

A Community of Eaters: Bringing Families Together through a Classroom Food Blog

by Tyler Woodman

The kitchen was filled to the brim. A pot of turmeric tie-dye simmered on the stove while children sat scattered around the floor. Dads dotted the crowd of children, tying rubber bands around classmates' t-shirts while their own children played in the yard. Teachers and parents chatted in the living room, munching on homemade African peanut stew, a winter squash galette, and salads prepared with ingredients from the garden. It was a Friday night and our generous hosts, a family from our class, refilled drinks and gave hugs as they walked among the guests. Moms rocked babies that weren't theirs, children helped fill each other's plates, and the house hummed with laughter, chatter, and the feeling that we all belonged together.

How We Got Here: A Project and a Problem

It was a Sunday morning, and my co-teacher Emily and I sat at her kitchen table, poring over notes and photos, trying desperately to answer the ever-present question in our classroom: *What's next?* Our classroom of three- and four-year-olds had spent the last two years getting a grasp on project work — following the principles of the project approach, the children's interests led us to take on several months-long studies. An academic year that teemed with challenge and conflict had left us drained, and we found ourselves filling our summer with water play, art, and music — each wonderful in its own way, but lacking drive and focus.

We tossed around ideas, but none of them seemed to stick. We tried to focus on what we valued in a project.

Relevance to the Real World: Successful projects have connections and relevance to children's real-life experiences; they draw on prior knowledge and increase understanding of tangible concepts

Student interest: Project work relies heavily on children's continued interest and enthusiasm and follows their questions about the work



Photo by Author

Complexity and flexibility: Allowing children's questions and interests to guide requires a project that is flexible and evolving, with heavy documentation to track the course of the project

We were still uninspired. We looked to project work we admired in other schools, and we noticed a few trends that were often left unconsidered in our own project work:

Teacher interest: Our favorite projects stemmed from not only children's passions, but those of their teachers. We began to ponder where our interests and our students' intersected.

Research-based: A key principle of the Reggio Emilia approach is that of Teacher as Researcher. Teachers should



Tyler Woodman is an instructor in the department of Human Development and Family Studies at Colorado State University. She currently serves as a classroom teacher at CSU's Early Childhood Center, a Reggio-inspired lab school in Fort Collins, Colorado. Tyler has been at the ECC in various roles since 2011, and has been teaching young preschoolers (2.5–4 years) since 2014. Coming from a Reggio-inspired and constructivist background, she is especially interested in child-led, project-based learning and building strong home-school connections.

be asking questions, forming hypotheses, conducting experiments, and documenting observations in order to learn alongside children — how could we focus more on our own learning while still valuing and documenting the children's learning?

Focus on solutions: Strong project work tends to focus around a central question with real-world consequences in the classroom and beyond. We had plenty of problems, and plenty of questions. We turned our attention to finding solutions through our project work.

Keeping these things in mind and reflecting on the challenging year behind us led us to our question — one for which, importantly, we literally had no real answer in mind. We didn't want to think in hypotheticals, we wanted a real solution to a very real problem in our classroom: the feeling of disconnection. Many of our struggles the year before had stemmed from the absence of connection to our parents, and we perceived that they felt disconnected from one another, too: school picnics were awkward and segregated, drop-offs and pick-ups were strictly business.

How Do We Make Our Classroom Feel like a Community?

We toiled with the answer. *Do we host more classroom events? Do we require participation? Do we send more emails, more journals, more newsletters? How do we make families feel connected to us?*

"What *does* bring people — normal people, I mean — together?" I asked, munching on a homemade bagel as Emily poured me another cup of coffee. Suddenly the answer was obvious: *Food* brings people together. A loose concept began to form in our minds, one that would not only become our next project, but would serve to answer our unanswerable question and foster community in the meantime.

Part One: The Blog

The next day, I sat down at my computer, freshly inspired and ready to get started. Emily and I had discussed at length the best way to connect people via our new focus on food, and the answer came to us through our own favorite method of recipe-sharing: the food blog. What better way, we thought, to allow people to connect in a way that would be easy, interactive, accessible, and low-pressure? Before we could create a literal community, we thought, we should create one online.

There was only one problem. "Do you know how to do a blog?" Emily asked.

"I was just about to ask you the same," I said.

I poured myself a large cup of coffee and plugged into the search bar: *HOW TO BLOG*.

Luckily, the result was comprehensive and fairly simple. I chose a free domain and followed the instructions, Googling any points of confusion along the way. Within a couple hours I had a simple design, an introductory post, and a title: A Community of Eaters. I emailed parents, too excited to wait for perfection, inviting — begging — them to check out our latest efforts. People responded positively — "I love this!" and "Let us know how we can help" were our first official blog comments.

We kept the content simple: sharing recipes that we cooked together in the classroom, documenting food-related events, and telling anecdotes of our own. One goal was to help parents get to know us better, and the blog was an easy, non-intrusive way of connecting our stories to theirs. At first, the comment section served as a place for parents to share their stories and thoughts about food, too:

I feel like anchovy paste can often improve savory dishes (spaghetti sauce, turkey burgers...). Unfortunately, I think I'm usually better off keeping its presence a secret!

Love this! Our oldest child started at a Waldorf preschool where they baked bread every Friday and ate it all week with butter and honey. There's something so nourishing about being a little chef — the feeling of kneading the dough, the wholesome smell as the bread bakes.

Before long, families were becoming more involved, sharing their own recipes and even coming in to cook with us. We sent home bags of lettuce from the garden, we created a 'recipe box' featuring dishes that families had shared, and slowly but surely, the walls between our blog and our classroom began to crumble. Parents were no longer commenting on our posts, but instead coming in and saying, "I really loved that blog," igniting actual, live-in-person conversation. As our connections as teachers grew stronger with our families, we knew it was time to take the next step: bringing families together.

Part Two: Real-world Connection

From the start, we wanted to provide families a way to connect with one another, but we wanted them to feel like it was happening naturally. And it turns out, it was; this cooking project was opening doors for togetherness that we never would have considered before. We brainstormed: *Should we have a potluck? A dinner party? Should we write a cookbook?*

As always, we were getting ahead of ourselves. So, we did something easy and natural. Our city hosts weekly food truck rallies at a park within walking distance of our school. Parents, children, and teachers already flocked to the park for a bite each Tuesday night all summer long, but we tended to avoid each other once we'd arrived. We decided that this was the perfect barrier to connection to rip down first, so we sent out an email inviting everyone to meet at the rally, right after school. To our surprise, we had a decent turnout, with several families joining us and even more meeting us after we'd arrived. We shared bites of tasty food truck fare, laughed and chatted, and watched the children play together until the sun set.

"We should do this again sometime," we all said as we parted — and we did! Only one more 'official' food truck meet-up followed, but in the meantime parents scheduled their own food truck rally dinner/playdates, and on any given Tuesday I'd bump into a family or two — and instead of waving from a distance, we'd buy each other a lemonade and make room on our blanket.

Feeling successful with the food truck rally behind us, we decided to try something that would require interruption from normal routine: an in-class potluck salad party. We had recently harvested massive amounts of lettuce from our garden, so the timing was perfect. We were impressed by the turnout to our salad party. Parents brought in seeds, berries, cheese, and other toppings while preschoolers helped prepare the dressings, and we ate together, enjoying the fruits of our collective labor. The crowd was full of faces we weren't used to seeing — perhaps it was the novelty of the event (or the promise of a garden-fresh lunch) that brought out parents we hadn't seen for a while in our classroom.

The success of these small-scale events inspired us, especially when we observed genuine growth in connection between not only ourselves and our families, but amongst the parents of children in our class. They were sharing space, stories, and meals; laughing together, watching their children play, and planning future get-togethers. This brought us to our final test of community: an after-school dinner party.

A Potluck and a Community: The Culmination of a Cooking Project

We weren't sure how to start. Should one of us host the party? Should we have it at school? Should we go to a park, rent out a restaurant? The answer was revealed in the best

way: we were casually discussing it with a parent one day when she said, "We'll have it at our house, of course!"

Of course. It was the perfect solution: what's more communal than sharing one's home with people you care about? We were excited — invitations went out right away, asking families to bring a dish to share.

When we arrived at our hosts' house the night of the party, it was already abuzz with children playing in the yard and the warm sound of conversation coming from the kitchen. Food of all types lined the table, from homemade stew to a takeout pizza — everyone had contributed. We talked with parents about things other than school, and we overheard the same happening among the crowd. Our hosts brought out a surprise for the kids — turmeric tie-dye and shirts to take home — and they all sat on the floor, twisting and tying with the help of a handful of dads, some making things for themselves and more making gifts for their classmates, friends, and siblings. The feeling was borderline familial and utterly communal.

As educators, we all crave that moment when something finally 'clicks' — when a rambunctious child settles in to hear a good book, when you start seeing success after weeks of implementing new interventions, when a kid says, "Oh, I get it!" Moments like these are why we do what we do. I looked around the party at the parents-turned-friends and classroom-turned-community, and there it was — the click. It was the payoff of months of planning and practice, blogging and cooking and events that occasionally felt like set-ups — but there was also a little bit of magic there, too, something we did not create. It seemed that the community was there all along, waiting to come into the light: we just used a classroom food blog to help it into place.



Photo by Author