CHAPTER 13

EXCEL

See saw, sacaradown,
Which is the way to Boston Town?
One foot up the other Foot down,
That is the Way to Boston Town.

—Mother Goose

THINK OF THIS CHAPTER as a series of lenses to look at where you are going in your practices. The analogy is an eye checkup. As the optometrist slips lens after lens into the holder in front of your eyes, the letters on the chart continually become clearer. The chapter title EXCEL is an acronym. Each letter stands for a cluster of best practices. No cluster is more important than another. Like the lenses the eye doctor uses, each is important in the process of the exam. I explain the acronym in the first part of this chapter.

The questions in the second part of the chapter help you focus on your practices more clearly. EXCEL is a self-test to help you see what you consider important. Seeing what we consider important is a way to confront our beliefs.

The third part of the chapter has ideas for how to use EXCEL, either on your own or with a group, to help you change your practices. I suggest reading the full chapter before beginning to answer the questions in part two.

UNDERSTANDING THE ACRONYM EXCEL

The acronym EXCEL stands for

E—Environment
X—eXchanges
C—Conversation
E—Evidence
L—Language

The cluster of practices together indicates the quality of children’s experiences. The selection reflects my beliefs about what constitutes excellent early education. Others might select differently. Here, I describe the meaning of the acronym EXCEL.

E—Environment

In early education, from birth to about age 8, the environment is the curriculum. Jean Piaget (1950), father of constructivist theory, believed that each child’s
intelligence develops from experiences with objects in the environment. Lev Vygotsky (1934/1986), father of socio-cultural theory, believed that the interaction of adults in children’s experiences determines how an experience will affect children’s thinking. Reuven Feuerstein, father of the theory of mediated learning, believes adults’ interactions—if they are intentional, convey meaning, and transcend from the immediate to the past or future—are the determining factor that makes us human (Feuerstein et al., 2006). Reggio practices integrate constructivist, socio-cultural, and mediated-learning theories. A challenge in early education is to integrate the beliefs of Piaget, Vygotsky, Feuerstein, the Reggio educators, and other best practices.

Reggio educators believe the environment is so important that they call it a “third teacher.” This means they trust that what children learn from each other and from using items in the classroom is equally important to what they learn from working with a teacher.

As you read the questions on the environment, consider:

**Key Point:**
The environment either constricts what children can experience or puts a world of relationships within children’s reach.

Every question suggests conditions that either restrict children’s access to ideas or, if changed, could make ideas more accessible. By “idea,” I mean a child’s ability to construct new meaning through his or her actions with or without an adult’s interaction.

**X—eXchanges**

The central idea in Vygotsky’s (1934/1986) socio-cultural theory is that we learn as a result of our interactions—or exchanges—with the environment but especially with one another—child/child, child/adult, or adult/group. Reggio educators believe that teachers’ primary role is to listen, to know when to intervene, and to do so in a way that enables children to clarify their own thinking. Feuerstein’s theory would put it this way: Adult intervention in children’s activities has three essential characteristics: (1) intention, (2) meaning, and (3) transcendence (Feuerstein et al., 2006). Intention means that adults give serious thought to why they are intervening, select a particular meaning that they intend to convey, make children aware of their intent, do whatever is necessary to convey that meaning, and then encourage children to connect the meaning to something that happened in the past or could happen in the future.

Looking at an episode in the Shoe and Meter project, described in Chapter 12, the teachers’ intent in suggesting that children make a long jump is to remind children how they once used standard measurement. The teachers make the suggestion because they see a parallel between how children measured their jumps and what they need to do to measure the table. The meaning is the children’s dawning realization that measurement must be consistent and must use numbers. The transcendent ideas are that there are ways to measure other than with one’s body and they can be applied to tables, long jumps, or universally. The teachers understand that children’s desire to give instructions to the carpenter is the motivation for their actions. Thus, to maintain the motivation, the teachers thoughtfully consider precisely when and how to intervene as the project evolves. The proof that the teachers are completely cognizant of every minute in the project’s life is that they have documented it with exceptional detail in words and photos.
eX changes are based on adults’

- selecting something of importance to communicate;
- knowing how to arrest children’s attention;
- sensitively listening or watching children’s responses as keys to children’s emotional and cognitive states;
- using their intention to change children’s state—stimulate a desire to participate, excite children about new cognitive skills, engage empathetic feelings, and the like—and to keep motivation high.

C—Conversation

I determine whether children are self-regulated by how they behave when you engage them in conversation. Conversation is a way to observe whether children can:

- focus their attention;
- maintain focus;
- think logically, that is, stay on topic and make responses that relate to what others are saying;
- restrain impulsive behavior;
- monitor what they are doing as they do it;
- retrieve relevant content and concepts from their memory;
- express their ideas fluently.

To me, conversation is important because it helps develop the brain’s attention systems. Attention is the basis for all learning. A child who cannot focus cannot learn. Helping children become self-regulated means “training” the attention systems so that in time children are able to regulate by themselves. Some children need to be taught these skills. Smiley faces, gold stars, threats, and punishments such as time outs are external rewards or incentives for children who do not have internal controls. External incentives motivate children to work for the reward. They do not help children work for the joy of the work, nor do external rewards help build internal control. Conversation is also important because it helps in developing the brain’s linguistic systems.

E—Evidence

By evidence, I mean both the work children themselves have produced and the documents teachers make or collect:

- notes or recordings of what children say;
- photos of children’s significant actions that
  — capture the moment of discovery;
  — seize a perplexed face;
— arrest the expression that says, “Aha!”
— reveal a group’s attempt to solve a problem, like using body parts to measure (Malaguzzi, Shoe and Meter, 1997);
— freeze hands as they skillfully manipulate;
— snag a series of images that show a skill as it evolves;
— catch an emotion when children empathize, show friendship, feel sorrow;
— watch a misadventure and perhaps its righting.

Note: Having a camera always ready, knowing what to shoot, having adequate light, a favorable angle on the children, and the object of children’s attention in view—all at the same instant—is often a matter of luck. But when caught, such photos are invaluable in showing children’s growth. Photos also show teachers’ increasing understanding of what the work means and of their own growth.

• video, a more difficult medium than photos because video requires interpretation to explain what the teacher’s intention is, the meaning of the clip, its transcendent value, and the context that surrounds or gave rise to the content;
• lists of what children have been engaged in along with other records that teachers keep on a regular basis.

L—Language

By language, I mean the diverse modes of expression in which humans communicate their ideas. There are hundreds. I focus on:

• spoken or written words in which ideas relate logically to one another;
• symbols, such as numbers, pictograms, or letters;
• gesture, facial expression, body language, and other movements;
• visualization and spatial representation;
• marks on paper that reveal how children move their hands and how they manipulate any kind of mark-maker;
• musical expression;
• using the hands to wield tools and shape objects in clay and other natural or man-made materials;
• responses to natural paradoxes such as light, shadow, holes, rainbows, air, water, temperature, and other phenomena;
• responses that reflect understanding of oneself and others.

Key Point: Language is both the means through which individuals exchange ideas and the means through which the mind receives, stores, manipulates, accesses, and expresses ideas.

I use the phrases Meaning-full Conversation and language-full experiences to emphasize the importance of using language fully. By fully I mean using extensive vocabulary, standard grammar, fluent expression, as well as using language in its verbal (speaking or reading aloud), graphic (writing), and silent (reading to yourself) modes.
PUTTING EXCEL TO WORK

In this section, are the five topics in the acronym EXCEL. I pose nine or ten questions for each topic. Under each topic is a list of considerations; all describe conditions that are undesirable. Note your reaction to each condition and respond to the questions. Your responses can help you analyze your own practices and determine what you do in each area of practice addressed in this assessment. In the third section of this chapter I provide additional guidance on how to use EXCEL to change your practice, either by yourself or with the support of a group of colleagues.

E—Environment

In the early years, the environment is the curriculum. Examine your environment to assess what possibilities your environment provides for children’s minds to grow.

1. Is the room cluttered or orderly? For signs of clutter, consider whether you see these things in your classroom:
   - cardboard boxes of surplus supplies such as tissues, sponges, paper towel, toilet paper, cleanser, and the like;
   - materials piled on shelves so that individual puzzles, games, or manipulatives cannot be seen without lifting off other items;
   - walls covered with commercially produced posters or decorations;
   - mismatched containers that hold materials;
   - containers so large that you cannot see the contents inside;
   - sets with many pieces—blocks, LEGO, trains—without a storage system that makes pieces visible, orderly, and easy to take out and put away;
   - small objects—beads, animals and people, grocery items, housekeeping items—stored without being sorted by category, color, size, or some other classification system;
   - pencils, crayons, or markers not stored by color;
   - crowded shelves.

2. Are the materials that are available to children mainly colored plastic, or are there wood and other natural materials? Consider whether
   - textures to arouse the tactile sense are mainly limited to wooden shelves, Formica tables, and plastic toys;
   - colors to arouse the visual sense are mainly limited to a narrow range or to intense hues. (Remember: The human visual system can distinguish about 2 million colors.);
   - objects that children can handle are mainly limited to circles, squares, triangles, rectangles, spheres, and cubes with no ovoids, ovals, cones, pyramids, or other shapes, especially those reflecting the complexity of the natural world such as spirals, fractals, and irregular or compound shapes;
   - there is little or nothing to arouse the senses of smell, sound, and taste.

3. Are there commercial products or children’s work on the walls? Consider whether
• wall displays are mainly commercially produced;
• memos, procedures, and other written materials that have little direct relation to children are in evidence.

4. Is there a large collection of art materials—open-ended, multi-purpose, diverse, and enabling children to be precise—that is visually accessible and within reach? Consider whether
• art materials are mainly limited to tempera paint, crayons, thick markers, play dough, wiggly eyes, glue sticks, blunt scissors, school paste, construction and painting paper, and not much else;
• materials are too high for children to reach;
• materials are in a cupboard or otherwise out of children’s sight;
• art materials are located in different parts of the room;
• there is no central place that clearly acts as a studio.

5. Are there thin-line black and colored markers and a mark-making area? Consider whether
• markers have only thick tips;
• markers are in only 12 or 16 colors;
• markers are uncapped or dried out;
• markers are isolated from paper.

6. Are manipulative materials in good condition, plentiful, varied, and orderly? Consider whether
• parts are missing—for example, no strings with the beads, no board for pegs, not enough pegs to fill boards, no cylinders, cones, pyramids, ovoids, or other non-rectilinear shapes or solids;
• items with working pieces are broken—for example, the door on the stove, the drawers in the cash register, the body parts of dolls;
• objects are scratched, chipped, or dented;
• quantities of blocks, LEGO, or other sets are insufficient to create large or complex constructions;
• there are no imaginative “found” objects to mix with blocks, train sets, or to use in play areas;
• overall there is little choice of materials.

7. Are the imaginative play areas detailed, attractive, and complex? Consider:
• dress-up clothes
  — there are none;
  — dress-up clothes are dirty, ragged, or torn;
  — storage is inadequate so clothes are piled on shelves, stored in chests or boxes, or lying on the floor.
• housekeeping area
  — sparsely appointed—not enough dishes to set a table for four, not enough pans, pots, or baking dishes to stimulate varied pretend play;
  — no real cans or cartons among food items;
  — nothing of beauty to give the area character or aesthetic quality.
• grocery
  — sparse collection of food items;
— no “real” item such as cash register or shopping cart;
— food is all make-believe with no real cans or boxes (empty, of course);
— all major food groups—protein (dairy and meat); fruits and vegetables; carbohydrates; fats, oils, sweets (in limited amounts)—are not represented.

8. Are there awe-inspiring collections of natural materials? Consider whether
   • there are no natural materials or too few natural materials to attract children’s attention;
   • natural materials lack variety;
   • natural materials are broken—shells chipped or fragments, leaves crumbled, bird’s nest scraggly, insects missing parts;
   • there are no ways to protect natural materials such as compartmented boxes, lined trays, pieces of felt, or special cases;
   • there is no magnifying glass or loop;
   • there are no books in which to research shells, rocks, leaves, bark, or other natural materials;
   • plants are not groomed or are wilting;
   • aquariums or cages are poorly equipped with nothing for animals to hide or play in;
   • animals’ facilities are dirty;
   • manufactured “natural” objects substitute for the real object from nature.

9. Are there mirrors, light tables, and climbing/crawling structures? Consider
   • mirror
     — only one mirror;
     — mirror(s) is plastic and distorts images;
     — no mirror in which children can see their full body;
     — mirror is hung too high for children to see themselves.
   • climbing/crawling apparatus
     — there is none;
     — designed for children under age 3, not 4 or older.
   • light table is poorly designed—for example, the bulbs can be seen through the Plexiglas, the surface is not evenly lit, is too bright, or the frame extends too far onto the top;
   • there are few materials that are colored, transparent, or shiny;
   • there are no materials that reflect or transmit light;
   • there is no object such as the pyramid, kaleidoscope, periscope, or other large Reggio-type structure.

X—eXchanges

The kinds of eX changes that take place among children, children and teachers, and children and the environment reveal what the role of the teacher is.

1. Do you tell the children what to do, or do children choose? Consider whether
   • you name the children and direct what they do;
   • you alone, not collaboratively with the children, make lists of class helpers.
2. Is use of time determined by a schedule or by children’s span of interest? Consider whether
   • a posted schedule lists activities at regular intervals of 15, 20, 30, or some other increment of minutes;
   • the schedule lists “pull-out” sessions for individuals or groups of children;
   • the schedule lists such classes as music or language that the full class attends on a regular basis;
   • children who are concentrating are interrupted to change activities;
   • children who are concentrating are told to stop so others can have a turn;
   • children who are concentrating are told to stop so they can work with the teacher.

3. Do children use “indoor voices”? Consider whether
   • the tone of the classroom is loud;
   • children call across the room;
   • you call across the room.

4. Do children hit, punch, push, and so on?

5. Do children run around the classroom?

6. Do children cooperate readily when asked to do something? Consider whether
   • children resist your suggestions, refuse to work with you, or ignore what you ask;
   • children are rude to peers and adults;
   • transitions are disorderly.

7. Do children work collaboratively in small groups? Consider whether
   • children play alone or do not play together with open-ended toys like blocks;
   • children do not use imaginative play areas with their friends;
   • most work is with the full class.

8. Are children disciplined by internal or external controls? Consider whether
   • there is a time-out chair;
   • a behavior chart lists children with stars or other marks by their name under categories such as “is quiet,” “sits still,” “listens quietly,” “walks”;
   • you call children’s attention to the chart;
   • you reprimand children by yelling;
   • you reprimand children in noticeable ways—dragging, pinching an arm;
   • you insist that children apologize to one another in words that you provide;
   • you frequently take children who misbehave out of the classroom.

9. Do children guide one another pleasantly? Consider whether
   • children are bossy with one another;
   • children imitate your words to discipline their peers;
   • children do not share roles of leader and follower.

C—Conversation

When and how conversation takes place reveal whether children are self-regulated, whether the day is organized by a schedule or is an Open Flow day, and whether the teacher listens to the children with intention.
1. Is there a full-class meeting every day? Consider whether
   - full-class conversations happen
     — occasionally;
     — rarely;
     — almost never;
   - days have no structure because whether there is a full-class meeting or when it takes place is generally unpredictable.

2. Do full-class conversations flow from children’s remarks, follow something children are interested in, or only flow from a topic you suggest? Consider whether
   - most topics of conversation are teacher-generated;
   - your questions and comments do not generate problem solving or critical thinking;
   - you usually have an answer you expect the children to give;
   - children mainly respond in unison or use scripted or formulaic words;
   - children seldom make spontaneous remarks;
   - aside from show-and-tell, children rarely speak about what interests them;
   - teacher-talk dominates;
   - your questions lead children toward what you have decided to do;
   - talk is teacher-initiated and in a teacher/child/teacher pattern rather than initiated by anyone to someone specific or to everyone.

3. Is full-class conversation multiway with children addressing one another, or do children mainly answer you and rarely one another?

4. Do children listen respectfully to one another, or do they pay little attention when other children talk?

5. Do children pay attention during a full-class conversation? Consider whether
   - Most wiggle, squirm, crawl away, or chatter among themselves:
     — usually;
     — sometimes;
   - Some wiggle, squirm, crawl away, or chatter among themselves:
     — usually;
     — sometimes.

6. Are conversation topics free-flowing, or are they formulaic—the calendar, attendance, show-and-tell?

7. Can children sustain conversation and stay on topic for an extended time such as 20–30 minutes? Consider whether
   - children rapidly lose interest in a free-flow conversation:
     — usually;
     — sometimes;
   - few children respond on topic:
     — usually;
     — sometimes.

8. Do topics of conversation reflect what children will do or have done during the day? Consider whether
• there is little conversation about activities children have been or will be engaged in;
• you do most of the talking and provide most of the information.

9. Are all adults in the classroom engaged in the conversation? Consider whether
• the second teacher does not join the conversation;
• the aide does not join the conversation;
• interns do not join the conversation;
• parents or other visitors do not join the conversation.

10. Is there much conversation between you and children one-on-one or in small groups? Consider whether small-group and one-on-one conversations are mainly
• greetings;
• about behavior;
• instructions;
• lessons from a Teacher’s Guide;
• preplanned, formulaic lessons;
• unrelated to what children are engaged in.

E—Evidence

Evidence consists of children’s work products that provide a window into each child’s thought processes and development. The quality of evidence is a window into teachers’ beliefs, expectations, planning, and implementation.

1. Is children’s work creative? Consider whether work does not vary from child to child; it all looks pretty much alike.
2. Is children’s work complex? Consider whether
• work requires
  — few steps;
  — little tool use;
  — few hand skills;
• work involves little or no problem solving;
• work is not challenging or novel;
• work does not provide new content or concepts.

3. Is children’s work original? Consider whether
• work is derivative;
• work copies a pre-made plan.

4. Is children’s work stored individually? Consider whether
• there are no individual folders for each child’s small work on paper;
• there are no individual portfolios for each child’s large work on paper;
• there are not other individual containers for other kinds of each child’s work.

5. Is selected work displayed? Consider whether
• work by all children is usually displayed together;
• work by an individual child or small group of children is rarely displayed.
6. Are there documentation panels on the walls? Consider whether
   • there are no documentation panels;
   • there are a limited number of documentation panels;
   • you are not sure how to make documentation panels;
   • you don’t have time to make documentation panels.

7. Do children spontaneously examine or discuss work on display? Consider whether
   • children never or seldom spontaneously examine or discuss work on display;
   • children take little or no notice of what is on display.

8. Do children take parents or visitors to look at their work?
9. Does work product show evidence of collaboration? Consider whether
   • children's work, for the most part, is done by an individual child;
   • children are not allowed to collaborate;
   • children are not encouraged to collaborate;
   • work is cooperative in that different children participate but there is little or no discussion, debate, suggestions, or negotiation;
   • work is cooperative in that different children add a piece but the outcome is predictable and therefore children's contributions have no impact on the direction the work takes.

**Language**

Languages, broadly defined, are powerful tools that the brain uses to receive and process information and to express itself.

1. Do children speak in full sentences, elaborate their statements, and use standard grammar? Consider whether
   • some children
     — are weak in all these areas;
     — could be stronger than they are;
   • children use lots of expressions that they learn from television;
   • children use lots of noises that they learn from television.

2. Do children express themselves in varied ways? Consider whether children demonstrate
   • little creative gesture and facial expression;
   • few meaningful body movements;
   • little or no symbolic representation;
   • disregard toward other living things and people;
   • un-empathetic interactions;
   • illogically stated thoughts.

3. Do children use a variety of tools facilely? Consider whether the following are absent:
   • scissors that cut;
   • wire cutters (for clay);
   • wire cutters and strippers (for wire);
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- needle and thread;
- vegetable peeler;
- stapler;
- tape;
- ruler;
- glue;
- mark-makers.

4. Do children use mark-makers on their own initiative as readily as they use words? Consider whether
   - some children have weak hand skills;
   - some children strongly resist drawing;
   - only a few children draw all the time.

5. Is children's vocabulary above average? Consider whether
   - children use fewer words than is typical of their age;
   - some children's vocabulary is sparse.

6. Do children love to listen to books? Consider whether
   - children are restless during stories:
     - many;
     - some;
     - few;
   - children name favorite books:
     - many books;
     - some books;
     - few books;
   - children ask to be read to:
     - most children;
     - some children;
     - few children.

7. Is the in-classroom library generously stocked? Consider whether the library is stocked:
   - well;
   - fairly well;
   - poorly.

8. Is there nonfiction as well as fiction?

9. Are there magazines?

10. Is the stock enlarged or are reading materials replenished regularly?

11. Is there an in-classroom listening area for music and books?

12. Do children sing, play instruments, or listen to music daily?

13. Is there access to a great variety of materials that encourage or support children's urge to express language in written or other graphic form? Consider whether the following are absent:
   - papers in many colors, thicknesses, finishes, and degrees of transparency, from cardstock and cellophane to rag, tinsel, and tissue;
   - all manner of mark-makers;
clip boards so children can carry writing paper where there are no tables or
outside the school on excursions;
• envelopes, especially small ones, to hold messages.

14. Are varied materials absent that would encourage children to express their
thoughts symbolically?
• wire from single strands to rolls of chicken wire, in different metals and
thicknesses;
• organized collections of buttons, bells, shells and other varied items to string;
• different thicknesses and textures of cardboard;
• beads, bangles, baubles, feathers, and sequins;
• miscellaneous hardware;
• looms;
• rope, string, raffia, streamers, and fabric strips to weave or use in other ways;
• clips, brads, tacks, staples, rubber bands, and other fasteners;
• used postage stamps;
• natural materials from the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms.

USING EXCEL TO RATE YOURSELF

I have written EXCEL for anyone interested in changing their practices. EXCEL
can be used either individually or with a group. Here, I describe possibilities for two
different uses.

You, Yourself, and EXCEL

If you use EXCEL as a personal tool, privately, the questions can help you have
a dialogue with yourself about various aspects of your teaching. If you are in the
process of rethinking your practices, I suggest using EXCEL as you begin the change
process. Then, put your answers away. At the end of the school year or 8 or 9 months
after you first use EXCEL, answer the questions again without looking at your earlier
answers. After you have completed answering the questions a second time, compare
the two sets of answers. The comparison will show you what has changed.

If none of your answers has changed, consider talking with a trusted colleague
about your beliefs and goals. If a few answers have changed, consider whether the
changes occurred mainly in one area of practice. Recall what you did to change and
particularly consider whether it was a conscious effort. If so, recall your state of mind,
put yourself in the same frame of mind, and tackle a second area of practice. I suggest
initiating your first changes in an area that is most comfortable or compelling for you.

EXCEL as a Group Exercise

If you have embarked on a change process with your co-teacher or with a group
of teachers and are using EXCEL together, begin with each person answering the
questions privately and putting the answers away.

As a group, agree on which area of practice addressed in EXCEL is the area
you want to discuss first. Schedule a regular time for meetings, and at each meeting
choose one of the questions in the area you have selected to discuss. Ask someone to take notes and to circulate the notes after the discussion. (A different person can take notes at each session.)

At a next session, use the notes to develop an action plan—things you will tackle as your first steps toward change. Each person’s change agenda can be different from the others. If a question stymies you, let me know via my website: anniewin-benham.com. I’ll be glad to clarify.

EXCEL addresses wide-ranging practices, far more than a group may want to tackle in a year or two. If some members of the group are reluctant to change, draw on the group for help in exactly what to do to begin; perhaps one person can act as coach for another. As a tool to foster discussion about change, EXCEL should be “eaten” in small bits, but thoroughly chewed and given digestion time! EXCEL is designed to be used in a reflective manner, not as a punishment/reward exercise. Therefore, encourage a group spirit that is supportive, where neither bragging nor blame is allowed.

**Tips for Using EXCEL**

The objective of EXCEL is to provide you with a tool for self-analysis that, through your answers, can help you keep track of and demonstrate growth in your understanding of reflective teaching.

Remember: As you consider the items in the assessment, notice that the examples are all undesirable. It is better not to do the things, to have the conditions, or to see the children’s behaviors that are listed!

- If several of your answers are “no” or “sometimes,” consider developing a plan and timeline for change.
- If you cannot answer a question easily, come back to it at a later time; or, choose a different area because the place you chose to begin may be the least compatible with your nature.
- Begin with the area that is most comfortable for you.
- Take a single question into the classroom and for a week jot down answers based on what you see yourself doing, on how your classroom looks, or on what the children do or say. In other words, ground your answers in the reality of what you observe.
- Because change is tough, tackle one of your teaching behaviors at a time, or change one small facet of your practice at a time. Move thoughtfully!

**CONCLUSION: BEST PRACTICES AND SIGNIFICANT WORK**

As we read in the epigram for Chapter 1, Alice and the Cheshire Cat agree that if you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there. A welter of voices confounds teaching practices—the morning drive time expert whose advice is contradicted by the lunch time speaker’s message, who in turn is trumped by the expert on the evening news. Each expert has a different idea of what is “best.” In this tumultuous sea, teachers need a life raft. Beliefs, as emphasized in Chapter 1, are that raft. Beliefs anchor all we do.
I believe that testing, as commonly used, is competitive, pressures teachers who in turn pressure children, and provides a distorted picture of achievement. Testing fails to capture the growth—or lack of growth—that is observed by classroom teachers who know far more about their children than any test can reveal. Testing can undermine attempts to use best practices. In Chapters 11 and 13, I have suggested ways to gather and use evidence to support what you know as a teacher. In all other chapters, I have shown what I believe are effective ways—best practices—to support and encourage young children to grow.

Embedded in the best practices I describe are detailed examples of what I call Significant Work. Significant Work is creative, original, complex, competent, language-full, and joyful. Reread the scenarios throughout the book, but especially in Chapters 6, 8, 9, and 12. Significant Work is the opposite of work that is banal, ordinary, simplistic, slip-shod, and dull. Use the scenarios as another lens with which to consider whether the work in your classroom reflects best practices.

Significant Work sparks children’s engagement so that they develop skills that will help them throughout their lives. These skills include focus, self-reflection, empathy for others, linguistic prowess, and analytic abilities. And, especially in Chapters 2 through 5, 7, and 10, I have described teaching that exemplifies what are generally called best practices. They are powerful practices. The teaching I have portrayed seeds children’s minds with significant content that is full of big ideas, the kinds that resonate throughout one’s life.