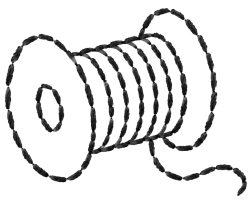
Preschool PhD

Learning with and from our youngest scholars

Shana DeVlieger, PhD



For those who taught us our very first letters
and those who continue to help us grow

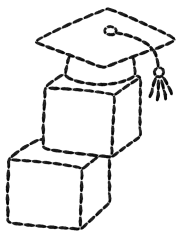


Introduction

Once upon a time,
while I was earning my PhD,
I lived inside a preschool.
Literally.

A toddler-sized bed,
building blocks on the floor—
each day, I studied, read, and wrote,
with questions to explore.

Then, down close to the carpet,
I saw it in their play:
wisdom to challenge my textbooks
and the spark to lead the way.



Their questions challenged answers
I'd heard in lecture halls.
Big ideas were taking shape
within those preschool walls.

So I listened a little longer
and questioned what I knew.
What might we discover together
if their questions guided us, too?

Now I've gathered these lessons,
Organized them A to Z,
to learn with and from our youngest scholars—
whoever we may be.

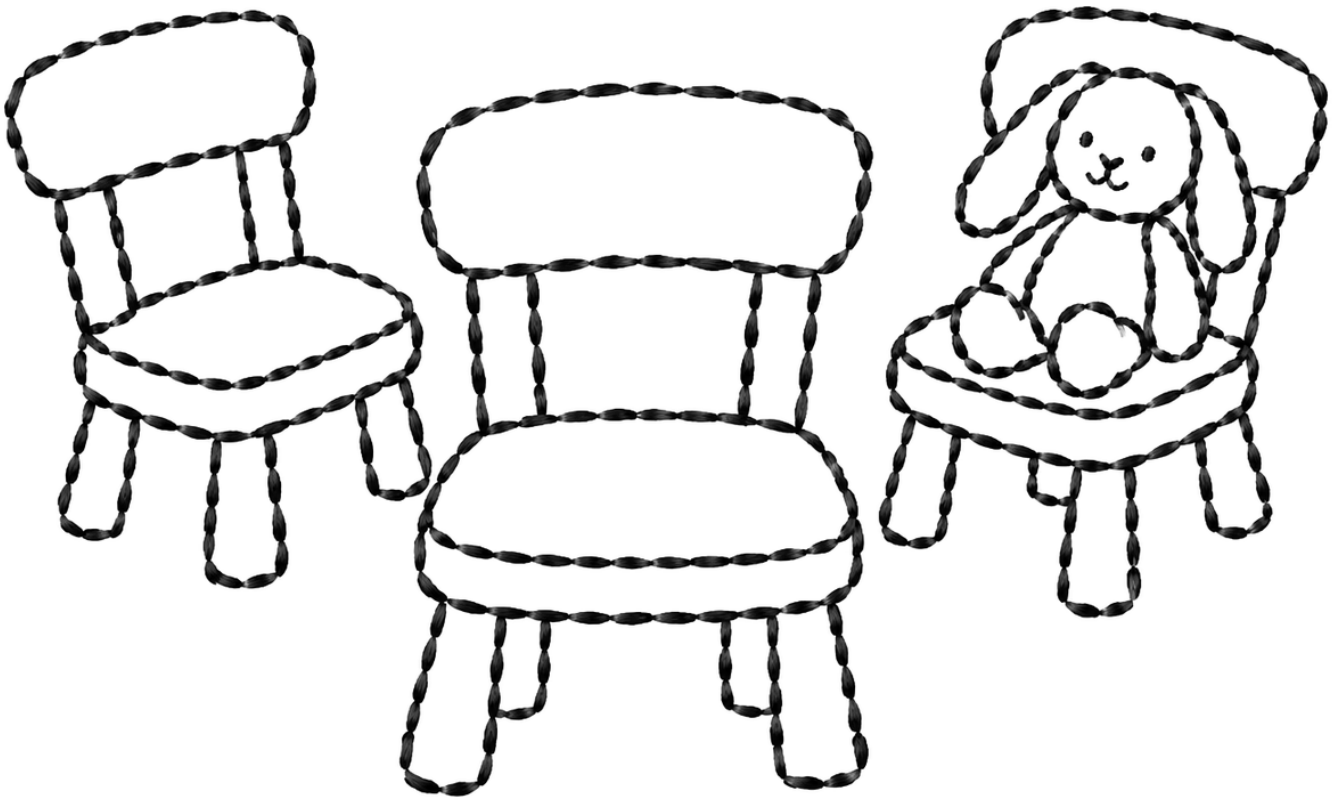
So, are you with me? What do you say?
If you raised your hand or nodded yes,
Then let us start with A…



A Attendance

Before we count who’s present,
Let's ask who isn’t here.
Make room for those we’re missing.
They have stories we should hear.

In a dataset or at circle time,
Let’s stop and ask why
Some get represented
And others cast aside.



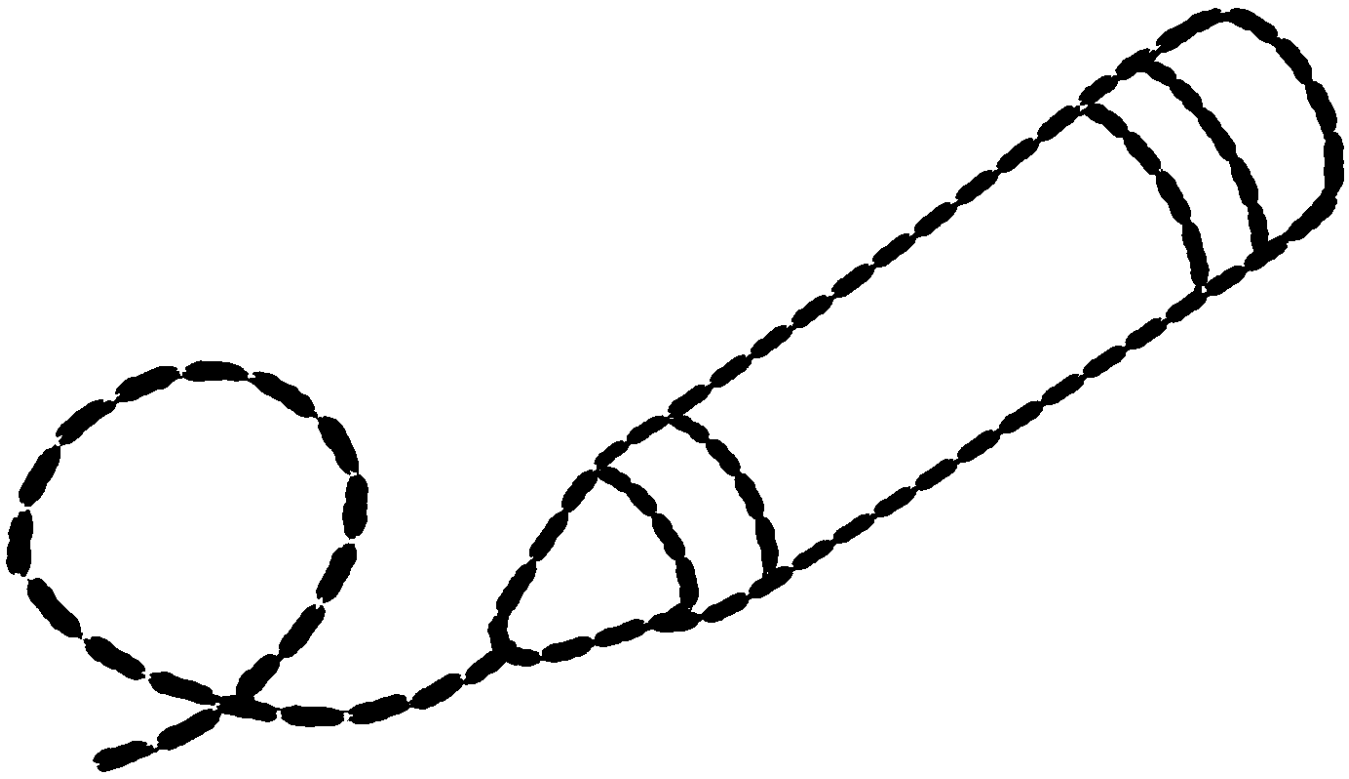
B Be a good friend

Read everything. Think deeply.
But here's where I'd start:
the best kind of scholar
grows their brain and their heart.



C Crayons

Pick up a crayon.
Let the first draft be rough.
It needn’t look polished.
A start is enough.



D Different disciplines

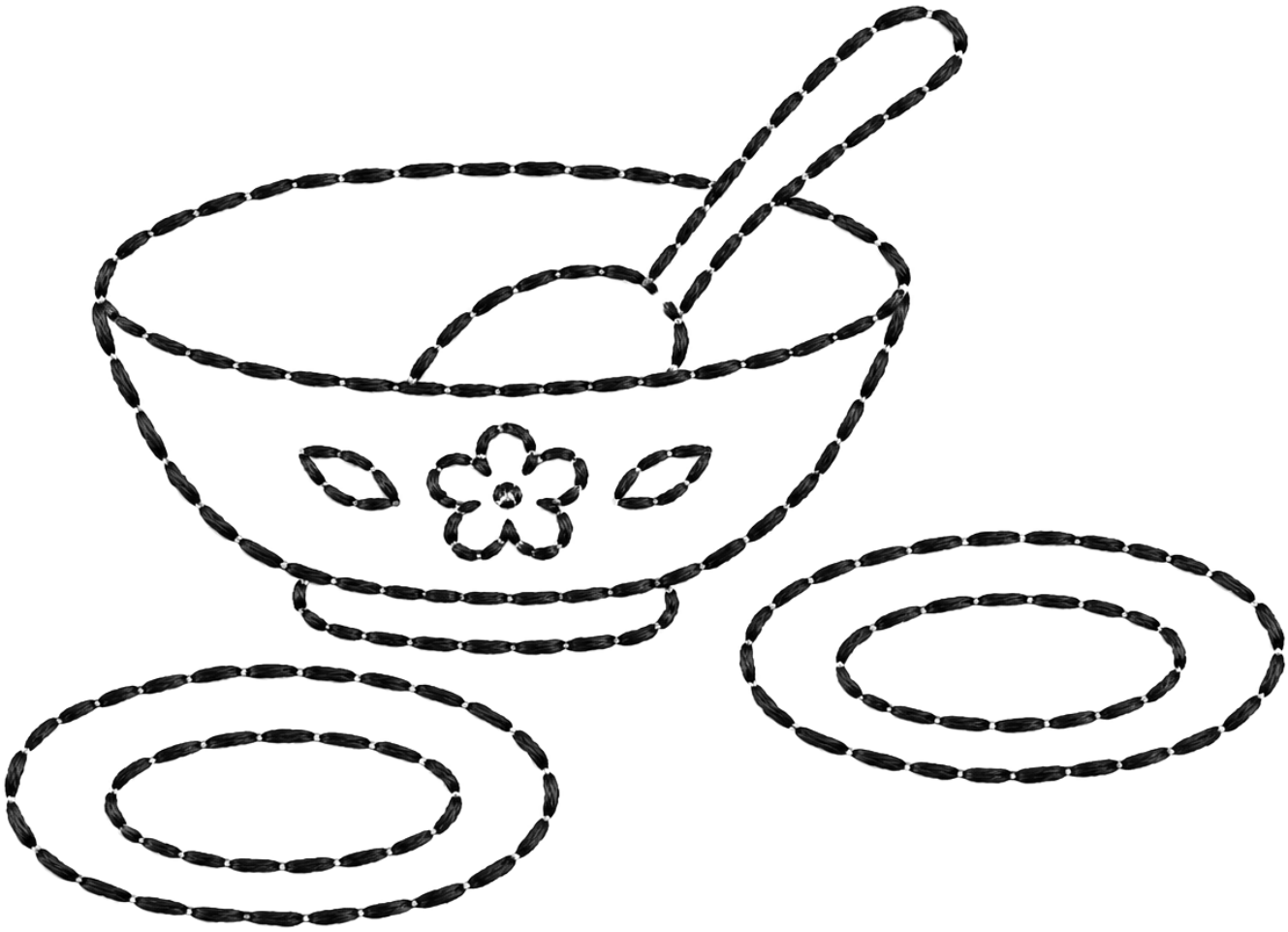
Brains, bodies, bus routes—
connected before nine.
A preschool day spills past the lines
our disciplines define.



E Eat together

Cook a meal. Set the table.
Pull up an extra chair.
Pass the plates and wash the dishes.
There's more than food to share.

We bring a taste of home
and a story or two.
A meal can feed a friendship
as well as feeding you.



F Feelings

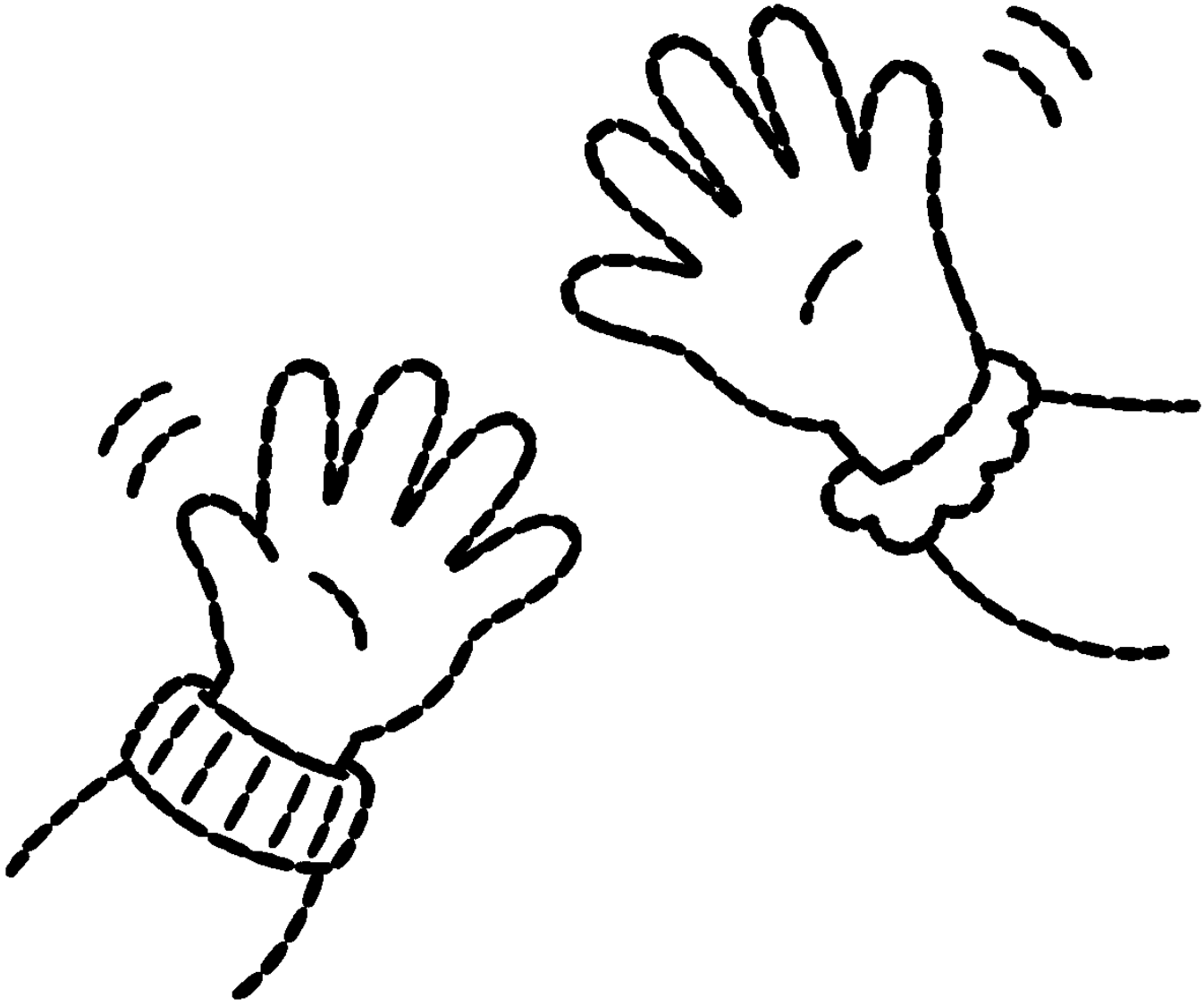
BIG feelings come to preschool
and PhD life, too.
Some haven't got a name yet;
they still have news for you.

They may feel inconvenient.
We may wish they'd go away.
They can show us what we value.
What might yours have to say?



G Good morning

“Good morning!” means, “I see you.
We’re here. Let's share this day.”
A little greeting makes a difference, be it
"Ciao," "Salut," or "Hey!"



H Holding loosely

Not every project that you start
will make the final show.
Some teach you what you need to learn,
then tell you, "let it go."

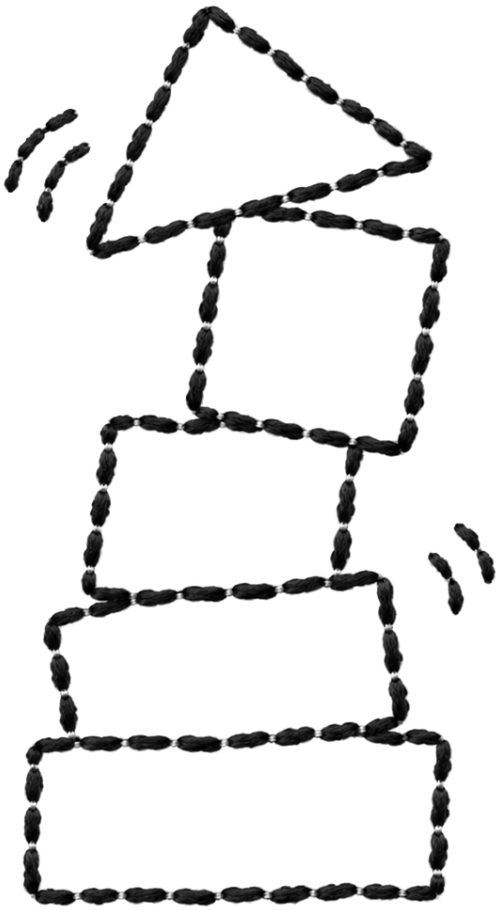
Learning is more than what we make
or polish for display.
It's following our questions
and changing on the way.



I Improv

The block tower wobbles.
There's paint on the floor.
Your plans have all changed.
What else might you explore?

Your funding might change.
Your department might, too.
Try, "Yes, and…"
Then, keep building.
Sometimes, it's laughs that get us through.

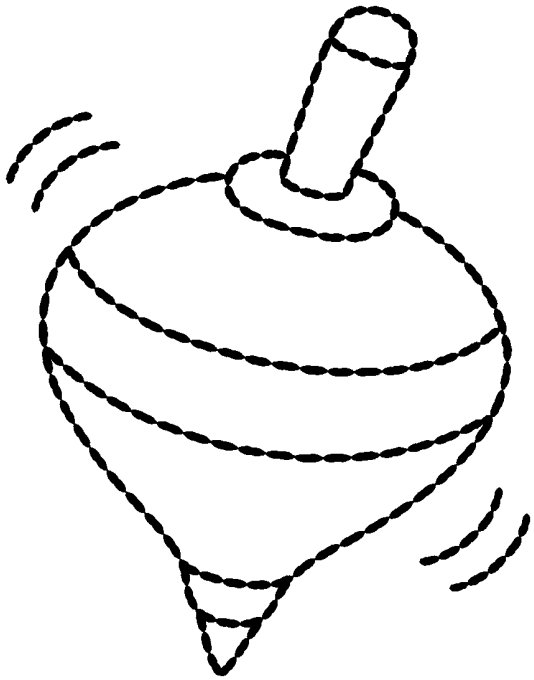


J Joy

Joy is resistance—
a way we can say:
the world we are building
must have room for play.

Giggles are holy,
whatever our age.
There is room for delight
Even alongside rage.

Play is serious work,
for discovery; to renew.
Protect your own joy,
and protect each other's, too.



K Knowledge

Preschoolers share discoveries.
Their stories tumble out:
the pets, the plans, the side quests,
whatever they hear about.

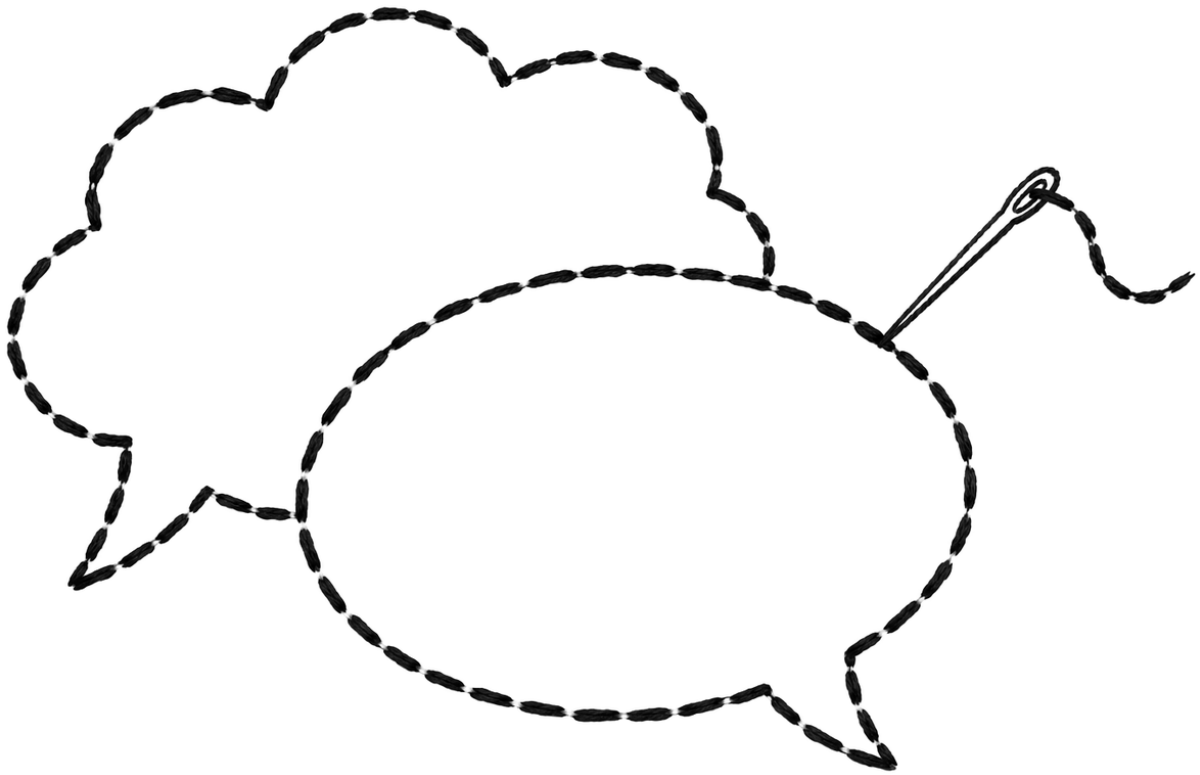
Each run-on is a small delight.
There's always more to say.
Share what you know and wonder.
Don't lock your work away.



LMNOP

Language **M**atters.
Narratives **O**perate
to maintain--or challenge--**P**ower.

Whose story gets repeated?
Whose words get pushed aside?
The language we call “normal”
shapes what we decide.
Homeless or unhoused?
Failure or betrayed?
Words can change a lot about
What we mean to say.



Q Quality

Good care for every child.
Good work for those who care.
A living wage. A working day
that's safe, supported, fair.

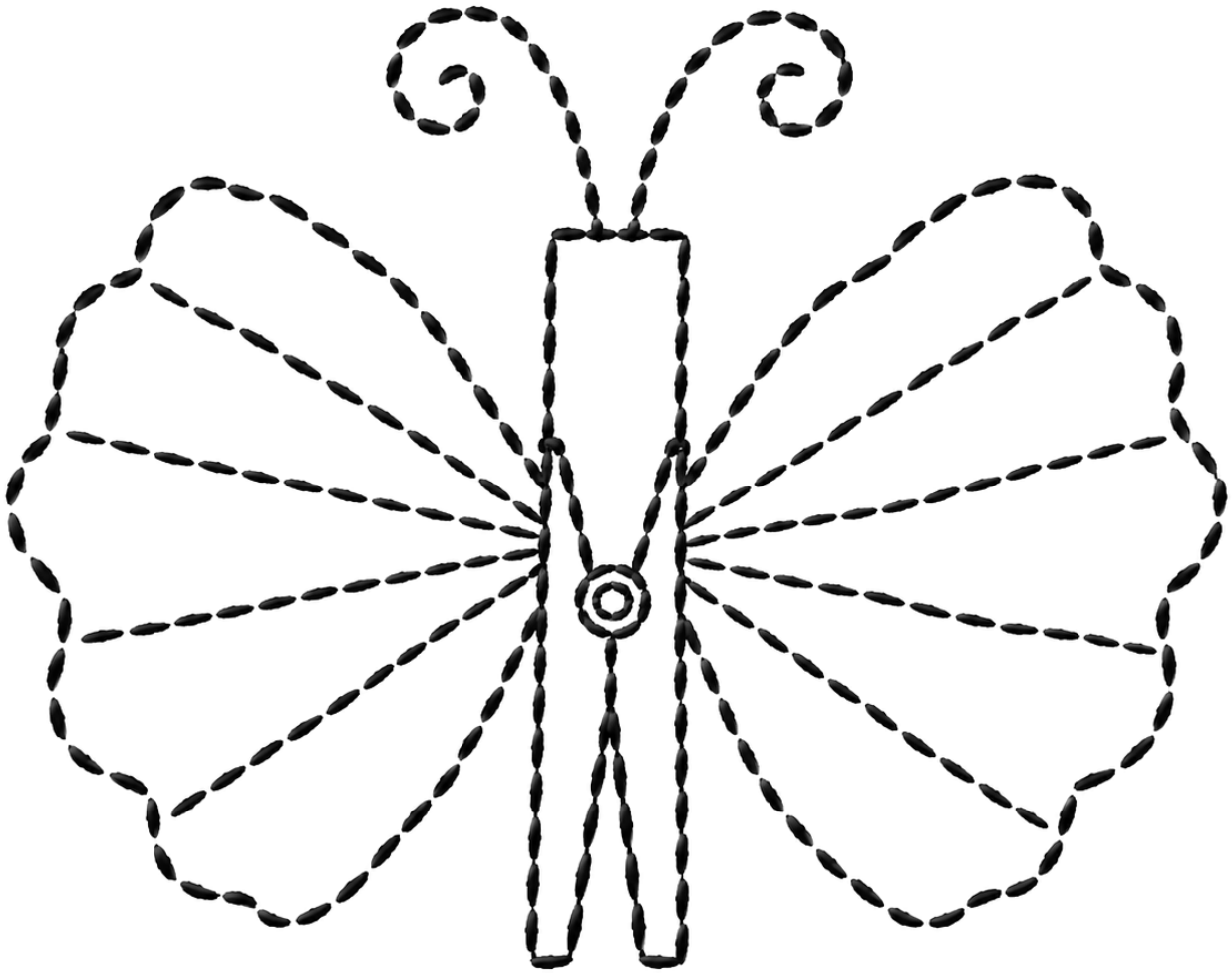
"Quality" can mean many things,
but this much should be clear:
no child or grown-up should be made
to live or learn in fear.



R Reimagine

Cardboard can become a castle.
Coffee filters turn to wings.
Scholars find new possibilities
in ordinary things.

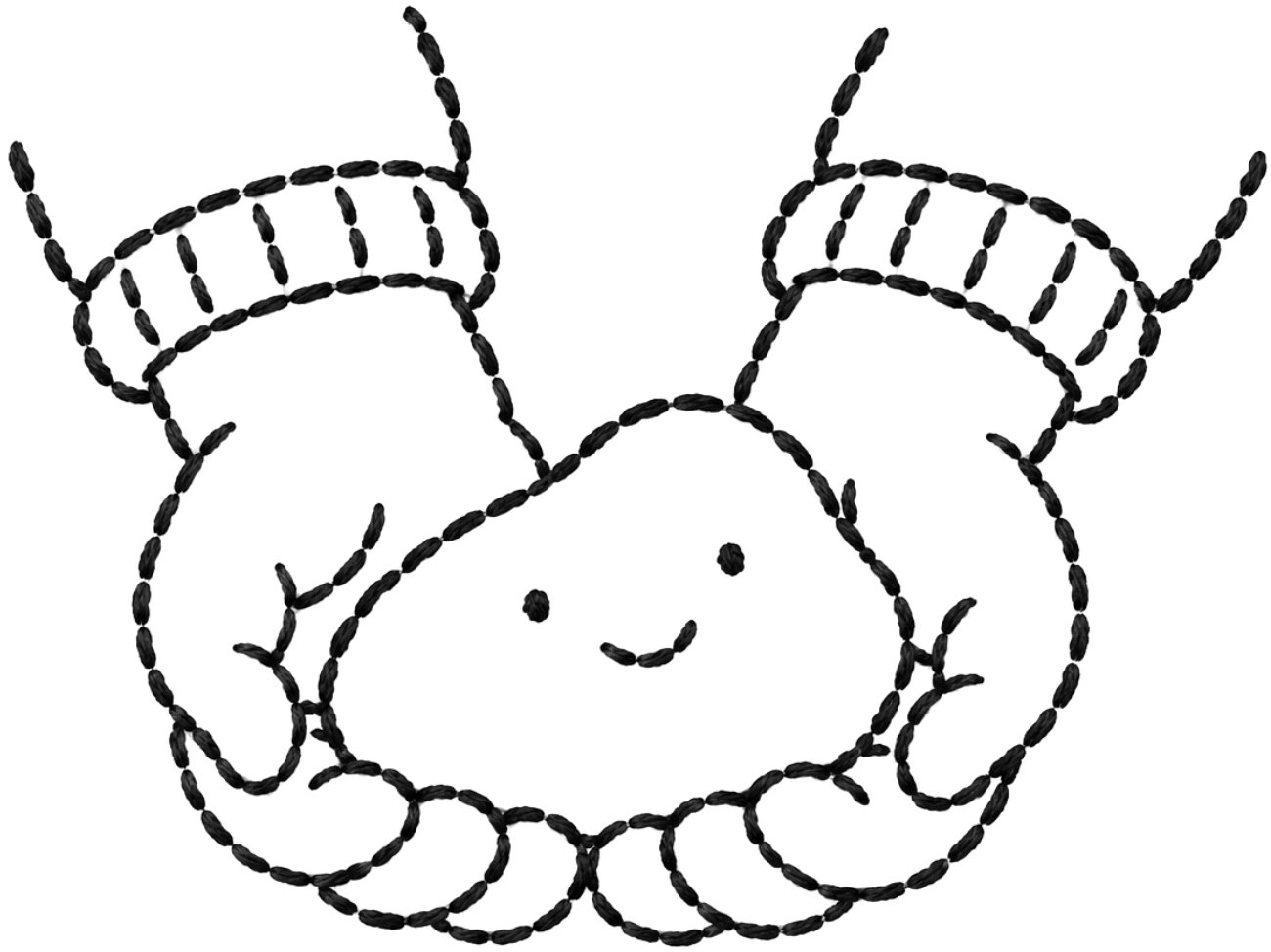
Let's look again at what is here
and ask what else could be.
Then mix, match, test, and rebuild
the world we'd like to see.



S Show and Tell

A pet rock. A stuffy.
An old comic book.
Show your friends what matters.
We'll stop and take a look.

Then ask what others treasure
and whom they hold dear.
When they're brave enough to tell you,
Be ready to lend an ear.



T Tomorrow

Tomorrow is uncertain.
That's hard. What's there to do?
Try to leave something kind and useful
for tomorrow's version of you.

Cap the glue. Label your files.
Back up your work today.
Small acts of care can help you meet
whatever comes your way.



U Unlearning

We all pick up assumptions
about the ways that things ‘should’ be.
We often carry biases
we’ve not yet learned to see.

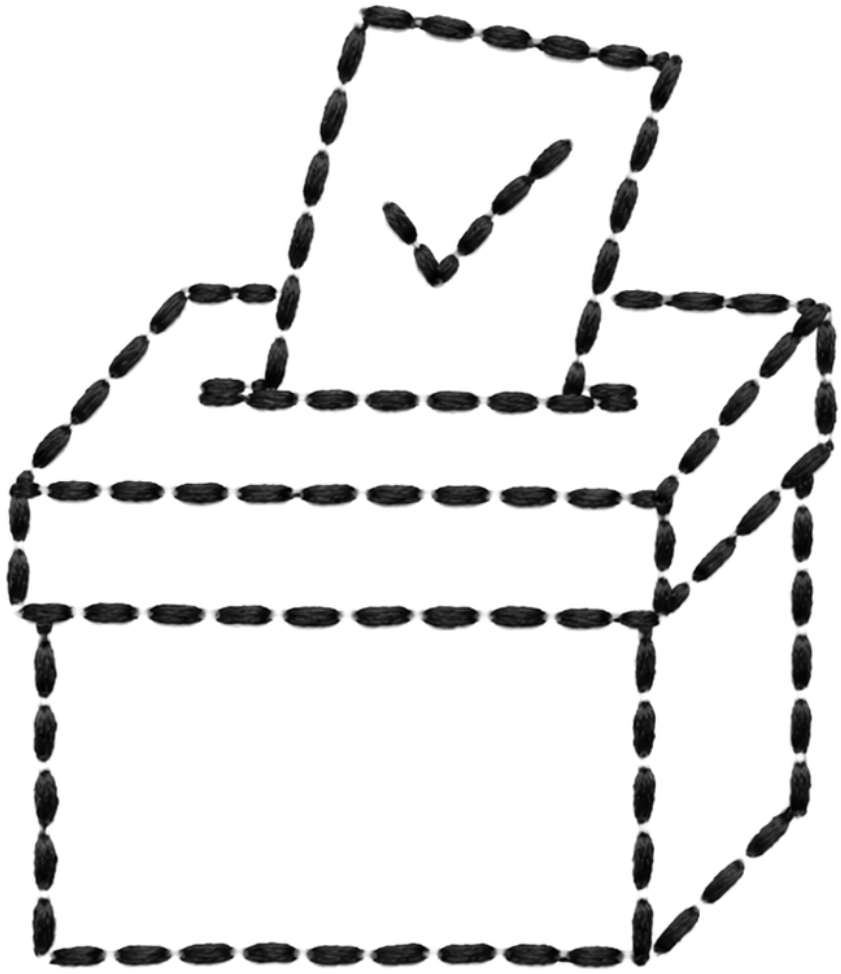
Question what feels certain.
Hear what others have to say.
At three or ninety-three, we still
can choose a different way.



V Vote

“A turtle or a hamster?”
Each person gets a say.
Raise your hands to place a vote,
Put democracy on display.

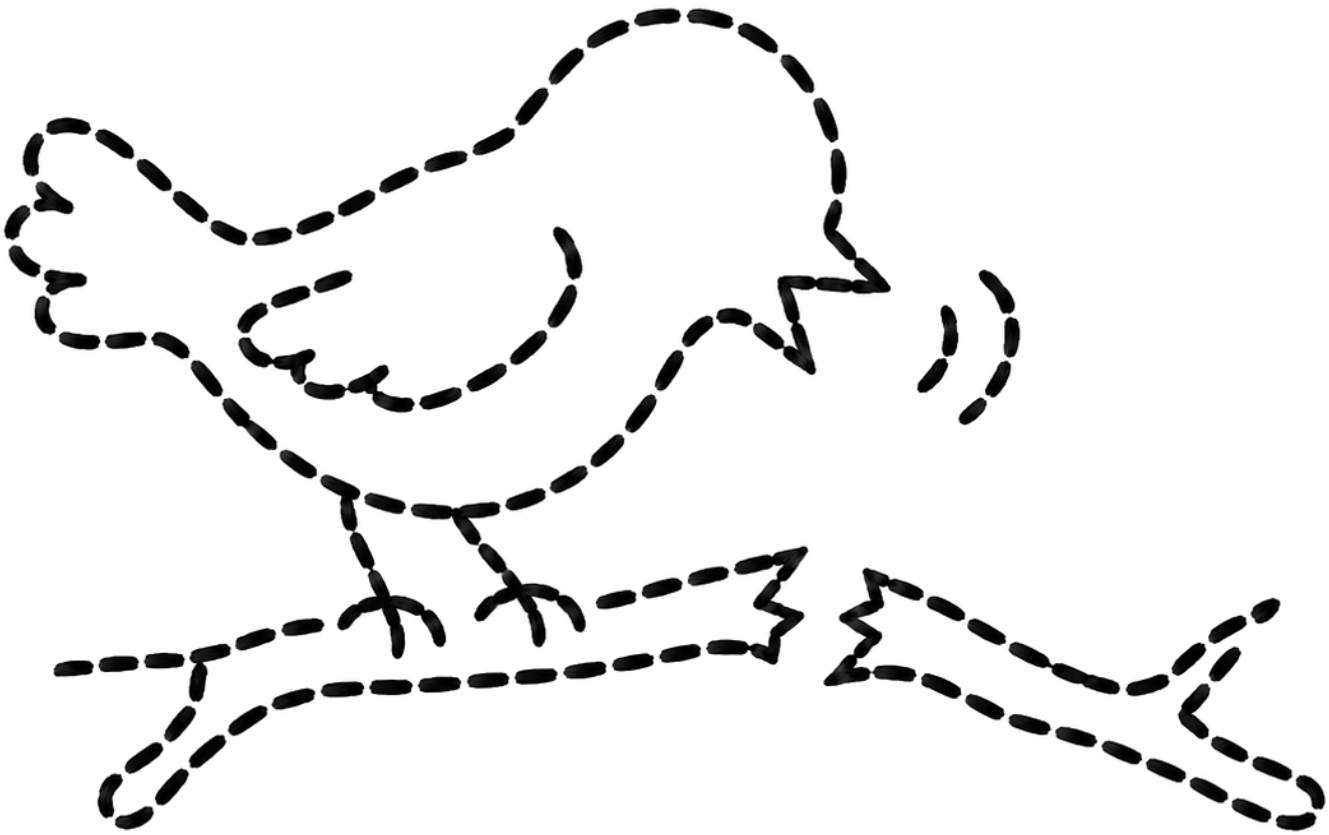
From choosing what to study
to choosing who will lead,
we vote for what we value
and the changes that we need.



W Witness

Notice harm.
Put words to what you see.
Telling the truth isn't always
the same as tattling.

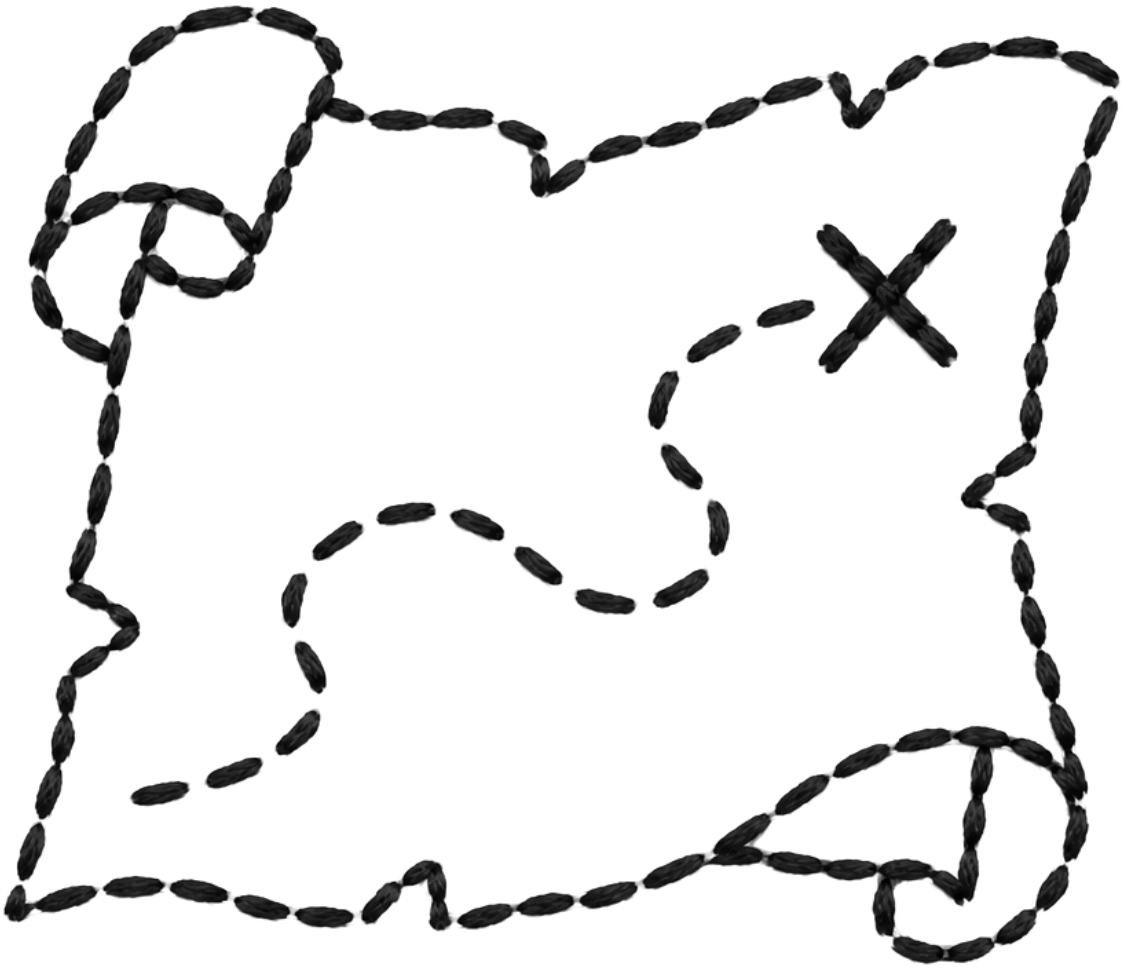
When we bear witness,
and do not look away,
refuse to call it normal,
we create possibilities for change.



X X marks the spot

As a wise preschool pirate once told me,
“sometimes the treasure map is wrong.”
Keep that thought beside you
when the search feels long.

Others may tell you what counts as treasure,
where to look, and what to do.
Check the map against what’s there.
Trust the evidence in front of you.



Y YOU

A four-year-old can picture
all the things she'll do:
President! Monster-fighting pop star!
What might be possible for you?

You don't need all the answers
or a perfect place to start.
Take a step toward a better world.
Find others. Play your part.

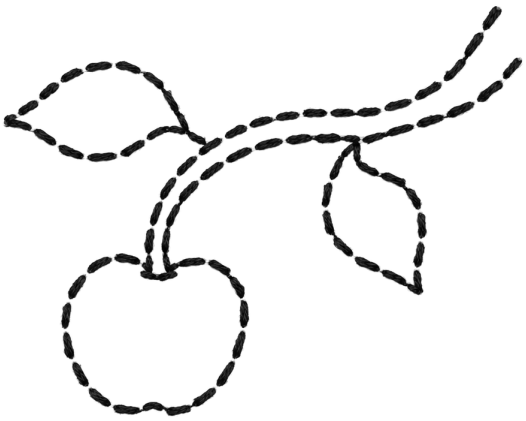


Z Zzzzs

Rest when you can.
Delight in having nothing to do.
Embrace a pause and play a little
before the next mountain that you move.

Rest isn't laziness,
not the same as sloth.
It helps us, humans and learners,
to take stress and shake it off.

So, take that great big belly breath.
Go lay under a tree.
Perhaps even watch an apple fall
And discover gravity!



Now you know your Preschool PhD ABCs.

What kind of scholar will YOU be



About the author

Shana DeVlieger, PhD, is an educator, researcher, and forever learner.

She lives with her husband in New York City (in an apartment, not in the preschool anymore).

