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Entering the Secret Hideout: Fostering Newness and Space for Art and Play

by Shana Cinquema

For many young children, the relationship of play and art is quite natural; children’s play delicately weaves within and around their art-making practices. However, this intricate weaving is not always visible within art classrooms. Conventional classroom structures and curricula tend to discourage children’s inherent playful tendencies and regulate play to spaces outside of traditional learning areas. Teachers tend to be uncomfortable when children’s own interests and desires enter the classroom through play and often limit such experiences. As Wilson (1974) notes, there is a difference between children’s play art and the art that children produce in school. He describes children’s play art as spontaneous; it is the art that children make for themselves, often outside the confines of the classroom. The art children make in school tends to be primarily initiated and guided carefully by the teaching adults. While many argue that children’s true spontaneous play art can rarely find its way into the classroom, it is this kind of art making in which I am most interested, both as an art educator and as a researcher. For me, these two roles—like the relationship between children’s play and art making—have become woven together. I find it difficult to separate my interests in research and teaching. During the year I spent teaching art in a small elementary charter school in southern Arizona, the two roles merged into one as I taught, researched, and—on some lovely occasions—was invited to play alongside the children with whom I spent so much time. Within the context of this paper, I will explore the complex relationships of art making and play for young children and discuss how the inclusion of children’s voluntary sketchbook drawings in my art studio curriculum fostered both the weaving of play and art as well as the creation of a third space in my classroom, conceptualized as a site of possibility and newness. It was the formation of this new space that transformed both the nature of my classroom and my relationships with my students.

A Vignette: Play and Art Making at Its Loveliest

Dylan¹ came excitedly over to me during our sketchbook (i.e., free drawing) time in art class and grabbed my hand, pulling me over to look at his newest drawing. It was of a volcano. He eagerly told me that the volcano was about to explode and that we had to get to the secret hideout. Together, we ran to the other side of the room while counting down from five and covering our heads with our hands. According to Dylan, we made it safely and survived the volcanic explosion.

The next week Dylan drew another volcano, which inspired more play and art making. He called me over, once more declaring that the volcano was about to explode and that we only had 40 seconds

¹ Dylan is a pseudonym.

to get to the secret hideout. This time, when we reached that area of the classroom, we touched our hands to the wall. Dylan traced his own hand and then mine with his finger, making an electronic buzzing sound and stating, “complete” after each tracing. Our hands were obviously being scanned for admittance. After we survived the volcanic explosion, Dylan decided he was going to make a flag for the secret hideout. He asked me what my favorite color was (I replied that it was purple), and he proceeded to color one side of a small rectangular piece of paper purple and the other side green (his favorite color). He asked me to put the flag on the wall above our hideout. I obliged and reached up as high as I could to pin the flag to the wall. He then informed me that he was going to draw our secret hideout and asked me if I would like my own room. I replied, “yes, I would love my own room.” He began his drawing using a purple marker, describing the various elements of our tall, tower-like, secret hideout as he drew. He asked me if I would like things in my room to help me get pretty, and again, I answered that I would. He proceeded to draw makeup in my room.

Two weeks later Dylan drew a third volcano in his sketchbook. This time, however, he had discovered a new secret hideout, located on a different wall in the classroom that would protect us from the impending exploding volcano. He called me over, and we engaged in our shared play activity once more, running over to the new secret hideout to survive the explosion. Dylan proceeded to make another flag for the new hideout. After I hung this flag on the wall just as I had the first, Dylan asked me if I would like to see my room. I said yes, and he took my hand and walked me in circles on the carpet. He stopped abruptly and told me that we had arrived. I asked him what was in my room, and he replied that my room had makeup and anything else I needed to be pretty. Then we went to his room. Again, we walked around in circles, and—perhaps understanding my confusion about this circular walk—he informed me that his room was very high. It became clear to me at that point that we were walking up a circular staircase to get to his room. Once we arrived, he told me that his room had toys and anything else he needed. I asked him what kind of toys, and he replied that his room was full of robots and any other toys he might need.

Dylan’s play and art making wove naturally in and out of each other. At times, his art making inspired his play, and at other times, his play inspired his art making. The invitation to participate in Dylan’s play is not one that I took lightly. This kind of genuine invitation into a shared “playworld” (Ferholt, 2010; Lindqvist, 1996, 2003) is not given often. It provided me with many moments of both enjoyment and contemplation about the rich meanings of children’s play art and my invitation into Dylan’s imaginary world.

Voluntary Art Making: Fostering Play Art

This experience with Dylan exemplifies the types of moments I aim to foster in my classroom—moments that allow for imaginative play art, explorations of ideas and materials, the inclusion of children’s own self-initiated interests, and collaboration among all members of the classroom, myself included. In order to encourage such instances of play and imaginative art making, I give students in my classroom free time to draw in their sketchbooks. During these precious seven minutes at the beginning of a weekly 45-minute art class, the children are free to draw whatever they wish and socialize as they draw. They select their own seats and often sit beside treasured drawing partners. Thompson (1995) notes that the social interactions that occur when children create voluntary drawings—made at the request of an adult, but focusing on ideas and content selected by the children themselves—help to foster and encourage art making. She states, “the presence of other children, the possibility of dialogue, the sharing of perspectives that inevitably occurs around the sketchbooks, contribute significantly to early artistic learning” (Thompson, 1995, p. 9). Dylan drew his volcano images during sketchbook time and invited me to play along with him. This rich narrative and playful experience had not happened at any other time with Dylan. It is clear that the freedom given to Dylan during sketchbook drawing time was essential for the continuation of such play art over the course of many weeks, resulting in four volcano drawings, the creation of two flags, and a detailed marker rendering of our first secret hideout.

As an educator interested in fostering the kinds of social interactions of which Thompson (1995) speaks, I am cognizant of the need to create and model an environment of social engagement and imaginative play during the time the children spend with me in the art studio. During the students’ sketchbook time, I sit alongside them, sometimes asking questions about their drawings; at other times, they volunteer to share their stories and images with me. Zoss (2010) describes this kind of classroom space as one that is not entirely constructed by the teacher but is instead a work in progress. She notes that in her experience, this space was “defined and redefined as students played with their own developing meaning making” (Zoss, 2010, p. 187). This space develops in my classroom while the children are drawing in their sketchbooks, integrating their own ideas into our shared curriculum, and is where the connections between their play and art become visible.

The creation of a space in which children’s own interests and desires can enter the classroom seems to be a crucial component of the merging of art and play. Zoss (2010) goes on to argue that the activities that take place within this type of classroom are based on a “complex set of relationships among the students, the teacher, the materials they use and make, and the meanings they attach to these relationships” (p. 182). Therefore, the meaning making that occurs is positioned in relation to the

specific context of the classroom. My own role as teacher and researcher comes carefully into play at these points. Through the thoughtful construction of student-centered spaces and activities where the children are given choice, I quietly invite my students to make art and play together.

Walker (2001) states that within the context of the art classroom, when educators include concepts such as purposeful play, manipulation of media, risk taking, and experimentation, students begin to understand that art making is about a discovery of meaning. However, she notes that “these practices do not occur spontaneously: they must be planned for as overtly as the more obvious aspects of art-making instruction. As art teachers, we must...give students permission to play” (Walker, 2001, p. 137). Dylan’s choice to draw whatever he wished within his sketchbook (volcanoes), his freedom to move about and interact with the classroom (running from the explosion and entering the secret hideout), and his ability to select his own materials for art making (the construction of the flags) all speak to the kind of space that permits play art; a space that Zoss (2010) defines as one “in which students perform and play with ideas visually, linguistically, and spatially” (p. 182).

A Third Space: Fostering Newness Through Play Art

When interpreted through Bhabha’s (2004) ideas about the third space, the type of classroom described above (and the play art created within in), formed in part through the inclusion of the children’s sketchbook time, can be understood as fostering newness. For Bhabha, the third space is understood as an ambivalent space, or a site of subversion, where those interacting within it create authentic new experiences. Thompson (2009) describes this space (in terms of the classroom) as a “space *between*—neither the exclusive province of teachers nor of children, but a shared space in which they work together to create an ongoing present and to envision and enact a future in which both are fully acknowledged and engaged” (p. 30). The moments at which Dylan invited me to become a part of his play art formed this third space for us together in the classroom—a new space full of authentic and original ideas.

However, as Bhabha (2004) describes, before we can create new ideas, we must recognize where our original knowledge comes from. Both Dylan and I have our own image of what normal and acceptable classroom behavior looks like; we each hold our own beliefs about how students and teachers should act. We both recognize (although this may be subconscious for Dylan) that these ideas affect our behavior in the classroom, but that our behavior can also affect and change the way we think. These thoughts about classroom behavior relate also to issues of authority. As both teacher and researcher, I acknowledge that authority does exist in the classroom, but I do not accept it as a single kind of authority; it is transparent. There are many ways of being teacher, researcher, and student in the

classroom. It is through an understanding of this transparency, and the rejection of the traditional discourse of normal classroom behavior, that our third space is created.

To better understand how this new site develops, I find it helpful to consider the first two spaces, which I understand as the moments when Dylan created his volcano drawings in his sketchbook and my own moments of being both teacher and researcher alongside Dylan. Bhabha (2004) notes that in order for a third space to be created, moments of discursive transparency and ambivalence must occur: epiphanies when the traditional discourses of power and authority are no longer considered a single form of truth. The first space created (Dylan's volcano drawings) represents his moments of discursive transparency; his epiphany happened in these moments of drawing. He decided that he could consider his role of student in the classroom in a new way—he could get out of his chair, create playful moments inspired by his drawings, and invite me to share and engage in those moments with him. He could rethink or reexamine the traditional ideas about what behavior in the classroom could (or should) look like. The second space created (my own narrative of these classroom events) represents my moments of discursive transparency; my epiphany happened when Dylan first invited me to play, to run across the room seeking shelter from the volcano explosion in the secret hideout. I chose to play with him, to engage with him, to accept his invitation. I realized that I could reconsider his role of student as well as my role as educator and researcher.

The third space created is represented by the collaborative moments that occurred between Dylan and me: running across the room holding hands, counting down to the volcano explosion, walking in circles on the carpet to visit our rooms in the secret hideout, Dylan telling me where to place the flags he created, me pinning them on the wall, and Dylan scanning our hands for admittance into the secret hideout. This was a site of possibility and ambiguousness where we could engage as student and teacher in new and different ways. It was a place where change could happen because both Dylan and I had stopped seeing ideas about classroom behavior as absolute or fixed. It was a space of subversion; by playing and engaging with each other both of us were subverting what were considered to be truths about classroom behavior. Here, newness could occur based on the encounters we shared—encounters that only came into existence because we both rejected these truths. The newness that occurred was of teacher/student relationships, of collaboration and play that could occur between student and teacher.

Concluding Thoughts: Fostering Spaces Where Children Can Live, Learn, and Play

The moments shared with Dylan exemplify the creation of a classroom space that fosters newness, where children have the ability to engage in both play and art making. Yet it is interesting to note that these kinds of moments occurred rarely in my art classroom, where I taught an average of 200

kindergarten through fifth-grade students weekly. Sketchbook time was provided and valued by all classes alike, but my shared play with Dylan was unique. What was it about the time Dylan and I shared in the art classroom that fostered this new space? How could I facilitate these experiences with the other children with whom I worked?

These questions plagued me, and continue to do so, even long after I left that art classroom behind. Part of the answer may be related to trust. At the time of the vignette I shared, I was a returning teacher. Most of the children knew and remembered me from the previous spring, and my return as their art teacher was welcome, especially after a few semesters with different art instructors. The relationship I had strived to build based on shared thoughts and ideas and on my recognition of my students as equal participants in our shared classroom space was continuing to grow. Some of the children seemed to understand that I valued their unique contributions to our curriculum, even if those contributions were spontaneous and, from the students' point of view, unsanctioned.

Another part of the answer may be related to the physical art classroom space and the rules there. The new school year had brought with it a brand new art studio, which I curated meticulously. I filled the classroom with a variety of materials housed primarily in clear bins or jars, so everything was visible. Yarns and drawing materials were arranged by color and style, and most (though not all) supplies were put out and available for the children to use at any time. I wanted to create a space where my students could touch and experiment with materials on their own terms, and the children, who had not had a classroom with such rules such before, were slowly becoming used to this way of being in the art studio. However, it was their sketchbook time that primarily fostered the children's experimentation. Sketchbooks became spaces for exploration of marker, oil pastel, tape, and hole punches. Sometimes, as in Dylan's case, sketchbooks were even replaced with new, different drawing surfaces, like the flags.

I believe that it was the freedom and control offered to the children by their shared participation in our art classroom (through their ideas and use of materials) that helped to foster the weaving of their art and play. Lobman (2010) writes "in play, children are not alienated from their creative abilities. Rather than being passive recipients of knowledge, they are the active creators of the very activity that produces opportunities for learning and development" (p. 203). By providing Dylan—and all my students—the chance to play with me while engaging in artistic, imaginative, and creative activities, I aimed to foster their own active creation of knowledge that challenges traditional hierarchical relationships and ways of knowing the world. It is through the weaving of art and play in the classroom, the rejection of received truths, and the unique ideas about student and teacher relationships that are formed as a result that newness is brought about. It is this newness that has the

ability to transform not only the way we work with and think about young children but also our ideas about art and education.

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