that has committed itself to meeting the needs of its learners.

The following statement from Little Garden's guiding principles really helped me begin to rethink what high quality should represent and be: *Teachers are partners in children's learning. Teachers listen to children's ideas and provide occasions within the environment for discovery and learning.* To me, the statement really suggests that teachers are partners with the children and should work alongside the children to create high-quality spaces in which they and the children can thrive. As partners in learning, I think teachers can begin the journey to creating not

only high-quality experiences for children, but also high-quality environments that can serve as a third teacher at all times.

As we concluded our research it became quite clear to me how much more dynamic the discussion on quality environments is. It is so much more than just teacher education and salary. Rather than looking at teacher education and salary, I think we would be better served to look at the types of opportunities teachers get to enhance their professional development once they are hired by a center. How are they continuing to get better as they work with children on a daily basis? How are they being asked to think about their practice and challenged to continue to provide the best experiences for children? The

professional development that was continuously available to teachers at Little Garden helps set the stage for how others can motivate their staff to be better teachers and to rethink and constantly strive to improve the overall quality of their centers.

As educators we are always discussing ways we can impact children's development. One solution may be by starting with the environment and really focusing on how the spaces children enter in our preschool centers are meeting their learning and developmental needs. And if they are not, we can begin the journey of recreating the learning environment into high-quality spaces where all children can succeed.

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