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## Research in Special Education: Using a Research Poem as a Guide for Relationship Building

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## Research in Special Education: Using a Research Poem as a Guide for Relationship Building

### Abstract

Building positive relationships with participants is an important component of qualitative research in the field of special education. Research poems allow expression of the evolution of participant-researcher relationship in a sensitive and nuanced manner. In this paper, I use a research poem about gardening to demonstrate how a researcher can construct a positive relationship with his/her participants. Each line of the poem represents the sequence and evolution of relationship development between the researcher and families who participated in the research.

### Keywords

Ethnography, Research, Poetry as Data, Relationship Building, Participants, Special Education

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## **Research in Special Education: Using a Research Poem as a Guide for Relationship Building**

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Building positive relationships with participants is an important component of qualitative research in the field of special education. Research poems allow expression of the evolution of participant-researcher relationship in a sensitive and nuanced manner. In this paper, I use a research poem about gardening to demonstrate how a researcher can construct a positive relationship with his/her participants. Each line of the poem represents the sequence and evolution of relationship development between the researcher and families who participated in the research. Keywords: Ethnography, Research, Poetry as Data, Relationship Building, Participants, Special Education

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It was a beautiful, cool, windy afternoon when I walked to her house to conduct an interview. Erin and I sat on a stone bench in her front yard, surrounded by strawberry bushes, a rusting watering can, wild garlic sprouts, unmowed grass, a patch of cilantro whose heady fragrance reminded me of India, a kid's bicycle with a broken chain, rose bushes and sunflowers. Cars whizzed by on the street across and the sun shone on an azure, clear sky. I pointed to some colorful wild flowers that grew on the shoulder of the street. "Welcome to community housing! They don't manicure the grass here you know!" said Erin, laughing. I shared her laughter, inwardly admiring her perspicacity. This was the beginning of our year-long relationship during my research.

In recent years, there has been a spurt in the use of qualitative research methods in field of social sciences (Wiles, Crow, & Pain, 2011). Education researchers have also begun to use qualitative, creative ways of re-presenting knowledge, with the intention of making data more alive, powerful and closer to reality (Bagley, & Cancienne, 2001, Piantanida, McMahon, & Garman, 2003). In the field of special education, Brantlinger, Gersten, Horner, Thompson, and Harris (2005) assert that the use of qualitative research "...leads to an understanding of individuals with disabilities, their families, and those who work with them (p. 198)." Most special education researchers however, tend to and are encouraged to use conventional forms of quantitative research such as single subject design, considered an "evidence-based approach" (Odom, Brantlinger, Gersten, Horner, Thompson, & Harris, 2005; Mesibov & Shea, 2011). For example, single subject design is popularly used to measure the behaviors of a child with behavior disorders in the classroom and across contexts (Center, Deitz & Kaufman, 1982; Gutman, Raphael-Greenfield & Rao, 2012; Mooney, Ryan, Uhing, Reid & Epstein 2005; Rogers, 2000; Rogers & Graham, 2008; Swanson & Sachse-Lee 2000; Whalen & Schriebman 2003). By using single subject design, it is possible to accurately measure the what, how, why, where and when of a child's negative behavior. The problem is that the design fails to capture the child's feelings and subverts the effect that the observer and the observed invariably have on each other. That is where art based and arts-informed research come to play. Arts based research methods serve as powerful, enabling tools that help capture abstract concepts such as feelings and emotions of the teacher and students that impact the behavior of everyone in the classroom, thereby providing a wealth of information that can help reduce negative behaviors.

According to Eisner (2008), "...not only does knowledge come in different forms, the forms of its creation differ" (p. 5). Arts based research methods such as poetry, songs,

photographs, stories and drawings help portray the researcher and the researched as human beings with flesh and blood, who have feelings, emotions and experiences that affect research in powerful ways. There are very few studies in the field of special education that describe the use of arts based research. For example, a seminal study titled *Christmas in Purgatory: A Photographic Essay in Mental Retardation* (Blatt & Kaplan, 1966) demonstrates how photographs were used to express poignant stories of people with disabilities who were institutionalized. O'Brien et al. (2009) use Photovoice as part of the data to capture the experiences of college students with disabilities. A compilation of narratives by Connor (2009), underscores the need for moving special education data beyond its numerical boundaries. The author facilitated the creation of self-portraits in the form of narratives, rap poems and stories by students of color with disabilities. The result was data rich with perspectives from the "others." Ware (2001) used poetry as part of data and in secondary class room teaching to examine assumptions about disability.

Data represented in the form of research poetry need not be an end in itself. There is a need for innovative ways of applying poetry to further knowledge. Furman (2004) has used research poetry to write narrative reflections about an autoethnographic study of his father's illness. I propose that research poetry can serve as an innovative tool even in higher education pedagogy. Thus, I explore a new dimension in research poetry and re-present and unravel my poem, as a step by step guide about relationship-building with participants, to prospective researchers in special education.

Thus, the main objective of this paper is to use research poetry to demonstrate the steps and intricacies involved in relationship building between a researcher and participants. I also employ elements of autoethnography for this purpose. Autoethnographic writing can facilitate in-depth understanding of a phenomenon by making lived in experiences accessible (Johnstone, 1999). In an autoethnography, the individual's personal narrative is used to question or examine a broader social issue (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). Each line of the poem represents the sequence and evolution of relationship development. My own narrative is interspersed with that of my participants. These steps may be applied by prospective researchers in education to address the following questions: What is the researcher's role during this relationship building process? How does she ensure that she maintains a harmonious relationship with various groups of participants such as teachers, parents, and other members involved in the child's education? How does the researcher establish trust with both groups and ensure that the trust is sustained?

### **My Experiments with Poetry**

I completely agree with Leggo (2008) when he says "Poetry invites us to experiment with language, to create, to know to engage creatively and imaginatively with experience" (p. 165). When researchers merely reduce the lived in experiences of participants into reports, this prevents us from capturing and communicating the nuances, emotions and feelings that emerge during interactions with them. According to Maslow (1964), these characteristics are "...not communicable by words that are analytic, abstract, linear, rational, exact, etc." (p. 85).

The professional literature demonstrates the various uses of research poetry. For example, Sherry and Schouten (2002) demonstrate the use of poetry in consumer research to represent their experiences. The authors believe that "In many cases the poem will stand alone to give witness to a subjective truth" (p. 230). Poindexter (2002) has used poetry to represent data in her research with patients with HIV. Paul Friedrich is well known for his extensive use of poetry in his ethnographic work with different cultures (Fabian 1990; Friedrich 1996; Friedrich & Dil 1979; Tyler 1984).

During my doctoral student years, I had published one poem in an academic journal, re-presented my data analysis in the form of a poem in a research methods class and taken a course in arts-based and arts-informed research. Leggo's work (2008) fuelled my interest in exploring the use of poetry in research. I began creating more research poems about issues in special education. My peers, colleagues and a few eminent professors in the field of special education read my poems and encouraged me to continue to use poetry in research.

After obtaining my doctoral degree and joining the university, I began to explore the scope of research poems that in higher education pedagogy. For example, I used a previously published poem titled "Autism Mantra" (Cousik, 2008) to teach a chapter on autism to undergraduates. The poem was an appropriate substitute for a routine, text book driven presentation because I had used all the often heard words about autism, which spanned across diagnosis, characteristics, treatment, and recommended and spurious practices in the field, to create the poem. In fact, the content of the poem reflected the content in the text book chapter. Student evaluations revealed that the students greatly appreciated the creative method of teaching better than the routine lecture and group activities. Encouraged by the students' interest in alternative, creative methods of teaching-learning, I began to reflect on graduate level teaching, where the courses required considerably more in-depth exploration of topics. I was particularly interested in using novel teaching methods in a course where I supervised students who were working on their thesis. The students enrolled in this course were already working as special education or general education teachers. They conducted action research in their own classes as part of the degree requirement and interviewing parents and other teachers was an important part of the methodology. This meant that they develop and maintain a cordial relationship with teachers and parents. I wondered if I could - use a research poem to teach my students how to be sensitive and empathetic researchers and thus, writing this paper provided an opportunity to explore this idea.

### **The Significance of the Process of Relationship Building**

Relationship building, particularly with families of children with disabilities is a very delicate process and requires care, empathy, maturity, understanding and tact on the part of the researcher. It is especially important to ensure that the relationship is positive, so that it is harmonious and sustained, resulting in ethical benefits for both researcher and the researched. The strength and quality of the relationship varies, depending on the skill, personality and previous experiences of the researcher and the researched. There are some common, pre-requisite skills however that a researcher can acquire in order to ensure that the relationship fosters mutual understanding and respect. Thus, this paper is an attempt to teach some of the most important skills that a researcher must develop, in order to build a mutually respectful, healthy, harmonious and sustainable relationship with participants.

Typically, knowing your participants involves formal and informal interviews. Following guidelines, the researcher procures approval for a questionnaire for the interview, schedules meetings with each participant and administers the questionnaire. Different types of questionnaires maybe used, depending on the type of study. The interviews maybe informal, semi-structured or open ended (Patton 1990). An interview usually begins by the researcher eliciting information about each participant's background—demographic information. This is followed by questioning pertaining to the issue/s under study. Depending on the time available, the latter part of the questioning may be brief or extensive.

Open ended questions leave more room for elaboration by the participant. The extent of responses largely depends on the willingness of the participant to share and the interviewer's skill in framing questions and cueing the participant during critical moments in the interviewee's narrative. Such cueing is likely to encourage the interviewee to elaborate on

an issue. Mere questioning may not encourage such elaboration. Kvale (1983) outlines 12 aspects to understanding a qualitative interview and underscores the importance of seeking to understand the interviewee through his perspective. Rubin and Rubin (2011) call their interview technic “responsive interviewing” because in this technique, “...researchers respond to and then ask further questions about what they hear from the interviewees rather than rely exclusively on predetermined questions” (p. xv).

Kvale notes that the researcher’s sensitivity greatly affects the interview process. For example, Venkatesh (2008) beautifully describes the incongruity of a situation when, as a doctoral student in sociology, he naively attempts to understand the reasons for poverty among black people in Chicago. He begins his interviews by administering a typical questionnaire where each interviewee reads a set of questions and rates each response on a scale of 1 to 5. Upon meeting a group of black men who were residing in the part of the city known for illegal marketing of narcotic substances, the researcher feels intimidated by their behaviors and the surroundings. But because his dissertation work is at stake, the author bravely attempts to interview some of the gang members and recalls that

The first question was the one that I had adapted from several other similar surveys. It was one of a set of questions that targeted young peoples’ self-perceptions. “How does it feel to be black and poor?” I read. Then I gave the multiple choice answers: “Very bad,” “Somewhat bad,” “Neither bad nor good,” “Somewhat good,” “Very good.” The guy with the too-big hat began to laugh, which prompted the others to start giggling. “F---you!” He told me. “You got to be f---ing kidding me.” (p. 16)

### **The Original Study**

When I began my research (Cousik, 2011a), I embarked on the journey of knowing my participants by being sensitive to their views and perspectives, instead of merely conducting interviews as a means to an end. I conducted an ethnographic case study that examined the phenomenon of children with disabilities learning music in an elementary school in the mid-west. The children in the school were affected by multiple risk factors—poverty, minority status and disability and hence there was a critical need to examine how these factors impacted their development. My study was nested within a larger study where researchers from the local university were examining the effect of learning to play the violin. As a special educator and as a musician, I was greatly interested in understanding how learning to play the violin—considered an instrument of the elite—was affecting the development of children with multiple risk factors of poverty, ethnic minority and disability who were participating in the project.

After obtaining IRB approval and recruiting participants through informed consent, I immersed myself in the music project through participant observation, attended the music class twice or thrice a week, every week and learned to play the violin along with the children. Participants were selected using the unique case sample method, where children in the study who had identified disabilities and those who were considered at risk for special education services, their families, their teachers, and other school personnel who were directly involved in their education were invited to participate. There were 27 seven participants in including 5 children, teachers, administrators, project personnel, school staff members and parents. Data collection methods included observation of children in the music class and other classes, field notes, field reflex journal, audio and video tapes, photographs, documents, informal conversations and interviews with parents and various school personnel.

I had also engaged a doctoral student who was a certified music therapist as a multiple observer.

According to Pugach (2001) “To consider disability in the absence of a full consideration of the socioculture within which it exists is to fail to understand the dynamics of an individual’s educational or community experience—the full context of their lives” (p. 447). Thus, as a participant observer, I was able to generate rich descriptions about students and also understand perspectives of other members in each child’s system such as family members and teachers. Studies that involve participant observation enable knowing at a deeper level than experimental studies that tend to use simulated settings (Becker, 1977). Additionally, I endeavored to minimize observer-interaction effects (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) by restricting my role to that of a mere observer and not a teacher (Cousik, 2011a).

I used within and cross case analysis methods to analyze data. Within case analysis includes generating a detailed description of each case that is likely to lead to powerful insights. It facilitates management of large volumes of data and through this process, the researcher becomes more familiar with each data set. Finally, within-case analysis helps the researcher become aware of connections and patterns across data sets thereby enabling cross-case analysis. I used content analysis methods outlined by Granheim and Lundman (2003) to conduct my cross case analysis. Credibility was ensured through correlating multiple observer data, peer debriefing, member checking and triangulation of data sources (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). A copy of the official approval for this study is available with the author.

By constant and close association with my participants, I began to develop strong relationships with them. The generosity of the parents and teachers in giving me their time, the unconditional warmth that they exuded and the openness with which they communicated, had me ponder over the process of knowing one’s participants beyond the conventional realm. Actually, my first participant paved the way for us knowing one another. After she received my letter, she called me and said “I want to help you!” With her first phone call, I realized she was friendly, educated, approachable and articulate. It was my responsibility to ensure that these excellent qualities in her were appreciated and her friendliness and approachable manner towards me maintained throughout my study. In order to really know her, it was essential that our relationship remained intact during the study and hopefully last beyond its completion. Deeply conscious of the immense value of her generous gesture, I began to think about creative ways of knowing her. How should I conduct myself so that the parents felt free to talk about their lives? How could I refine my role in the interview process? What were some things I should avoid or be careful about?

There were ethical considerations as well. As a researcher, respect was top on my priority—respect for participants, their work and home schedules, and their culture. I conveyed my respect through politeness in speech and by being as nonintrusive as possible. During my observations and interviews, I put forth suggestions when they were solicited and carefully avoided stating my opinions or imposing my views on my participants. In order to minimize any bias, I triangulated data whenever possible, by examining issues that claimed my attention from various perspectives—that of the child, parents, and teachers, and sought supporting evidence from literature. I also made an effort to convey respect for each setting through my attire—semi formal when I was collecting data in the school and comfortable clothing when I was in the community with the families. All interviews were scheduled as per the convenience of participants. I had informal conversations with the school personnel only after making sure that they had the time—for example during breaks or after school. Informal conversations with parents were facilitated by my regular visits to the community.

## **Creating Research Poetry as Data**

From the beginning of the study, I looked out for potential contexts, dialogues and conversations that could be re-created in poetic and visual art forms. Once every few days of data collection, I would sift through my field notes and field reflex journal and highlight parts that captured my attention. I looked for the elements of repetition, refrain and rhyme in each comment, dialogue or note. For the purposes of this paper, data constitutes the interview transcriptions and dialogues and quotes from the informal conversations with participants. As I gathered more data, I was able to create poems of two types. In the first type, I used quotes directly from my conversations with teachers and parents and slightly altered a few of the sentences to construct lyrical re-presentations of the central idea of each context that seemed significant. However, I took great care to ensure that I maintained the integrity of the original comments. In the second type of poetry, I made use of metaphors and analogies that seemed to me to represent the context in a creative, more powerful and insightful manner. According to Polkinghorne:

Human experience is not organized according to the same model we have constructed for the material realm. I envision the primary organizing principles in human experience as more akin to those that construct poetic meaning than those that construct the proofs of formal logic. Experience makes connections and enlarges itself through the use of metaphoric processes that link together experiences similar but not exactly the same, and it evaluates items according to the positions they hold in relation to larger wholes. (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 16)

Thus, through use of original quotes, metaphors and sometimes songs that were taught in the music class, I periodically created summaries of my experiences in the field in the form of poems and drawings.

The following poem is a summary of my experiences with some of my participants. I had used activities of gardening—digging, tilling, planting and weeding as metaphors to create the poem. Subsequently, I unravel the messages in the poem to explain the growth and development of the bonding between the researcher and the researched. The poem has been previously published (Cousik, 2011b) and the editor has permitted its use in this paper. The use of gardening metaphors seems appropriate because gardening facilitated the segueing of the roles of the researcher and the researched from strangers to collaborators. Furman (2004) states that “...the impact of a metaphor is more powerful and succinct than if one were merely to describe the dynamics of an experience or a relationship” (p.163). Gardening weekly with my participants provided me an opportunity to know them in their own surroundings.

### **Ethnographing the Garden**

Digging the earth  
 Seeking to know her well  
 Tilling the land  
 Mulling over our conversation  
 Weeding the earth  
 Airing her misgivings  
 Planting peppers  
 Sowing seeds of trust  
 Binding the earth

Bonding with the family  
Hoping for a good harvest  
Hoping to enjoy the fruits of our labor

### **Digging the Earth, Seeking to Know her Well**

Ethnographic research involves the creation and ongoing renegotiations of relationships between researchers and informants (Lawlor & Mattingly, 2001). Developing a relationship with a participant who is a parent is like growing a plant that requires caring, nurturing, and vigilance. For example, a researcher may have to provide ongoing feedback about their children's progress in school to parents. S/he may also have to lend an empathetic ear when parents vent their feelings about their personal problems. Sometimes, a researcher may have to demystify the legal and official processes involved in schooling (like providing light for the plant in order that it stands strong and independent). Most importantly, a plant grows best on its native soil. Therefore, in order to build a healthy relationship with participants, researchers must be willing to meet/spend time with the participants on their grounds—at their homes if possible.

Thus, when I received the friendly phone call from my first participant, I decided to go with the flow. With her permission, I began the first interview at her place because I sensed that she would be comfortable in familiar surroundings rather than at the school—which is the teachers' domain. The most important initial step in the interview process is to be a good listener. In their research in the area of nursing studies, Sorrell and Redmond (1995) state that “The interviewer needs skills in listening for and interpreting meaning so as to respond appropriately” (p. 1118).

For example, Erin told me “I think Peter has severe social skill issues because I couldn't take care of him when he was an infant. I couldn't carry him like other moms because of my surgery...” I realized that she harbored feelings of guilt even after so many years of his birth. I gently reminded her of all the things that she had been able to do for her child. She had constantly read to him, taken him out to parks and other places where he could socialize with other children and during his school years, talked to him every day about what he did in school. Thus, by highlighting her efforts to ensure her child developed healthily, I conveyed that she had more than adequately compensated for her self-perceived lacuna in parenting.

When participants reveal personal information, the researcher must make every attempt to listen to them attentively. The researcher must also provide appropriate, non-verbal responses through body language and facial expressions to encourage the participants to say more. Pauses in the conversation must be used efficiently to reiterate and confirm what the participant said, or ask if the participant would be willing to expand on the point. Through this process, the researcher is subtly letting the participants know that their comments are valued. I nodded in accordance to some of the things she shared and talked a little about my own background and life experiences. Through such attentive listening, I facilitated an in-depth sharing about her growing up, her illness and her education, reports of friction with the teachers, and gossip about neighbors.

“So what do you want me to talk about?” asked Erin, Peter's mother. Peter was a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade student at the school where I conducted my research. “Please tell me about yourself. What was it like, growing up?” I asked her. “Well, I was born with a rare type of disorder you know. They did surgery on me. See this huge scar? That's why I couldn't care for my child like other mothers. I couldn't jump around and play with him...” she began. Liebow (1993) emphasizes that there should be an equal contribution between the interviewer and the interviewee. Thus, when Erin learned that I was from India, she said “Doesn't Peter look like

an Indian with that dark, curly hair and brown skin? His dad is African American you know!” I laughed and said “Yes, he does look like an Indian boy!” and talked briefly about my own growing up and my interests in cooking, music and growing vegetables.

After a few minutes of talking, we decided to take a short walk in the pretty neighborhood. Some families relaxed in their front yards, drinking beer/soda, smoking cigarettes and chatting. It was around 2:00 P.M. and the children were still at school. Where were the criminals that people warned me about? This part of the city was generally considered the “city dump”—not a safe place to be in.

A participant may sometimes take the lead in connecting the researcher with other participants and even encourage her friends and relatives to take part in the study. One must be careful to ensure that IRB guidelines are adhered to and explore the possibility of recruiting new participants, as long as they fit the researcher’s criteria for selection. For example, at the far end of the street that we were walking on, a woman came out of her house and waved at Erin. Erin looked at me and said, “Do you need more participants for your study? I bet Sara would like to participate, because all her kids are special ed! In fact one of them and my kid are best buddies! But be careful with her though. She doesn’t always tell you the truth.” I discerned that Erin and Sara must have been living as neighbors for quite some time and knew each other well. I thanked Erin and said that I was eager to meet Sara but respectfully refrained from reacting to her last comment about Sara.

Erin introduced me to Sara and told her that I was doing a study on how children with special needs learned. Sara had already received my letter through the school and said “I have a deep respect for special educators! You are doing a great service to the kids. I am happy to take part in your study.” I thanked her and said that I would return at a later date to schedule an interview. Erin and I continued walking and reached the community garden which was a part of a larger park. The whole garden had been divided into small plots. Erin led me to hers, handed me a shovel and said, “Come on, we’ve got work to do!” A slender, young woman who looked like she was from Asia joined us. Mina was Erin’s close friend. After digging and preparing the soil, it was time for tea. Mina brought out slender, bone china cups and poured us all some hot tea made of raspberry leaves. We sat on wooden benches and sipped the tea. The conversation flowed smoothly and effortlessly. We decided to do this every week and I left. Reminding myself about parity of contribution, I promised to bring Indian food next time.

Knowing participants is further facilitated when the researcher adopts a positive and friendly manner of interacting with others, right from the beginning; and perhaps, mentally rehearse possible ways of initiating and continuing conversation. For example, before beginning an interview, I found it helpful to have a few conversation starters that are likely to ignite a participant’s interest rather than asking stock questions that elicit stock responses. An ethnographer’s book of field notes is a rich source to formulate opening lines. For example, before I scheduled my first interview call with Sara, I leafed through my field notes and highlighted what I had already heard or knew about her family and my observations of her son at school. “I noticed that Peter and Keith are always together in classes! How long have they been friends?” I said. She began to answer and I listened attentively, patiently waiting for her to finish what she was saying. Sara liked to go into great detail about each question that I raised and hence conversations were usually very one-sided. Sara also generously allowed me to talk to her when I passed by her place during my weekly stint in the community garden. I deeply appreciated the fact that she did not insist on a formal schedule for the interviews and felt comfortable enough to talk to me casually as I passed by. Her friendly attitude increased my motivation to visit the community more often with more ease.

Although Erin always welcomed me at her home for interviews, I realized that it may not always be possible to meet parents at their homes. During such instances, a researcher

must make efforts to meet them at places of their choosing and continue to creatively work on knowing them. For example, Briona, a single mother of two girls, held a full time job and expressed that she could only talk to me over the telephone. She was willing, however, to take more than one phone call from me and although the conversations were brief compared to those I had with the other two participants, I guessed that Briona valued her privacy and preferred me not to visit her home. But because I was a participant observer in the school which necessitated that I was present there twice a week, I had opportunities to talk to her informally whenever she visited the school.

With my fourth participant Julia, scheduling an interview was nearly impossible. I had to find other ways of talking to her. One such opportunity came when she was with her son Tom in the cafeteria. "He seems to be having a good day!" I said to Julia. She was standing by the doors, keeping an eye on him. Julia, a mother of 3 children with disabilities, often attended school with her children, as teachers were wont to call home if one of them misbehaved. Thus, all my conversations with Julia were during the school days, either when she worked one to one with Tom or his siblings in their classrooms, or when she waited for him to transition from one class to another.

### **Tilling the Land, Mulling over Our Conversation**

It is important to follow formal interviews with parents with informal visits as a next step in the relationship building. Informal visits help the researcher become a familiar figure in the neighborhood. For example, when Erin said "You guys (from India) cook all your meals from scratch, don't ya? Tell you what? I have a patch in the community garden where I grow vegetables! You can grow your vegetables with me there! And then you can show me how to cook some of your dishes! How about that?" she asked. I was thrilled at this opportunity to get to know her daily life activities, through which I hoped to gain insights about life in that community. I agreed to work with her in her garden every Tuesday evening.

A researcher must be alert to such serendipitous opportunities that ethnographic research offers and make full use of them in order to develop a deeper understanding about the phenomenon under study. Thus, working in the community garden every week enabled me to meet parents in informal settings. Through our discussions, I began to realize that all the parents were very knowledgeable about their children's strengths and weaknesses, their legal rights and about the services available for their children in their community. Sara was a single mother of 4 children who were diagnosed with disabilities. After a traumatic relationship with a husband who had been recently incarcerated for substance abuse, she had decided to raise her children on her own. Sara and her children completely relied on the state for support. Sara was deeply dissatisfied with the system and the injustice meted out to her younger son, Keith.

Keith...got slandered and misunderstood and taken [*sic*] of churches, schools have complained...Finally one day I requested to have some tests done on him physically and mentally...what they stated was he has a severely damaged speech impediment. ...I wanted an occupational evaluation done because he is a hands-on learner! So now they're doing it. Then I found out that he has dyslexia because when you hear and see things all your life a certain way that causes dyslexia. He is in therapy for a year now...Going to the doctors, going to the therapist, complaining to everybody I could. "Look there's something wrong with this child and you are slandering him."

Informal conversations with Tom's mother Julia revealed that she had observed his

inconsistent behavior at home and had started to seek professional support outside of school. She said "...He has good days and bad days. You never know what he will be next. He is like that at home also. I think he has ADHD. I want to have him tested. The school is trying hard but it doesn't seem to be working for Tom! I have to put him on meds perhaps..." Similarly, when I was walking back with Erin and Peter after school, Erin told me that she had observed Peter's problems with socialization from the time he was around 2 years old. Through these informal conversations with parents, I gained valuable insights about parental knowledge, their efforts at bringing up their children and the personal challenges that they constantly faced in their lives.

Sometimes, parents may also contradict what a researcher observes at school. For example, Francesca's mother Briona proudly recounted her daughter's creative abilities. "She is very good at arts and crafts! She is also a social butterfly, you know! She loves going to school and rarely misses it 'cos she likes to hang out with her friends!" she said. "I am sure her teachers like her too?" I said. Briona said "Well, yes, but she is struggling a little with her academics. She does very well with things she knows already, but when she has to work on something new, she shuts down!" It was clear that Briona was underplaying her daughter's academic difficulties because I had noticed that Francesca was constantly being punished at school for misbehavior. The reading specialist complained that "...she is mean to this other girl with special needs. And, I just don't know how she managed to reach 2<sup>nd</sup> grade! Her reading scores are not even at a first grade level!"

It was not my job here though, to report the specific details of Francesca's school performance to her mother. I was a mere observer, documenting the conversations and their contexts for my own learning. It was the teachers' responsibility to provide periodical, official reports of Francesca's school performance. At such times, a researcher could prudently direct parents to possible strategies that can help resolve conflicts with teachers. It is also ethical that a researcher remain supportive without appearing to take sides. Considering the fact there is an ongoing relationship between families and the school, it is very critical that the researcher does nothing to jeopardize this relationship. "Have you tried talking to her teachers?" I asked Briona. "I will, soon..." she replied.

Many parents will also express their opinions about and their perceptions of the school system. In order to avoid bias, the researcher must document the perspectives from both sides-teachers and parents. And in order to maintain one's collegiality with both groups and as a further matter of ethics, great caution must be exercised if the need for sharing such information with either group arises. For example, Sara blamed the school for Keith's struggles at school. She said "School, he's been ripped away from one teacher that misunderstood him. 'It's his eyes, he just can't see' or 'he just can't learn.' This is real, true statements and real paperwork. 'He ain't smart.' 'Something's wrong with that kid.'" His third grade teacher, on the other hand, reported that she had some misgivings about his home life. "Something's going on with that family. I need to talk to his mother. He is not even performing at first grade level. His crucial learning time is being lost" she said. I had the opportunity to hear both sides of the story which enabled me to make non-judgmental inferences about the tension between the parent and the teachers.

As a researcher, one finds oneself in situations where loyalties are tested. It is essential to remain neutral and gently redirect the conversations to topics that surround the objectives of your study. This point is well illustrated by an incident involving Keith and Peter. According to Erin, Peter and Keith were 'best buddies.' One day, Keith took Peter's toy scooter and claimed it as his own. After that incident, Peter's father forbade him from talking to Keith. I noticed that Peter and Keith no longer talked to each other in school. When Erin reported this incident to me, I listened to her with empathy and agreed with her that it was not appropriate to take someone's toy and claim it as one's own. Although I regretted the

loss of friendship between the two children, I choose not to mediate and respected each family's right to work on the conflict. I refrained from playing role of a law enforcer and gently redirected our conversation to Peter's school performance.

### **Weeding the Earth, Airing her Misgivings**

As the researcher-parent interactions continue in informal settings, parents will also begin to express what they think about teachers, an indication that the researcher is beginning to earn their trust. In return, parents may expect the researcher to share his/her observations of their children in school, perhaps hoping to hear more than what a teacher's formal report can convey. They will expect the researcher to reciprocate their trust. For example, I had the privilege of being in both the contexts—the school and the home and respected the sanctity of each setting. At school, I was an observer of their children's school activities and in their homes, I was an empathetic listener. I refrained from directly sharing my observations and conversations with participants in both the groups but offered some suggestions that could serve to improve communication between teachers and parents.

The issue of trust was put to test when I was talking to Erin. During a pause in Erin's narrative after about fifteen minutes, I said "Talk to me about Peter as a baby. How was he?" I asked. "You have seen him in school, haven't you...so what do his teachers say about him? Do they complain about his social behavior? He always has problems with this one teacher you know..." she said. I had personally witnessed Peter's problematic behaviors and the teacher had also told me that she was frustrated with Peter's behaviors. Thus, by triangulating my data sources—by listening to the parent's account, through observations and by talking to the teacher, I was able to agree with Erin. I suggested to her that it would be a good idea to meet his teachers and take deliberate steps to help him perform better at school. Towards the end of the year, Erin reported that she had met the teachers many times and as a result of sharing of knowledge and ideas by both groups, Peter performance at school was steadily improving. Towards the end of the school year, her teacher proudly displayed his poems on the bulletin board.

Sara conflict with the school system however, seemed ongoing. For example, she reported that

When Keith was promoted to second grade, I made sure that Ms. Lovejoy moved with him as well! That third grade teacher, she is a screamer! She yells! I didn't want my boy to in her class! So I had Ms. T moved from another school to our school and now Keith is very happy in her class! I want the best education for my child and I will fight them!

By being a participant observer, I was also able to view the teachers' perspectives about such issues. Although both teacher and parent accounts concurred on some aspects, there were contradictions as well. For example, Keith struggled with math, reading and writing but his first grade teacher reported that Keith was the best student in her class—"a model student, very helpful!" It is possible that she tried to highlight only the positive aspects of his school performance so as to avoid any conflicts with Sara. On the contrary, another teacher said "I have heard things about Keith's mom. Something's going on. I don't know how he reached 3<sup>rd</sup> grade! His scores barely reached the first grade level!" The 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher that Sara referred to indeed had a loud, commanding voice which she used frequently to bring a sense of order in her class. I remember noting in my journal "If she continues to speak to the kids in this manner, she will soon damage her vocal chords!"

## **Planting Peppers, Sowing Seeds of Trust**

Constant and repeated interaction with parents enables the researcher to reach a stage where he/she begins to erase and cross borders. The researcher must be willing to loosen some of the strictly professional-client relationship, as part of the trust building process. Apart from being an empathetic listener, the researcher must also acknowledge the parents' efforts in bringing up their children despite several challenges including economic hardship. For example, when Sara spoke of her struggles with bringing up her children as a single mother, I complimented her on her courage and resourcefulness. "You are very strong and so well informed about special education laws!" I said to her one day. She said "I have to be, for my kids' sake!"

Although initially she wanted to do the interviews only over telephone, she gradually appeared at ease and began talking to me informally. For example, during one of my work days in the garden, I passed by Sara's house and she invited me in to show off her wall. That was the first time I had entered her home. Each wall in the living room was filled with her children's drawings and craft work. A chart of rules sat prominently in a corner. Sara believed that children should be taught to behave in a disciplined manner. Each of her children had a routine that he or she had to follow including regular meal times, brushing and bathing routine, homework and reading time. I was grateful to Sara for welcoming me into her family's personal space—an indication that I was beginning to earn her trust. I was also impressed by Sara's efforts to ensure her children grew up "to be good citizens." Her attitude towards childrearing seemed totally at odds with the teachers' presumptions about families in poverty—that these children lacked discipline and structure at home.

By the simple act of being allowed to visit Sara's house, however briefly, my relationship with Sara changed, loosening boundaries and creating opportunities for a deeper understanding about the life of her family. This trust building was only possible because I had become a familiar figure in the community. I had communicated to the parents through my demeanor and regular visits to their community that I was an empathetic observer who was genuinely interested in learning about more about them.

## **Binding the Earth, Bonding with the Family**

A researcher must also be prepared to welcome unsolicited phone calls and offers for dinner or lunch or shopping. In fact, Erin seemed to be so comfortable with me that she would call me on an occasional evening and invite me to pick mulberries, or ask me "You said you added cilantro in everything, didn't ya? Why don't you stop by and harvest some from my garden?" To continue the reciprocity of the relationship building process, I decided to return her favor in kind. After harvesting the fragrant cilantros from her front yard, I offered to cook some rice and vegetables with it for an upcoming lunch in the garden. A few other families in the neighborhood learned about the lunch and offered to join us. Each person brought a special dish to share. We had salad straight from the garden and home-made tea. Afterwards, we harvested more vegetables that would be freely distributed to all the families in the locality. As I pushed the cartload of carrots, beets, purple basil, peppers and tomatoes and walked to Sara's house, I marveled at the extent to which my relationship with the community had grown.

As my study progressed, some parents continued to be comfortable talking over the phone, as opposed to having face to face conversations. After a couple of visits to her house, Sara and I continued our conversations over phone. Sara's calls to me often reflected her frustration and anger at the school. During one such call, she began to weep uncontrollably. I allowed this venting process and gently reminded her of the occasions on which she had

fought with the system and won. I realized how stressful it must be for her to be a single parent, living in economic hardship and attempting to raise all her children as a single mother. I felt a sense of responsibility towards her well-being and was really keen on doing something to reduce the tension between Sara and the school. I offered to find out other resources in the community that she could contact to help her resolve her conflicts with the school.

Regarding Francesca, I had observed that she was very musical and good at arts and crafts. I also wanted teachers to recognize Francesca's creative abilities. Thus, during my conversations with her teachers, I was able to highlight my observations and provide suggestions as to how these strengths could be utilized to help her improve her academic skills. Some teachers acknowledged that Francesca had strengths but a few others continued to punish her for her problem behaviors, without recognizing her creative abilities. True to my role as a researcher, I listened respectfully to the teachers when they shared their reasons for punishing her and documented my reflections about the issue for detailed analysis later. My goal at this point in time had been to offer supports for the families using the resources and skills that I possessed and endeavored to do it in way that was least intrusive on the teachers' relationships with parents.

### **Hoping for a Good Harvest, Hoping to Enjoy the Fruits of Our Labor**

Lastly, it is important to understand the collective significance of the result of relationship building. Although each actor in the setting has her own individual goal, perspective and role in the research, the researcher must endeavor to make this journey harmonious. Rather than investing heavily in data gathering, the researcher must appreciate the different threads which weave the school, children, parents and community together. The researcher is a part of this fabric. Thus, all of us hoped to reap a good harvest. Erin hoped her vegetables would come up healthy. All parents hoped that their children would get good grade reports by the end of the year. Teachers hoped that their students were successful at school. In future, I hoped that the families would strengthen their relationships with teachers and teachers would find time to visit the families and enhance their understanding about parents, their home lives and their unique perspectives.

### **Results**

My experience of getting to know my participants emerged like a bouquet of flowers of varied hues, colors and shapes because of the unique qualities and context of each narrative. As a researcher, I had equal responsibility in the relationship-building process. I made a conscious effort to be non-judgmental and offer support to parents. Although I interacted with both parents and teachers, I remained a neutral but empathetic observer, offering suggestions only when solicited. As we had a common interest at the epicenter of our interactions—the children, we were able to cross borders with our collective narratives. Two mothers allowed me to know them more closely and two others accommodated my request for telephone interviews and brief face to face conversations despite many constraints. Parents began to trust me more as the year progressed, partly because they were willing to welcome me into their community and partly because of my own efforts to earn their trust. Erin remained friends with me even after the completion of my research and she still talks to me freely about Peter and his progress at school and about her garden.

### **Discussion**

In this paper, I have used research poetry to explain the process of relationship

building between the researcher and the researched. In the manner of an hour-glass, I condensed data into a research poem and by unfolding of the poem into a new narrative, I described the steps involved in relationship building between the researcher and the researched. The metaphors used in the poem serve as milestones in the process. I concur with Erickson (1985) who underscores the importance of developing and maintaining relationships with informants from the beginning. During the study, relationship between the researcher and the participants is ongoing and is greatly strengthened by “genuine exchange of views” (Heyl, 2001, p. 369). My experiences with parents and teachers during my study highlighted the need for investment of resources and time by the researcher and the researched (Ortiz, 2003, p. 36). Once the research is underway, the researcher must be willing to loosen the strictly professional stance and appear at ease in the community, among its people. In order to gain and maintain the trust of the participants, a researcher must be an attentive and empathetic listener, be resourceful and ready to provide support that participants may seek. Thus, through the process of relationship building, the researcher evolves or morphs and forms a new or additional identity. For example, getting dirty in the garden was a great segue from my role as a researcher to a role as a well-wisher of the family. Finally, a healthy relationship is fostered through practice of mutual respect, consideration of the participant’s time and culture and the adopting of a supportive stance by the researcher.

Writing poetry from research data is a very personal endeavor by the researcher and “This method is so reliant on the gut feeling and literary hunches of the researcher that it cannot be replicated” (Poindexter, 2002, p. 708). One must not presume that all ethnographic data can be explained or re-presented through poetry. Rather, poetry may be a viable tool for researchers who have a penchant for sifting out the lyrical, musical components in the conversations with their informants. Researchers aspiring to collect poetic data must endeavor to learn to write poetry with the same intensity, interest and excitement that one invests in writing prose (Leggo 2008, p. 170). A caveat here is that all research poetry may not be amenable to expansion as pedagogical tools. However, it is important to re-examine the scope of research poetry by pushing boundaries and taking it in new and exciting directions.

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