

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

Exploratory Play/Time **An investigation within three elementary classrooms**

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Three Educators, Three Experiences, The Trilogy

Imagine this—classrooms filled with happy, focused children, being leaders in their own learning. Teachers at ease, watchful and mindful of their discoveries and their needs. Surprises by the minute, wonder at every turn. Three educators discovering exquisite truths and shadows about the power of free exploration or play time in the classroom setting.

Three women, from three different decades, teaching three different classes in the same school: Bridget Browning, born in the '50s teaches grade seven, and has 25 years of experience; Kristina Wilting, born in the '60s teaches grade one, and has 8 years of experience; and Jennifer Billingsley born in the '70s teaches grade one/two, and has 5 years of experience. Together, we explore the role and possibilities of what we have coined 'exploratory play' or 'exploratory time' in our classrooms.

The Inspiration

“Serious Play in the Classroom: How Messing Around Can Win You the Nobel Prize,” an article by Selma Wasserman (1992), inspired our study of exploratory play/time in our respective classrooms. Wasserman addresses the need for children to make creative discoveries through play. Children who are able to tinker and explore their own interests without the fear of failure become more creative. The word ‘play’ infused our collective consciences and we began seeing positive evidence of the value of play or free time everywhere.

We remembered playful times from our own childhoods and recalled the strictness, permissiveness, or levity of each of our respective educations. We were intrigued by the memories, or lack thereof, of play in the places we inhabited as children and wanted to reclaim the ‘stage of romance’ that Alfred North Whitehead depicts as a time of discovery “dominated by wonder” which children experience in their primary years. From about six to thirteen years of age;

the emphasis must always be on freedom, to allow the child to see for itself and to act for itself...Without the adventure of romance, at the best you get inert knowledge without initiative, and at the worst you get contempt of ideas—without knowledge. (Whitehead, 1929, 33).

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We were bitten by the romance and desired for our students the warm feelings conjured up by Whitehead's concept of freedom and play. Also, our years of teaching and life experience gave us reason to acknowledge the significant role of play in our own lives.

The Study

Our study set out to observe students during an hour of exploratory playtime, three times per week. Though Wasserman's study focussed on a more curriculum-supported research, our team wanted to explore and discover facets of exploratory playtime in the classroom and the possibility of new connections to the curriculum.

To meet district standards, classroom life moves at such a fast pace our children rarely choose their own activities. We seldom take time to observe the children with whom we interact for reasons other than assessment and evaluation. Due to time constraints, learning what children are truly interested in is an extravagance. Furthermore, we wondered if playtime would impact the atmosphere in our classroom and whether or not it would increase student motivation to learn?

We believe children want to study about things that interest them. Older students ask regularly if they can learn about unexplained mysteries, a particular rock star, or most recently, wizards. None of these topics are found in our mandated curriculum, yet this is where many students are likely to put their best energy.

Our students lead complex lives; they are often inundated by media and the pressures of society. Difficult home situations, lack of dinner table talk, homework support, or after school friendships may leave voids in the children's lives. We wondered if our urban children have safe places to play? More broadly, do our children know how to play anymore? Anne Haas Dyson calls upon "teachers and educational researchers to illuminate—to clarify but not simplify—the overwhelming complexities of urban schools" (2001, 430). If we are to be intelligent teachers we must meet children on their terms.

In the primary grades, prior to the research project, Jen and Kristina found that giving children time to play in the classroom was a daily struggle for both their students and themselves. It was a daily annoyance as they and their students looked to the 'Shape of the Day,' the day's agenda written on the blackboard, and complained, "What! No centres?" and Jen or Kristina would have to respond with, "Sorry but we have no time today," rather than giving the children what they were continually asking for—time to play.

Our core feelings pointed to allowing for more exploratory playtime, but how would we justify it to the parents and educational administration? Why did we feel play is valuable? We had no answers and felt we needed to legitimize exploratory playtime in the classroom. We wanted reassurance that by giving children time to explore while playing, we were, in fact, helping them to learn in meaningful ways.

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

Digging up the Dirt

Uncovering research on the topic of play revealed information written by psychologists, paediatricians, and early childhood workers, but very little by teachers themselves. Play, it seemed, was a ‘four-letter word’ beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

In the 1940’s, child development specialist and humanist John Dewey offered remarkable ideas about the foundations of play. He wrote that “play is free, plastic ” (1944, 203), a beautiful and flexible description of play. An early childhood educator from the U.S.A. echoed our concern about the need to value play in the classroom. Sheila Flaxman (2000), a teacher for 35 years, recommends that teachers promote and fight for play “as an integral part of a child’s day. When playtime is threatened so is a child’s chance to grow” (41).

Other research suggests that play is essential to a child’s social and mental wellbeing and it should be promoted as an important learning tool (Flowerday and Schraw, 2000). However, there is little recent information that confirms play as a useful tool in directing children’s learning in school in the elementary grades.

Candid comments from colleagues revealed a common belief that students choosing free play in the classroom would result in wasted time, therefore, it was rarely encouraged. Even when choice was offered, it was often with significant limitations and restrictions. Yet Flowerday and Schraw (2000), who interviewed thirty-six teachers on what, where, when, and to whom they offer choice, say that giving choice to students does matter, as it increases student motivation.

A study conducted by psychologists and paediatricians in an orphanage in India entitled “Not by bread alone”(2001) on the impact of a structured ninety-minute [play] session on the development of children in an orphanage looked at the role of play in an environment where play was not promoted. The study concluded that both the children and the adults were happier and better adjusted as a result of incorporating play into their daily schedule.

As educators with human needs, we must consider our own state of mind when teaching. Steven Wolk (2001) believes good teachers are passionate teachers. We need to infuse and relate to our students, not only who we are as teachers, but also who we are as engaged human beings. By sharing our own interests and pursuits with our students we can model how, as adults, we explore the world and play a lot in our free time.

Built in 1914

Our school belongs to a neighbourhood in transition that is effected by shifting economic times. Expensive cars provide a foil for realities that exist behind many closed doors. Lighthouse Park Elementary, like many East Vancouver schools, has a high English as a Second Language (ESL) population, at fifty percent, comprised largely of Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipino speaking families. The second largest group

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

speaks English; however, there are another dozen languages spoken. A small yet supportive core of parents, many of whom have grown up here, volunteer at our school.

Comparatively small at 320 students, our school also supports a large number of learning-disabled children. There are fourteen divisions, an intermediate communications class, and a social development class. Curious, cheerful students greet us every morning on the old granite entrance steps and proudly hold open the heavy doors. “What a great place!” echo guest teachers and visitors experiencing our school for the first time. Parents, too, have similar sentiments and many arrange for their children to complete their elementary years here.

Methods

Our three research classes include Grades One, One/Two and Grade Seven. The classes have nineteen, eighteen, and twenty-three students respectively. All but one child, who left on holiday to Vietnam, participated in the study. Parents were informed of, and students participated in our action research for one month, three days a week. Given the ages of the children, we decided to call the hour ‘exploratory play’ in the primary grades and ‘exploratory time’ in the intermediate class. We debriefed with our respective classes after each one-hour exploratory playtime period and discussed problems or concerns that arose. Each student completed an exit slip. Grade Seven students assisted the Grade Ones and Twos to record choices and feelings.

Before the research, we talked with our students about possible activities during the free hour and we agreed that we would place no restrictions on things brought to school. We wanted to see what would happen. The students knew that when it was research time, they were to solve problems themselves and not interrupt us unless it was an emergency.

Initially we designed elaborate charts to collect data but we soon discovered this method was not manageable (What were we thinking? So many boxes! How were we to think and see outside them?). Resorting to a narrative format worked the best for our purpose of documentation. We needed lots of room to write, draw, and reflect on the same paper, often adding conversation bubbles or comments next to an observation paragraph. We began to see patterns emerge in our observations that would often provide a focus for a subsequent research day

Findings

Kristina
Grade One
Marbles Rule, Marble Rules

Bridget
Grade Seven
Tiny Islands/Big Sea

Jennifer
Grade One/Two
White Boards and Pens

Kristina's Narrative: Marbles Rule, Marble Rules

On day one of research in Grade One, I was dressed in a long wizard-like cloak. I had discussed with the class that when I was a researcher, observing them during exploratory play, I would wear a colourful cloak and they were to pretend I was a silent ghost.

It quickly became evident that exploratory play was noisy and that noise would have to be tolerated not only by me but also by some of the students who mentioned, on a number of occasions, that the classroom was too noisy! Some children developed coping strategies like removing themselves from the hub of noise, while others hummed tunes to themselves. Conversation and accompanying noise infused the classroom. Selma Wasserman warns that “children...actively involved in learning...talk to each other, share ideas, speculate, laugh [and] get excited. In short, they are noisy” (1992, 138). To continue wholeheartedly with the idea of exploratory play, I would have to be flexible.

On the second day I introduced new toys to the class including a plastic marble track. ‘Special Helper,’ student Rick, got first dibs:

On a tabletop, in frenzy, the box is ripped open. Parts are pushed together and three different structures emerge. No one refers to the picture on the front of the box. This surprises me! Sarah says, “Look at the picture on the box,” but she is ignored and the assembly proceeds with few words and many hands—this seems a fluid process. Suddenly Iggy pours too many marbles down the tubes. The marbles are bouncing and rolling everywhere—all over the classroom. In the din of marble mania another noise erupts on the couch in the far corner of the room. Trent is crying. He convulses in bursts that turn to sobs. Marbles roll his way and he gets up to retrieve them. “Thanks Trent,” says Jeff. “What’s the matter?” Trent does not answer but soon joins the ‘marbleous’ game with a smile on his face. He still has not said a word.

Nikki, Kim, and Nora are at the next table looking on. “It’s too loud!” With that, the boys wordlessly take the tubes to the carpet. No one seems to be arguing or controlling. This was authentic play! Amidst all the chaos and noise, the children never once looked over to me to monitor my approval. I felt encouraged that my pep talks had let them trust me—I had said I would not intervene unless 911 needed to be called. They were to try and sort out their own thinking:

Then Sarah, the only girl in the group, pipes up with, “Jeff, you’re messing this way up. Iggy, can you help me?” Again there is no response so Sarah leaves the group. Rick seems defeated and says, “I’m not playing.” Iggy reaches for tubes in front of Trent who says, “Hey, you have to share them.”

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

*Trent knots up his arms, cries momentarily and grabs tubes from Iggy.
Iggy and Tyler do not react, but Tyler says, "Look!" Trent stops pouting.
Vivian retrieves some of the rolling marbles, "You guys, your marbles are going everywhere!"
Suddenly the structure falls down and they all laugh, "It's cool!" Trent says, "The final challenge." (Hmm? Haven't I heard this in a T.V. show?)
Kim says, "The marbles are too noisy." No one responds.
Trent trumpets, "That was so fun, you guys! That was quite the challenge."
Tyler agrees, "Yeah! That was fun!"*

Observing the children at play, I learned about Trent and his emotional fragility; he had a difficult time sharing and using words to convey his feelings. It was fascinating to watch the other children interact with Tyler's initiative to help calm the situation. With very few words, children aware of Trent's frustration seemed to know just what to do and say. By the end of the period, Trent had recovered from whatever had set him off at the beginning of class. (I never did discover that which resulted in his sadness).

I marvelled at the incredible problem solving, learning, and developing of tolerance and acceptance for Trent that the children's play demonstrated. I took this moment's magic to make meaning myself. What I witnessed was a whole dramatic scene of unrehearsed, yet richly human expression. Apart from the cognitive development, there was a natural development of understanding for Trent's initial anti-social behaviour in the group and of affording him the space to grow and adapt at his own pace.

There was still an issue with the noise. I decided to debrief with the class and see what they thought. I felt a need to move from my original commitment of complete freedom to bringing back some rules around noise, but I wanted to elicit the rules from the students.

The Talk

*"How did everyone feel about today?"
"It was really noisy at the marble centre," asserts Nikki.
"How does everyone else feel? Put up a hand." Most hands go up.
"What should be done?"
"They could play more quietly tomorrow and not use so many marbles," suggests Kim.
"Thank you. Any more ideas?" The group is silent.
"Can we try to play more quietly tomorrow?"
"Yes!" everyone agrees.
"If it gets too noisy for you what might you do?"
"Ask them to be quieter," said Nikki.
"I also noticed some people moved to quieter spots in the room," I added.*

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

With that issue addressed, I was curious about the children's lack of referral to the picture on the box while marble construction took place. I wanted to explore this with the children.

"How did the marble people feel about the construction?"

"It's pretty wobbly," admits Tyler.

"What ideas do you have about this?"

No one responded so I suggested if they wanted help they could ask me when I was not a ghost doing research. They agreed. I wondered, should I be changing the parameters of play that we had originally established? Should I be helping my students during and/or after their exploratory play?

Choosing whether or not to offer assistance was challenging because I felt I was imposing my experience with problem solving on them. They may or may not have come to using the diagram on the box in the month of research. Part of me wanted to see how long it would take for someone to see the picture and show it to others. I wondered if Sarah's suggestion would be heard on another day. I decided to tell them to look at the box when I saw an opportunity, during a formal science time the next day, to discuss the elements of stable, standing structures.

Sonic Boom

On day three, Rick, the computer game master in the class, was thrilled. He was allowed to bring computer games from home. I was cautiously curious for Rick is not known for sharing well, being helpful, or understanding. I wondered about influences from home and the painful comments about family arguments over money he had written in his journal. I remembered these comments as I watched him set up Sonic Boom on the two class computers.

The action begins. Terse, cutting language erupts from the children as they interact with the game. There is a huddle of boys around Adam who has the mouse. Vivian is alone on the other computer.

Tyler remarks, "Sonic is going to kiss the girl."

Adam exclaims, "Ooooh no he isn't!"

Jeff fires, "Bam, bam, bam, kill, kill, kill."

Rick, looking on spits, "Damn-it! Yucky, yucky, yucky, I'm going to kill you!"

Adam advances the game and Rick cries, "You don't have to save the girl. Die, die....I win damn-it! Yes, yes, boom, boom, bang!"

Adam utters, "They all touched him; the robot killed Sonic."

Rick lunges over Adam and hits the keyboard keys in rapid succession shouting, "Die, die!"

"Can you stop saying that?" pleads Vivian. She promptly plugs her ears and leaves.

Adam, affected by Vivian's departure, states, "You can't kill everything."

Rick insists, "But I'm helping you. Besides it's not my girlfriend. It's not real." In the next moment Rick takes his CD out of the drive and leaves.

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

Rick had a hard time sharing and his language was abhorrent; there was so much violence and rude, unacceptable conversation referring to females. I wondered if I should interrupt the exploratory play to debrief with the class immediately? I noticed we had fifteen minutes left so I ended the time early. I needed to speak to the computer group specifically but I also thought a general class discussion focussing on respectful deportment was in order. The discussion that ensued revealed incredible insight by classmates. I asked how many children played computer games at home. A few hands went up.

Calvin said, "My dad won't let me play games."

Nikki stated, " Sometimes, kids get too into it and Moms and Dads don't let them. Bad words can come from the computer. They can teach you bad words and you may get into trouble because you watch the violence. It can give you violence and nightmares and you might do it when you are older and you may get into trouble. It can teach you to hurt people and punch them in the face. You can go to the office or,"

Vivian piped in, "Get expelled. It can teach you swear words and you might say them to teachers."

Sarah adds, "Or little kids and they will tell the supervision aides. And your parents won't let you do whatever you want."

Once again my life as a teacher was made easier by having thoughtful students as allies. John Dewey states, "few grown-up persons retain all of the flexible and sensitive ability of children to vibrate sympathetically with the attitudes and doings of those around them" (1944, 43).

Also, some children, simply, have ways with words. I could not have rehearsed a more direct, honest discussion myself. Jiddu Krishnamurti believes "one teaches to help the young towards self-knowledge, without which there can be no peace, no lasting happiness"(1953, 113).

By allowing the children to voice their ideas, I am fulfilling some of my deeply held beliefs about knowing one's self and trusting in the processes of living each day to the fullest. John Dewey also reminds us that "children proverbially live in the present; that is not only a fact not to be evaded, but it is an excellence" (1944, 55).

And on this note, I acted swiftly. Addressing the violent language needed to happen immediately. Waiting could have erased the moment. The other children needed to understand the gravity of the situation. Obviously some sensed the injustice, but playground strategies like plugging ears and leaving to avoid conflict were not enough this time. The children needed to understand that along with freedom of choice also comes responsibility. Thankfully I was there to facilitate discussion and seal this moment in the past. But I also wondered if conversation like I witnessed at the computer goes on in the playground? What other misogynistic venom is ejected there? What do girls say about boys?

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

“I know what to do”/ “I knew it”

For some children, the scenario of learning with the group needed to be shifted to accommodate individual learning at other times. I had at least four students in my class for whom direct instruction, paying attention, and sitting quietly were not conducive to their understanding. They needed more play/time to process information.

At playtime, Nora says, “I don’t want to have centre time.” She asks to use the block paints. I nod, and quietly remind her to roll up her sleeves. “It’s okay, Ms. Wilting, I know what to do.” At the easel she begins a picture and soon looks at her empty palm. She carefully paints the ends of her fingers and makes dots with them on her paper.

Nora did not see me watching. It was interesting how she could be riveted in activity and exploration when expectations were removed. Her exit slip at the end of the day was ambiguous for she had circled both the happy and sad faces. Her comment read: “My friends were nice to me today.” And I thought she was having a great day. I wondered what she was thinking while painting, she looked so peaceful.

David, another fellow who struggles with pencil and paper activities, is assembling the marble track with Nora when Nora appeals for my help. I motion to ask friends.

David says to me, “Do you mean to look at the box?” I shrug and smile. He triumphs with, “I knew it!” Lying on the floor looking at the box he grabs some marbles and rolls them across the floor, “Bowling!” he chortles.

Nora laughs and says, “I go bowlin’ with my Gramma.”

David Booth, writing about drama in the classroom, points out that when engaged with each other, children share, “a mutual, symbolic collaboration of ideas, undetermined plot, [and are able] to pause in a fictional present, linger on an image, or move forward, backward, and sideways, in an attempt to make meaning happen” (1985, 195).

Another day of unrehearsed, authentic drama in my class!

Hunters and Gatherers

On the last day of our official field study, I asked the students to ponder what they did and did not like about exploratory play.

Kim: “I like playing with my cats (stuffed, not wild) because I don’t get to play with them at home very much. I go to my dad’s and I forget them.”

Nikki: “Playing is not learning because it’s not the same thing.”

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

- Trent: "Sometimes when babies play with toys they learn something."*
Vivian: "It's fun to play with all things. I learned how to explore toys."
Jeff: "I liked playing with cars with my friends. You can't push them too hard."
Tyler: "You have to let go." (I hang on these words today.)
Sarah: "I didn't like it when me and Vivian had to solve problems by ourselves, but we had to solve it by ourselves."
Nikki: "We didn't have time to play because we had to solve problems. It's hard to solve problems by ourselves."
Sarah: "It's very annoying when people keep asking us to help solve their problems."
Nikki: "At home I don't have time to play computer games. I've got swimming and piano and Chinese school."
Vivian: "My mom and dad are always playing games."
Kim: "Not at my dad's house because Laurel's getting things ready to marry my dad for the wedding."

I was amazed at the clarity with which feelings were expressed and the patience of the group to listen to everyone's story.

After library later that day Vivian came to me with her new book, How to Look After a Kitten. She was using the book in her playfort made of chairs.

- She stops, refers to the book and races over to me to share what she read, "As they play they are learning as well."*
I say, "Wow! What does that mean to you?"
Vivian replies, "That we need to play to learn too!"
Unbelievable connections! I love it. Serendipity? Or just doing what we do best—playing and making connections.

As Dewey makes clear, play is "persons...trying to effect something, an attitude that involves anticipatory forecasts which stimulate their present responses" (1944, 203).

Freedom of choice both in books and toys from home allowed for the children's own connections to evolve. I love my job, my researcher-cloak swirling around me, finding conversations to savour. I felt like a tribal leader stepping in and out, around and about my students as if choreographing a new dance. It is a role I like and it fits into the sense of drama I experience and live daily.

Reflections

Thinking outside the box describes the paradigm shift I had to make in accepting how my students came to learning and life at school and in my class. I saw children who love playing and socializing. I learned that giving students exploratory play time in the classroom synthesized much structured learning from other times in the day and that 'just playing around' also contributed to an inordinate amount of highly observable, cognitive development as in the marble track construction.

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

We set out on our playing, exploring, learning adventure with no discussion about noise. My own noise tolerance became less problematic as I became engaged in collecting data. There were many times when I wished the students would talk a little louder while playing quietly and I did not want to move closer lest my presence arrest the chatter.

Being an omniscient, silent observer served me well to form a deeper understanding of the tolerant, human side of children's interactions as well as the more painful results when children play with inappropriate games. I gained invaluable insight into how I can use the tool of observation during exploratory play to be apprised of immensely critical situations within the classroom. My pre-research idea of playtime was to allow the children some down time if I felt I needed to support some struggling students. Now I see clearly what a teacher can miss without a time for critical listening. I feel empowered to know debriefing exploratory playtime can afford a class amazing opportunities for authentic discussion and problem solving both in an academic vein and on a social level. In some instances children need to be led toward critical thinking, however, once engaged by the teacher, it is astounding what wisdom and perception young children share with one another. Observing children during an unfettered time, such as our exploratory playtime, is one of the richest times I have experienced with my class. I shall endeavour to continue this practice in the future. I feel compelled towards observing playground activity now and wonder what discoveries can be made there.

Findings: Jen's Narrative White Boards and Pens

At the outset of our project, I asked the children what they would like to do during exploratory playtime. I had a list of toys ranging from puzzles, to Play Dough and Hot Wheels. After spending hundreds of dollars, I discovered, three play sessions later, that the children were already tired of the new toys and that a large group of children were playing with what we already had—white boards and pens.

“What time is this?”

“Why do you do the seven that way?”

They were reviewing time, a unit that we had just begun that day.

The special needs child in my class was also involved and was benefiting from this fun game of review. I was amazed at how they were so quickly applying their recently acquired knowledge and how they so naturally corrected each other when one made a backwards letter. They were having fun playing with their new knowledge of circles and numbers that went around, and I could hear my own voice being mimicked in their teachings, “Good for you! What time is it now?”

Amy Dickenson, a Kindergarten teacher, frustrated by the performance-driven environment of the U.S. classroom expresses frustrations similar to my own when she “wonders whether her 25 pint-sized students are still with her “(199, 61). A sense of urgency to move on to the next unit or piece of curriculum was, she argues, getting in the

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

way of allowing children to digest knowledge at their own rate and revisit and play with more abstract ideas such as a circle with numbers going around it.

“No Peeking”

I used to have rules for my centre times, no more than four children per centre and no switching centres once a child had made his or her choice. I quickly realized that given time and freedom, children create their own rules and consequences for breaking these rules. One day of research highlights this:

The children are playing Easter Bunny in the house centre and hiding eggs. No one is allowed to peek. One student is caught peeking and is asked to leave the centre. During the debriefing time this student is upset.

“I felt sad because she said, ‘get out of the house centre’.”

“But she was peeking.”

“But I didn’t know the rules.”

Another student says that she should ask about the rules. I ask her what she could do next time so that she would feel happier. She says, “Don’t peek.”

The students, when asked, knew what they could do differently next time, and they knew the right answer for how to follow ‘the rules,’ but they did not have the skills to do it during the moment and required further time to practice this. They were acquiring good habits through practice, for Wasserman states, “experiential learning, or serious play, builds habits of thinking” (1992, 136).

Playing to Learn

I asked the children on our last day of ‘research time’ if they had learned anything. There was some laughter and smiles as the kids looked around at each other. The children were truly baffled by my question. Then the first child spoke:

“I learned how to share.”

“I learned how to be nice and play with people.”

“I learned to be kind because when we got in a fight we got over it.”

“I learned to play stuff.”

“I learned that when you did stuff that you didn’t like then you didn’t do it next time.”

The special needs student said, “People were learning to be nice to me.”

The lessons these children were learning from each other were much more than could be taught by any adult. The fact that the special needs child felt and understood that children were positively interacting with her is an experience that could not have been artificially created. Giving the children the freedom to interact naturally did this. John Dewey’s (1944) insights into play emphasize this point. “Teachers would find their own work less of a grind and strain if school conditions favoured learning in the sense of discovery and not that of storing away what others pour into them” (159).

Back to Normal?

An hour a day, three days a week is a lot of time to devote to exploratory play in the classroom. I was looking forward to the end, when things could ‘get back to normal.’ ‘Research time’ was coming to a close and I asked the students how they felt about it. “I feel sad because I won’t have any more fun here,” was a response voiced by many of the children.

Research was over and now I could get on with other lessons and units. I felt a sense of relief. But, I also began to notice many problems. Daily, children were returning from recess with a list of problems. “He said a mean thing to me. She won’t share.”

I began spending more and more time, going over problems, and soothing crushed egos when it finally hit me! The children were missing their in-class time to play. They did not have time to practice playing during class time when I was there to monitor and guide their thinking and behaviours. Educators always give children practice time for math, spelling, and other subjects, yet we assume that children know how to play naturally, without time for practice.

I began allowing the children exploratory playtime in the classroom, and once again discovered that they were happier all around and there were fewer complaints of problems on the playground.

Reflections: Within the Energy

Initially the children were curious and suspicious about me sitting and observing them play. I chose not to wear any cue but simply told the class I would now be silent and observing their activities. They felt it was a game and accused me of spying on them. Then they became more comfortable with me watching them, yet my presence was always felt. Sometimes they reacted with shyness, other times with guilt if they were doing something wrong.

The feeling in the classroom, whenever we had exploratory play, was an overall feeling of relief, freedom, and joy. The children acted as if they had won a prize each time they were released to play. Rather than finding evidence of this feeling in the tangible data, it was expressed within the kinetic energy of joyful engagement.

What I have learned from watching the children through a different lens is that when I stopped doing the research, and stopped giving the children exploratory playtime, I began to have more problems in the classroom. The children were coming back from the playground after recess and lunch with a list of problems. The children were not practicing their problem solving skills and I was not debriefing with them daily, discussing these issues. It was difficult to find time in the day to implement exploratory

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

play but I was beginning to see that everyone was better off with a little time to socialize in a supervised manner, where they could practice these skills in a safe environment.

I also learned that some students used this time to synthesize their learning and to test their preferences. I would often see them grab a chalkboard, imitate me while reviewing, and practicing many things we had learned throughout the day. One special needs child really benefited from this time when classmates used it as an opportunity to teach and play with her, where they normally would not. In fact, most children used this time to play and interact with others whom they normally would not.

Observing my students means I have become much more connected to them and their needs. I have learned to step back sometimes and to trust in their choices. I still struggle to give my children exploratory playtime because I think they are worth it!

Findings: Bridget

Tiny Islands/Big Sea

Throughout this study, my grade seven students loved exploratory time. They could not wait for 'their hour' and many students planned in advance just what they would do. As the hour drew near I would don an old paint smock and grab my clipboard. These two actions were the indicators that research was about to begin.

Before I began the study, I thought most students would use their exploratory time for leisure or 'play' time. I was surprised to find they were using their time to catch up on work they could not do at home for various reasons. Reading their exit slips, I learned many of the students felt there was not enough time in the day to complete assignments. Homework assignments and project work made for a heavy workload when combined with their already full schedules outside of school. My most interesting observations, however, came from watching my class as a whole instead of looking at individual children.

Observing student choices was informative but by the third observation, my interest waned and I focussed more on the atmosphere, who worked with who, and movement in the classroom.

As I perused the class, I sensed something was amiss but could not pinpoint what was wrong. Something in the atmosphere was different when I compared it to the usual chatter during lesson activity. This bothered me. I saw my class divided into small, self-selected groups like tiny islands floating in a huge sea. Supplies were not being shared. Why was no one speaking to anyone other than to his or her group members? Where was the camaraderie that had existed in my class?

Before our study, I assigned student seating at table groups of four. This plan would change every six weeks so that students had a chance to work with children other than their friends. At other times, the class was divided into different groups for project work

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

or lesson activities. Having more female than male students, lone boys were isolated at tables with three girls. There was never a complaint about my imposed seating arrangements. The students had always worked well in the smaller groups. Presented with exploratory time, there was no imposed seating plan and students could work wherever and with whomever they wanted.

I decided to investigate the lack of communication among the groups. My assumption was that everyone in the class was content being in each other's company but my observations were telling me otherwise.

The Girls' Group

Grouping patterns emerged after just two observations.

By the windows, at the back of the room, one large group of seven girls work at a table meant to hold four students. Strangely, they are not working together. With heads bowed over their work, there is little conversation other than, "Can I use that felt when you're finished?" or "Is this the Indian Ocean?"

They speak quietly so only members at their table can hear them. Periodically, one head lifts to observe a raucous group playing cards in the middle of the room.

Across the room, another group of four girls work at a bank of computers looking up material for their 'Famous Person Biography.' Although motivated about their project, they keep their voices low and share few ideas. They seem uncomfortable with their backs to the centre of the room and keep peering over their shoulders at the card players.

At a table beside the computers, two girls attempt to play a board game but are unsure of the rules. They need more players but are reluctant to find anyone who is interested. Their voices, too, are low as they argue, "Forget it! I'm not going over there. You go!"

"I'm not going. You go!"

Not wanting to interfere, I decide to let them solve the issue themselves. Why won't they cross the room?

Adjacent to my desk, two girls work alone at two separate tables. They talk to no one and pay little attention to what is going on around them.

On the far side of the room, a group of four boys play a game of Monopoly. The game is friendly but there is serious conversation about where Aaron is allowed to put his hotels. As usual, resolution eventually happens and they move on.

This game has been ongoing from the beginning of the research project with the same players throughout. With only seven males in the class, the game has commandeered more than half of the boys.

Why are the other three boys not playing? And why is this game exclusively male? Are others excluded or do they simply choose not to play?

Two children in my class, a boy and a girl, work alone. Throughout the study, neither child has worked nor played with anyone else.

James has difficulty settling into exploratory time. He does not enjoy this choosing time; he prefers to have his time structured. Experience tells me decisions are difficult for James and he feels more comfortable when he is told exactly what to do. It often takes him twenty minutes to settle into an activity. Today is no exception. Finally he decides to work on his art project, though he is not really engaged in this activity. He wanders through off to the side and observes but does not participate in the monopoly game nor does he get asked to play. He appears content to watch.

In the front of the room sits Kate. She is academically challenged and generally does not connect with her peers. Quiet by nature, she only responds if spoken to directly and often avoids contact if it's possible. Today, she works alone at her table. She sits with her back to a group playing a raucous card game. She seems undisturbed by their exuberant chatter. She turns her head slightly and stops colouring her picture. She is listening to the children behind her! The card game breaks up and the group heads out of the classroom for the bathroom. Kate unobtrusively stands up, turns around and begins to check out the deserted table. She picks up the cards and studies them. Next, she starts to explore the other things that have been left behind. No one is paying attention to Kate and she feels free to explore the remnants of the game.

The raucous group playing cards is made up of boys and girls. Its membership has been consistent since the beginning of the study. There are two boys and two girls. The group is situated in the centre of the room and is hard to ignore. Their noise level is higher than other groups with the conversation bordering on offensive. The members have become more disruptive with each research session and I am beginning to feel that it may be time to intervene. I eavesdrop on their conversation, which is not unlike that of a bar on a Friday night:

Girl 1: "What the hell?"

Girl 2: "Do you have ADD?"

Boy 1: "What the hell is ADD?"

Girl 2: "It's like attention problems. My mom says I seriously have it."

Boy 1: "Yeah, well what are STD's?"

Girl 1: "Shut up!"

Boy 2: "I want to sit on the big stool."

Girl 2: "Yeah, that's where you belong. On a big stool!"

Girl 2: "So, are you single?"

Boy 1: "I'm single and I'm proud!"

Girl 1: "You're a loser!"

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

Although the conversation is disjointed, it is apparent, that while swapping insults, they appear to be flirting.

I have not introduced rules about noise hoping that if a conflict about noise arose the students would solve it themselves. Today, the noise level grabs my attention, like they want to be noticed.

It is this group that everyone else in the class steals furtive glances at. It is this group that makes the rest of the class nervous. It is this group that resonates dissonance and distresses me today. Their behaviour is drastically different from the rest of the class. They are having so much fun and yet no one wants to join in. Why?

Exposure

The bullying began one morning at the end of February. One of my female students complained of a migraine and went home. I contacted her mother who immediately requested a meeting. We met at lunchtime and she promptly said her daughter would be devastated if she knew I was speaking to her, but that the matter was so serious she felt she had no choice other than to meet with me.

Her daughter had had enough. On her daughter's behalf, the mother identified a bully group in the class and said the bullying had been going on for some time (prior to the research period). She related that the bully group had acquired so much power that they had successfully threatened and excluded two girls from the basketball tryouts. Although the students in the class were aware of the problem for the better part of the school year, many students felt silenced for they thought nothing would be done about the bullying. They were frightened of exposure for fear of retribution. Now I understood the uneasiness I felt in the classroom, and the odd relations between individual groups. Bullying explained the disconnection.

How could I approach the class so victims felt supported and the bullies would feel threatened with exposure? I had to tread lightly. That afternoon, I shared my feelings about what I had noticed during exploratory time. Then I told them that parents had contacted me alleging that bullying was going on in the classroom. I asked the students if they knew what I was talking about. Incredibly, twenty-two of twenty-four hands went up. I devised a questionnaire that had four questions:

Have you witnessed bullying in the classroom?

Have you ever been bullied?

Have you ever been a bully?

What did you do about it?

I was hoping for honesty in their responses; and they delivered.

It's Not Cool to be a Bitch

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

Since then, my entire curriculum has been devoted to Social Responsibility and the results have been promising. We spend time each day discussing different issues related to bullying and other concerns that teenagers have (friendship, peer pressure, trust, drugs and alcohol, sex). One such discussion began with a journal question, “Why is it ‘cool to be a bitch’?”

I got the idea after watching The Passionate Eye, where Lynn Glazier (2004) hypothesizes that “It’s cool to be a bitch.” She states, “Girls hurt others by using stabbing looks and biting words to inflict emotional wounds.” Next, I tried to change attitudes by exploring reasons why “It is not cool to be a bitch” and in the case of the boys in my class, “Why it is not cool to be an asshole.”

Finally I felt a shift in the negative energy and the classroom atmosphere relax. Children began to move more from group to group comfortable that they would not be harassed. The identified bully group, however, became isolated and not welcome in any of the smaller groups. This was not what I wanted to happen but, under the circumstances, it was understandable. In the very near future I will need to address this new issue of the isolation of the bullies and think about healing for the whole class.

As a follow up to exploratory time, journal writing and discussion offered ways for my students to examine their own behaviour and that of their peers. I wonder now, if my students had been given more time in earlier school years to practice healthy social skills and conflict resolution, whether such dissonance among groups would have evolved.

Reflections: Right Under My Nose

In this study, one of the many things I learned is that I need to communicate more frequently with my intermediate teaching team about student workload and the time we provide for our students to complete assignments. Many of the students’ exit slips indicated they felt relieved they had more time to finish assignments during exploratory time. Common responses were:

“I felt happy because I had free time to read.”

“I felt good because I was getting this stuff out of the way.”

“I felt good because now I can focus on my projects instead of doing homework.”

“I felt relieved because I could get my work done and finish my projects.”

I realized that my students, though twelve and thirteen years old, also needed time in the classroom for exploration free of expectation. However, their ‘time’ looked different than that of the younger children in Jen’s and Kristina’s classes. An American study of students in Grades Three to Eight found that student interest, choice, and enjoyment decreased as grade level increased (Gable, Robert K., Gentry, Marcia and Rizza, Mary G., 2002). Additional forces such as peer group pressure, self-esteem, and self-image also affected motivation and achievement. Maybe it was a lack of supervised socialization that allowed the bullies to develop in the first place.

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

Although many of the students have been friends since kindergarten, hierarchies had formed within the class. Differences were no longer tolerated. The identified bullies, or troublemakers, tried to set the tone in the class but this power struggle worked best within a curriculum with no exploratory time. I also wondered if what I was witnessing in the classroom was similar to what may be going on at recess and lunch. Was I seeing the playground at break times?

Ultimately, I have learned that there is special truth in the adage that ‘things are not always as they seem.’ The fact that there was an extreme bullying situation going on right under my nose and that I was unaware of it tells me I am not paying enough attention to what is truly happening with the students with whom I spend so much time. It was only when I took time to observe my students during the research project that I sensed trouble.

Exploratory time allowed for self selected groups and activities without teacher direction. During this time there was no imposed focus on academics, which in turn allowed social issues to become evident. There was also a perceived lack of supervision. Less structure and more freedom revealed the anti-social behaviour in the classroom, unveiling what had previously been hidden. Once the bullying had been made public, the tension was off and the bullies were no longer hidden, but watched carefully.

Reunion:

Shadows

Our action research into aspects of exploratory play/time revealed and illuminated shadows within all our classrooms. These shadows were, for the most part, the “hidden culture”(Glazier, 2004) beneath our feet. Exploratory playtime, for both our students and ourselves as researchers in each of our classrooms, offered us passages into realms we had not imagined. Only by figuratively stepping into the shadows of the hidden culture did we vibrate with the colours, darkness, and complexities contained within.

Listening to our students interacting with classmates confirmed our suspicions of the powerful influence of television and computer games. Kristina's students brought computer games from home that glorified violence and engaged students in warped banter about females. These video games were unacceptable and children were told to leave them at home. The parents were also contacted and apprised of the situation. As Selma Wasserman points out, “such new ‘toys’ [video games] may have grave implications for the kinds of adults that today’s children are likely to create” (Wasserman, 1991, 135). We are concerned that such activities take passive participants and turn them into aggressive people not able to socialize or engage in the beauty of life, furthering our belief that we need to monitor the children’s exploratory play/time.

In particular, media’s effect on older children is powerful. Some of the students in Bridget’s class imitated flippant, provocative attitudes of TV characters. Sarcastic, biting

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

comments and aggressive behaviour replaced supportive statements among peers. Barbara Coloroso (2002), author of *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, says;

Trash T.V ... has shown that children who are regularly exposed to media violence are apt to become desensitized to real-life violence. As a consequence, they are less likely to be sensitive to the pain and suffering of others and thus less likely to respond to someone in need or to help out in a crisis (120).

Recognising this fact makes it incumbent upon us, to not only discuss and educate our students, but we also need to convey to parents the importance of knowing what activities their children are engaged in.

Does constant exposure to a violent culture play a significant role in the bullying? The subversive bullying by Bridget's students was meant to upset the balance of power in the classroom and control vulnerable students through fear. Once exposed, these students no longer were able to bully the others.

Research time in Jennifer's classroom revealed an underlying tendency for her students to follow traditional gender roles. For example, one male child was teased and embarrassed because he was seen in the house centre putting on and playing with satin gloves. At the end of the day, this child did not report that he had been playing at the house centre. The exploratory play in the classroom enabled Jennifer to see more clearly subtle aspects of the children's behaviour and relationships with each other. She uncovered a need for educators to spend time exploring role issues in the classroom so that children are comfortable and free to explore different roles and activities without criticism.

Exquisite Truths

Despite our unique backgrounds and educational experience we tried to open our eyes to the unexpected. We gained invaluable knowledge through unfettered observations about the intrinsic value of exploratory play/time and how it can lead to serendipitous, happenstance learning for children and revelations for ourselves.

Jennifer's experience suggests that exploratory play definitely needs to be incorporated into the curriculum; exploratory play provided her children with an outlet to problem-solve and synthesize their learning. Kristina, too, realized that exploratory play was an opportunity for her students to revisit concepts they had learned.

Exploratory play allowed Kristina to discover the stories within the complex lives of her students. It also provided a time to listen to the individual and understand the nature of group dynamics, tolerance, and acceptance.

Bridget's students looked at the exploratory time as a gift and Jennifer's students viewed it as a prize. Exploratory playtime allowed students to socialize, something many felt there wasn't time for in the school day. It also provided Bridget's students with time to complete assignments.

Parallels

Students in all three classes shared similar feelings about what they had learned from the experience.

“I learned how to share.”

“I learned how to be nice and play with people.”

“I learned to be kind because when we got in a fight we got over it.”

“People were learning to be nice to me.”

“I learned I could be successful because I knew what I was doing.”

“I learned that I am happy when I get to do what I want.”

Exploratory playtime gave children the freedom to explore relationships, and for adults to learn about those whom they teach. Without exploratory playtime, the subversive bullying in Bridget’s class might never have been detected. Although it was finally a parent who brought the issue to light, Bridget had already begun to sense the undercurrents of disunity among her students, and had begun to investigate. With the “hidden culture” exposed, the grade seven students were relieved to not have to deal with the situation by themselves. Jen and Kristina’s kids, too, needed guidance through rule making and appropriate choices. Exploratory playtime opens up pedagogical moments of opportunity, to learn about children’s interests, to trouble-shoot, and to help children develop healthy relationships with each other.

A Level Playing Field

Collectively, we learned that we could create a curriculum around exploratory playtime as a valuable social learning experience. We believe that exploratory playtime must be given equal value as that of mathematics or reading. As we learned from our research experience, parameters for how exploratory playtime might best work in their classrooms must be established by individual teachers, guided by their students’ input and response. We need to legitimize the power of exploratory playtime not only with parents, teachers, and administrators, but also with society in general. It is a rewarding and powerful path to learning. By not giving children exploratory playtime within the classroom, we are not allowing children opportunities to fully develop their skills of problem solving, role-playing, socialization, and decision-making. We must educate others that exploratory playtime should become part of the curriculum and taught, as an integral component of education.

A Safe Place

Growing, thinking, hopeful, happy, talking, laughing

Developing healthy habits of play

Including those who show us what they know and wonder in a different way

A Future

Choosing, leading, exploring, accepting, retaining, inspiring, socializing

Empowering kids to choose and establish a healthy balance

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

I have to step back and trust

Educators

Trusting, watchful, guiding, interacting, discussing, reflecting, parenting

Must take a back seat to...

Controlling, directing, resolving, deciding

You have to let go

Boredom

Eliminating, daring, risking, synthesizing, thriving, motivating

Learning from one another naturally

Conflict

Resolving, reconstructing meaning, discussing

Changing the seeds of warped thinking

Being alert and aware

Informing

Exit slips, journal writing, debriefing, listening, hearing, observing, feeling

Things are not always as they seem

By: J.B., B.B., K.W., 2004

We know, that we are making the right choice being advocates of play, both in and outside the classroom. But it is not just the children who are learning while they play. Just as children need the spirit of freedom in which to grow, we, too, as educators and as adults, need freedom to play within our working environment or our vocations will stagnate. We need to recognize Krishnamurti's "right" education where "the spirit of individual freedom and intelligence...pervade the whole school at all times" (1953, 92).

Reflections a year later.....

The After Play

Jennifer

Where am I a year later?

Last year I taught Grades One and Two and this year it is Grades Three and Four. I believe strongly in the benefits of allowing children exploratory playtime, yet with the older grades I struggle even more with finding the time to allow children to play within the classroom. I feel significant pressure to cover the curriculum and I struggle with the question of whether children this age really need playtime as much. Yet, when children do get time to play they are ecstatic, and I understand how even older students benefit from playtime within the classroom.

Now and Then

Kristina

Billingsley, J., Browning, B., and Wilting, K. Exploratory Play/Time: An investigation within three elementary classrooms *Educational Insights*, 10(1).

For the past two years I have had a half-day Kindergarten/full-day Grade One class. I am committed, more than ever, to giving my students at least forty minutes of exploratory play each day. This year I also have an autistic kindergarten child in the class and accordingly, I need to incorporate concrete activity-based learning as well as opportunities for the students to socialize into the morning. This year got off to a rough start when the mother of the autistic child thought her child would not get enough play/time. I invited her into the class to decide for herself. She saw how interesting and diverse exploratory play time was and within three days she was convinced this was a great class for her child. The child now has trouble leaving when the morning is over.

Social Responsibility

Bridget

Our research on playtime provided me with insights into the social behaviour of preteens and teenagers that I would never have seen if not for our study.

I found this year's class to be very different from last year's. Overall, academically, they were stronger and everyone in the class had at least one friend. Students worked toward common goals such as fundraising for field trips, planning Sports Day and compiling a yearbook. They also provided the younger children in the school with fun events such as dances, special days and buddy reading. Planning for these social activities seemed to create a bond that was missing in last year's group.

I began the year with a focus on social responsibility and discussions on bullying naturally emerged as we explored ways to be inclusive and supportive. As well, I included the other Grade Seven classes so that everyone would receive the same message. The topics we explored were respect, anger management, maintaining friendships, and diversity. Activities were varied and included group projects, essay and journal writing, and weekly class meetings. Of these, the class meetings were the most effective in provoking open conversation about issues that were current and meaningful. The boys and girls had different perspectives on relationships but this was deemed acceptable and it led to interesting discussions on the socialization of males and females from an early age.

Being aware of potential problems helped me to plan my year. I focused more energy on social issues and worried less about the academics. I knew they would be ready for Grade Eight by the time June rolled along. I think also, that by establishing a trusting relationship early on we were able to take more risks (ie. discussing sensitive issues openly and with respect).

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Jennifer Billingsley, Bridget Browning, and Kristina Wilting are teachers in schools located in Vancouver, British Columbia. They each recently celebrated the completion of their Master in Education, a collaborative adventure which they embarked upon with enthusiasm, commitment, and care. Born in different decades, they continue to mentor and support each other in their teaching profession.