

# C.A.R.T.S.

CULTURAL ARTS RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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## Interviews: The Heartbeat of Our Inquiry

by Paula Rogovin

A sign on the restaurant read: Unsatisfactory Inspection. This was our third unsatisfactory report from the "Health Department." *Oh, no, what would happen next?* Yes, we have a restaurant in our first-grade classroom. The food is plastic, the refrigerator and stove are made from cardboard boxes. Each day during Research Workshop, the children search for answers to their many questions: *How do they get food for the restaurant? Who grows the food? Where does the food come from? Who works in the restaurant? How do they know how to cook the food?*

On the first day of school my 1st graders had selected research topics about our school community. After describing what they already knew about the topic, they formulated questions. We posted the questions. Those questions would become our curriculum. We made a list of ways we

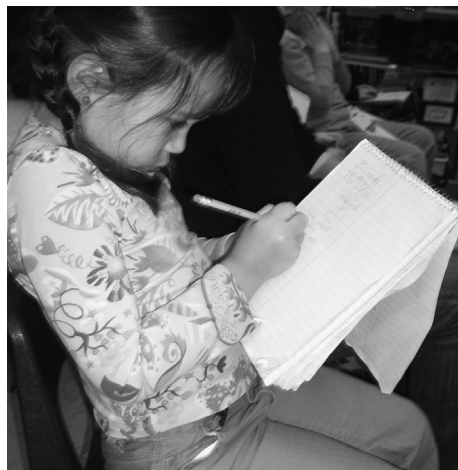
could find answers. As educators, one of our jobs is to help students consider and expand the ways to find answers to their questions. Books and the Internet are useful, but perhaps the most child-friendly and exciting way for young people to find answers is by interviewing people in their community. Information and concepts children can discover at an interview often go well beyond what they can read. Here are a few of the interviews and activities from our research.

### Our Restaurant Research - An interview of Amanda's father, Eric

In our weekly Family Homework bulletin I asked if any family members or friends had worked in a restaurant, even for a short time. That's how we ended up interviewing Amanda's father, Eric. Eric told us about the work that takes place at night, after the restaurant is closed. He described the night porters, who work from midnight until 7 a.m., cleaning and letting in the delivery workers, who start arriving at 4 a.m. Imagine all those night owls doing so much work while we are sleeping! The children became those night workers as we did role-plays to deepen their understanding. Since that interview, we found out that many people (and animals) work at night, and we expanded upon our ideas through great children's literature.

### An interview of workers at a local restaurant

During Center Time each day children get to play with Legos, clay, or blocks.



Carolina taking notes during an interview.

Photo courtesy of Paula Rogovin.

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Some chose to work in our restaurant. One day, there was a (pretend) grease fire with fake red construction paper flames at our restaurant. We really needed to know what to do with all of the grease from our restaurant so that it wouldn't be such a problem. A few weeks later, we went to a local restaurant, a veritable United Nations, where we interviewed workers about their jobs. When the children asked about the grease, we learned that the grease from the restaurant is taken to a factory and recycled and turned into soap and even fuel. That trip and interview sparked an interest in recycling.

### **An interview of our gym teacher, Michael**

We interviewed our gym teacher, Michael, who owns a restaurant. During the interview, we had a lively role-play. Some children were the food prep workers, pretending to cut food. Others were chefs, dishwashers, and bus boys and girls. Still others were wait staff who hurried in and out of the kitchen.

Just before Michael's interview, the restaurant in the corner of our classroom had received its third "unsatisfactory" inspection report. Problems noted on the inspection reports included: food (plastic) on the floor and some perishable foods not refrigerated. We would have to figure out what this meant, and why these were such serious problems.

The children were worried about our "unsatisfactory" reports, though they suspected that the student teacher and I were the inspectors. Since Michael knew so much about restaurants, the children asked him what happens when you get three "unsatisfactory" reports. He said that if this were a real restaurant, we would have to go to court!

### **A "court" session/interview of Jack's father, Kirke**

In the beginning of the year I surveyed jobs and hobbies of family members, so I knew that Jack's father, Kirke, was a judge. Kirke came to our classroom, which we set up like a real court, with rows of chairs, rather than our informal seating. He wore his black robe and brought his gavel to the interview/court session. "Witnesses" talked about the problems noted in the inspectors' reports. The judge gave us 30 days to make improvements.

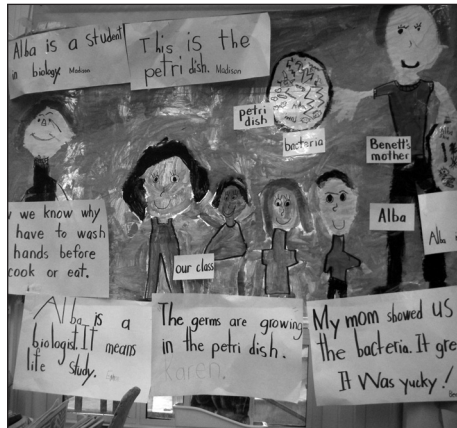


*Students interview Benett's mother, Alba, about bacteria and germs.*

*Photo courtesy of Paula Rogovin*

### **An interview of Benett's mother, Alba**

We interviewed Benett's mother, Alba, a college biology major. She told us that there are bacteria and other germs all around, but we can't see them with our "naked eye." The children, true first graders, thought that was funny. We learned that the expression, "naked eye" means seeing something with just the lens in our eye. Some of us have a special lens in our glasses. We looked through a magnifying glass to see how that lens makes things appear even larger. Then, we looked on the Internet to see a microscope, which has a more powerful lens. The next day, we borrowed the microscope from the science teacher.



*Mural about the importance of washing hands*

*Photo by Paula Rogovin*

Alba brought petri dishes with agar to this interview. Each child rubbed a Q-tip on the floor, a hand, or a shoe, then rubbed the Q-tip on the agar (which is food for the bacteria and molds). Two weeks later, Alba came back with the petri dishes so we could see how the bacteria and molds had grown. This time, we could actually see the bacteria and molds with our "naked eye."

Ahh, then we realized how important it was to wash the dishes and tables, to keep food off the floor, and to wash our hands before we eat or cook. Alba told us she had kept the petri dishes in a nice, warm place. She said that the bacteria and mold don't grow very well in the cold. We then real-

ized why we need to keep certain foods in the refrigerator.

### **A second "court" session/ interview of Jack's father, Kirke.**

Nearly thirty days later, the judge came back to our classroom. After, the "All rise," he swore in witnesses who explained to him what we had learned from Alba about bacteria and other germs. Children explained to the judge about why they were keeping certain foods in the refrigerator. The judge told them how pleased he was that they had learned so much about keeping the customers and workers in our restaurant safe and healthy. He was glad they had "cured" the problem (as we "cure" a medical problem). We all cheered as the judge told us we could keep our restaurant open.

### **An interview of Noah's babysitter, Zoraida**

As part of their restaurant research, the children wanted to know where food comes from and who grows it. As they researched strawberries and other fruits and vegetables, students read that sometimes children grow those crops. And, it was at the interview of Zoraida, a babysitter of a former student, that some deeper, perhaps lifelong, learning happened.

Zoraida grew up in Peru, where she attended first grade. Because her family needed more money to live, Zoraida, as the oldest child, had to leave school at age seven to work from early morning until the sundown. During the interview (conducted both in Spanish and English), children pretended to be donkeys pulling the plow to loosen the soil. Others took turns copying the way Zoraida planted the corn and then beans right next to the corn. They pretended to grind the dried corn to

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make flour. Role-playing was fun, but the students were upset when Zoraida told us about how sad she was that she couldn't go to school.

Although it was difficult for these first graders to imagine not going to school, it is important for them to begin to understand the issue of child labor. Zoraida may have opened up for them a lifetime of awareness about that subject, and perhaps a commitment of activism around social issues.



Yael in our restaurant.

Photo by Paula Rogovin

During Zoraida's interview, as with all our interviews, the children sat with notepads in hand. Periodically, we stopped to take notes with pictures and words, depending on the skills of each student.

### What happens after the interviews?

During an interview, I'm always thinking about the potential reading, writing, literature, science, art, math, music, and other curriculum areas which can possibly evolve from that interview. After an interview, my student teachers and I think about ways to make those connections, possibly during an upcoming research workshop, at math workshop, during center time, or during meeting time when we have poetry, and songs, and stories.

### Writing, art, and reading:

After each interview children draw a picture and write a page for a homemade

book. Those homemade books about our interviews become our reading lessons. A few days a week, we do word study with these books. Imagine reading about your parent instead of reading from a basal reader! After we use our books in class, the children take them home to read and discuss with their families.

We surround ourselves with our research. In the days following an interview, a group of children will work for several days during center time to paint a mural depicting something important from the interview. When the mural is finished, children make large captions, and the mural is posted in our room or in the hallway. We painted a mural of Zoraida and the donkey, used to plow the soil. We painted a mural of Alba holding up the petri dishes. Sometimes for reading workshop, we pull up in front of a mural and do word study from the captions and labels. We might circle all of the words with "ow" or put a funny zigzag under words where the s sounds like z (is, has, was).

### Writing, social studies, and social action:

Zoraida inspired many poems, written by individual children during Writing Workshop, and we even wrote together as a class. At Research Workshop we did more research about child labor. That led us to write a play about child labor. We presented that play to the families at a special evening event we call a Family Celebration. Another teacher recorded the play on DVDs so that, as the children said, "We could tell the world that we must end child labor."

### About Interviews

Every teacher I've ever encouraged to conduct interviews in her/his classroom, has commented to me afterward that it has changed their teaching life. It's true. Interviews can do that. Interviews help make information and concepts more accessible to students. The interview is seeable, hearable, and touchable. Through our questions, discussions, role-playing, and note taking, the children are part of the interview, making interviews a very active form of learning.

There's very little preparation necessary for these interviews. At the beginning of an interview, I help set the framework, so that we can focus on a particular topic. When we interviewed Alba, for example, I said that Alba is a college student, and that she may be able to help us solve some of the problems with our restaurant. "So, let's ask Alba some questions about that."

A child asked, "What are you studying about in college?"

When I was a child, it seemed that the teacher and the textbooks knew everything. When we interview parents, babysitters, friends, and community workers, we find that the people we interview know far more about a particular topic than the teacher. The information at an interview may go far beyond the scope of a book.

Interviews are fun. There's lots of laughter during role-plays. There are so many surprises at interviews. Who would have thought that Jack's father, Kirke, would run a court right in our classroom, or that he would invite us to visit his real court room that Spring – and we went. Who would have thought that Renata's father in Brazil kept the secret recipe for synthetic rubber in a safe at his factory? The excitement from the interview is always reflected in the children's writing in the homemade books.

The truth is that I, too, find the learning and the surprises from the interview really fascinating. When we are learning along with our students, classroom life is a joy for all.

### Interviews in a Climate of High-Stakes Testing

So, how did I "get away with" doing all these interviews and the social studies-based research in this day and age, of "No Child Left Behind?" A tragedy of this era of education is that there is almost NO time in most schools for social studies. After mandated test preparation, reading and math blocks, and scripted curriculum, there is little left for anything else. This is a fatal flaw. I teach at the Manhattan New School, Public School 290, where administrators know that inquiry teaching can be interdisciplinary. Rigorous reading, writing, literature, science, art, music, and math lessons will evolve from interviews.

It is urgent that educators work, both outside and inside our classrooms, to put an end to the obsession and profits from testing and scripted curriculum. Let's bring back social studies and science inquiry. Through interviews we can open our minds and hearts. Our children will develop academic skills as they become informed, socially conscious learners.

*Paula Rogovin teaches first grade at PS 290 in Manhattan and is the author of Classroom Interviews: A World of Learning (Heinemann, 1998) and The Research Workshop: Bringing the World into Your Classroom (Heinemann, 2001).*