

Stories of Play in a Grade Four and Five Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry

by

Cameron M. MacKay

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But how to establish the exact moment in which a story begins? Everything has already begun before, the first line of the first page of every novel refers to something that has already happened outside the book. Or else the real story is the one that begins ten or a hundred pages further on, and everything that precedes it is only a prologue. The lives of individuals of the human race form a constant plot, in which every attempt to isolate one piece of living that has a meaning separate from the rest—for example, the meeting of two people, which will become decisive for both—must bear in mind that each of the two brings with himself a texture of events, environments, other people, and that from the meeting, in turn, other stories will be derived which will break off from their common story.

- Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*

Acknowledgements

Context is a recurring theme in this thesis. The idea that nothing happens in isolation, that there is always the influence of past and future, the lingering relations with others, applies not only to the events within this narrative, but to the writing of the thesis itself. Simply put, there are so many people and experiences which have played a role in steering me through the present.

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In a thesis about play it is only appropriate that I recognise the (pop) cultural influences in my life. I am speaking here of the writers, directors, musicians, artists, and characters who have allowed me to wonder and imagine. Not being able to thank you personally, your recognition is sprinkled—playfully, of course—within the thesis.

To my wife, Kitty, and my son, Finlay. The time sacrificed in the writing of this thesis has impacted you most directly. I know that at times I have been less than present—maybe even more so mentally than physically. Thank you for allowing me the time and space to complete this. Through all of this theorising on play, I have come to recognise that you are two of the most playful people I know. As I (finally) bring this writing to a close, I look forward to once again playing together.

Abstract

This narrative inquiry examines the value of play in upper-elementary schooling. It is guided by the research puzzle, “What does play look like in a grades four and five classroom and what potential might it hold?” The narrative inquiry takes place in the context of the narrative inquirer’s own grades four and five classroom over an 8-week period.

Through a postmodern, social constructivist lens, the play stories of several students are told and critically reflected upon. Field texts are used to construct a narrative of play and pose pedagogical questions and perspectives throughout.

The narrative inquirer concludes that play cannot be recognised by particular pursuits but by the shared qualities of those pursuits. In this research window, play is observed to be social, busy, unpredictable, emotionally charged, in need of responsive teachers, and able to provide children with autonomy. It is argued that play belongs in the upper-elementary classroom not just for the academic, social, and emotional benefits but, drawing on the work of Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999 & 2005) because it is a democratic and ethical approach.

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Chapter 1: Context of the Narrative Inquiry

I am unable to pinpoint the earliest moment in which the idea of becoming a teacher entered my mind. Even if I thought I could, every moment has the fingerprints of some earlier moment on it anyway. So as tidy a story as it would make, there is no starting line at which we can convene (which also means that there will be no finish line at which to part). In lieu of an “earliest moment,” let us instead congregate at a vivid memory that may be as good as any place to begin bringing my relationship with play into focus.

I am seven years old, sitting at a solitary desk in my grade three classroom. A worksheet of single-digit multiplication questions, a “Mad Minute”, stares up at me. We have been instructed to complete this as quickly as possible, without speaking, and then put our heads down. The clock is ticking.

I consider that up until this point I have been viewed as a “good student.” Although younger than my classmates (thanks to a mid-December birthday), I have been reading fluently since kindergarten. I am considered well-mannered and easy going. School, to this point, has been “easy.”

I notice a few heads go down. I look back at the arithmetic on my desk. These are questions to which I do not know the answers. Having some sort of strategy to solve them has not even occurred to me (nor, it seems, the teacher). I think we have been told that we are doing this in order to learn our “times tables,” but this reeks suspiciously of testing, not teaching. I attempt to pull numbers out of thin air. More pencils are put down. More heads are placed on desks.

I am a curious child. I enjoy reading, drawing, and asking questions. I love puzzles and problem solving, but I see no connection to that on the paper in front of me. I’ve been part of a

school enrichment group which gets pulled out of class once a week to paint with a specialised art teacher. Where is *she* when I need her?

Time is winding down. I can tell because mine is one of only a few heads that is not already resting on a desk. I look down at the paper one last time before it is snatched away from me. It becomes the first in a future pile of “Mad Minutes” that I am to complete at home over the winter break.

Two significant things seem to happen over the course of this minute (and neither of them has anything to do with learning mathematics). At seven years old, I begin to disengage as a student. I also begin to get a fairly strong feeling, though maybe not explicitly at the moment, that this (*school*, that is) could be so much more relevant if it considered student engagement.

Fast forward to the end of winter break—thirty-two years later. I am shuffling around the classroom, *my* classroom, on a Monday morning. I have become the teacher. My resentment towards school had actually grown since those grade three days, but so did my curiosity around learning. I think it was these opposing forces that drove me to pursue a career in education. Along the way, I spent years trying to articulate all that I felt that was missing from school: the student engagement, the intrigue, the spontaneity, the relevancy, the pure joy, until, suddenly, it seemed obvious. The word was fresh in my mind, if not on my lips—play.

So here I am, Monday morning, January 9, 10:10 a.m. I am trying to organise a few last minute things before my students come back inside from recess. In a few minutes, twenty-one grades four and five students will come tumbling back into the classroom, throwing off winter wear, and congregating at our carpeted meeting area with, I am guessing, their signature, busy energy. I will not be handing out “Mad Minutes”, I will not be dispersing worksheets of any kind. No—we are about to play.

Explorations is on the schedule and I plan to kick off this new term properly. I have selected a picture book biography to read aloud: *Manfish: A Story of Jacques Cousteau* by Jennifer Berne. It traces Jacques Cousteau's curiosities and pursuits, beginning as a child, and is well suited, I believe, to spark a class discussion about what *our* interests and curiosities are and, as the week goes on, how that might look during Explorations. On our Smartboard screen, underneath a bold line of text that reads "EXPLORATIONS = OPPORTUNITY," I have projected an image of Jacques Cousteau along with a line from the book: "Jacques spent his days playing, creating, and experimenting."

The first half-dozen students are settling at the carpet now with more streaming in. They chat. Some are taking in the Smartboard display. Before I have even made my way to the front, Stella, a grade five student, turns on the bench where she is seated to challenge me directly.

"But we can't *play* at Explorations, only create and experiment."

I realise that she is referencing the line from the book. I don't break stride. Releasing her inquiring gaze while walking past, I trail off with an unconvincing, "Well..."

* * *

Play—a provocative if not taboo word in the context of the classroom. Its utterance might stir chaos in kindergarten, never mind in the world that my nine to eleven year olds inhabit. I have always considered there to be play in my classroom or, at the very least, a playful atmosphere, but it was not until I began this narrative inquiry, not until I decided to call it what it was, that it occurred to me—play is not a word that I use in my classroom: not with administration, or colleagues, or parents. And now, as Stella had so abruptly brought to my attention on this Monday morning, not with my own students.

Why? I guess it has just been easier to avoid it. Sometimes I already fear that outsiders wonder about what *really* happens in my classroom. Wonder what this long-haired, brightly dressed, male is doing in an early-years classroom anyway. Wonder what this whole “Explorations” thing is about. First impressions may be to look upon this teacher with suspicious eyes—this does not *look* like a regular teacher in a regular classroom. I worry about being misunderstood—judged before opening my mouth. Because play itself is such an impulsive and frivolous pursuit, it may be thought that my reasons (or lack thereof) for dedicating time to it in the classroom are just as absent. They are not.

I am sensitive to the suspicious eye, not because I worry that others may disagree with me, but because I want my playfulness to be considered seriously. I want parents (and students and colleagues) to “get it,” or at least not dismiss it off hand. Using the word play in my classroom may cause others to take what they have seen, to take what they have heard, to take what they *assume*, and then, grasping at that one word coming directly from *me*, to confirm it all. Then, of course, they will drop another word in front of “play” to unequivocally dismiss it —“just.” “I knew it,” they will say, “they are *just playing*.”

So I do not have an immediate response for Stella. She is right. We have not used the word play, never mind defended it. I need time and space to talk about play. I need a chance to collect our thoughts and experiences. I need the opportunity not for an attempted, quick explanation, but to zoom in and carefully dissect a slice of our classroom—to tell the story of our insights, our frustrations, our joy, our intertwined, tangled up, *mess* that is play. I need to begin a conversation that allows others to construct an understanding of how we are learning, and living, and being in our classroom.

That is the intent of this study: to investigate the multifaceted relationships with play among students in my multiage, grade four and five classroom. I am interested in developing a deeper understanding of what play looks like with this age group and what significance it might hold. Through student voices and my observations, I will tell the stories of children and their relationship with play within the context of our classroom. I will explore what play activities they choose to engage with and how these experiences affect them cognitively, attitudinally, physically, and emotionally. Through a narrative inquiry approach, I will construct an understanding of upper early-years play by, “coming alongside” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34) my students as they play.

So, allow this to be a discussion with my colleagues, with the families of my students, with the doubters (even if some are imagined), and with anyone with a vested interest in the education system. But, most importantly, allow this to be my response to Stella. Allow this to be our conversation about play.

Research Puzzle

According to Clandinin (2013), “each Narrative Inquiry is composed around a particular wonder” (p. 42). The idea of play, and what it might look like in terms of teaching and learning, has been a common thread in my thinking. At present, I find myself teaching in a grade four and five multiage classroom. This is a position that sees me straddled (according to the Government of Manitoba) between early-years education (kindergarten to grade four) and middle-years education (grade five to grade eight) (Manitoba Education, 2010). From this perspective, I wonder about the relationship between play and children as they grow older. It is hard for me to imagine that play could go from holding a significant place in a child’s life to suddenly disappearing when that child’s age reaches double digits. Considering the qualities of play found

in the literature review, I believe it to be more likely that play simply continues to evolve as one grows older. How, then, could play, this important aspect of a child's construction of knowledge and identity, be ignored in school? Thus, it is in my interest and (I might go so far as to say) my professional responsibility to recognise play as it transforms with middle-years students.

With this in mind, my research puzzle could be stated as: What does play look like in a grades four and five classroom and what potential might it hold?¹ What role might play have in terms of student learning, creativity, development, personal growth, identity, relationships, and well-being? What can we learn from children about play? How might observing and listening to the play stories of a few students help us to enter into a much needed conversation about play in middle-years and in education in general?

Through constructing stories of children and their play through a narrative inquiry, I would then like to consider what we as educators can learn from play and best support it. What might this inquiry teach us in regards to valuing and fostering play in our own classrooms and promoting its inclusion in school more generally? How do we best stimulate and counsel classroom play without contaminating it with our prodding fingerprints? Can we make the purposelessness purposeful? *Should* we? These are all wonderings that I hope to elaborate on once a narrative of play has been introduced.

Significance of the Study

Because play is a potentially important avenue for children's construction of knowledge and identity, it is critical that we engage in a conversation about its inclusion in the classroom: a conversation that includes not just pre-school and early years students, but those entering middle-years and beyond. Other than with very young children, there has been little research on play.

¹This question is a revised version of the original, which appears in the consent forms.

However, there is much in the literature concerning play that I believe to be relevant, if not crucial, to the lives and development of students entering the middle years.

Play = Learning and Innovation

“[P]lay is the key element in any event of learning” (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 84). If this is so, is it not worth examining whether this relationship between play and learning continues beyond the early-years? Should inquiring into novel experiences in an engaged way (i.e. playing) not be considered as a process of meaning making at all ages? Might play help middle-years students tap into innovation? Play, as we have seen, includes the spontaneous and novel. Through play, new possibilities are explored, sometimes at random, producing the opportunity for new syntheses of ideas. According to Kohn (2010), “deeper learning and enthusiasm . . . require us to let students *generate* possibilities rather than just choose items from our menu” (p. 19). Supporting play, or a playful approach to learning, might allow students the opportunity to explore the outer limits of their thinking, thus holding the potential for innovative ideas. We must remember that “the truth of education is that it lies in the process itself. The educated mind will lead us to unanticipated destinations” (McKernan, 2008, p. 86).

Children as Active Players

Through playing, one becomes a player in one’s world. Play is not done *to* someone but *by* someone. Unlike much of what happens in many middle years classrooms, play is an active rather than passive event. The player becomes the protagonist in her learning and her life because “in play children can be autonomous in a way that they cannot be anywhere else” (Erikson cited in Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 114). For the child who has her education imposed upon her, play becomes a small window of autonomy. Play allows the child a critical voice. This is extremely

important to the development of students entering middle years as they continue the journey of finding their place within the world. Play allows children a safe space in which to act out or rehearse situations that they may not yet be ready for, it broadens the limits of imagination because “without the ability to imagine, people remain stuck, unable to move into a place of power and possibility” (hooks, 2010, p. 61). According to Gray (2011), a decrease in play has even been correlated with an increase in cases of psychopathology in children and adolescents.

Play may also help middle years students be active not just in mind, but in body as well. Several play activities require some level of physical exertion, contributing to a healthy lifestyle. Others, at the very least require the player to be moving about, rather than sitting in front of worksheets or a screen, as he or she gathers supplies, collaborates with others, manipulates objects, etc. Even if a particular play activity does not demand any movement, I have regularly witnessed students standing, rather than sitting, at tables as they are intently engaged in their play. If pathological sitting is the newest health concern, could play not turn out to have some welcome side effects?

Unexamined and Slipping Away?

The lack of literature to be found on play in the middle-years indicates that it is an insufficiently explored area both in research and in practice. According to Ortlieb (2010), play in the classroom decreases significantly in the middle-years, “limited within certain grade levels and only at certain times of the day” (p. 242). Even more troubling than this is the possibility that what little playfulness can be found with middle-years students may actually be *receding*! Some research has shown that time spent on free play by children and adolescents has steadily declined over the past several decades (Gray, 2011; Harris, 2014). Several factors could potentially be contributing to the decline of play including: fears around safety (greatly affecting outdoor play);

a “back-to-basics” push and focus on standardised instruction and assessment; the proliferation of passive screen time for children and adolescents; and the over-programming of children (for example: homework, clubs, sports teams, etc.).

If we concede all of this about play, then the argument for examining play in the middle years is simply: because it is the right thing to do. To simply ignore play in the middle years would be unforgivably neglectful. Play respects human potential by stimulating meaningful learning while promoting personal voice and active citizenship, and yet what little remnants are left once students leave early years classrooms may be further eroding. By engaging in this narrative inquiry, I hope to examine whether we might even say that making room for play, at any age level, is a moral obligation.

Theoretical Framework

Postmodernism

My thesis is guided by a postmodern perspective of knowledge and the individual. It is my belief, and inherent in my practice, that learning is “meaning making rather than truth finding” (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013, p. 23). Postmodernism allows for contextual relations among students and their social construction of knowledge and identity, welcoming “uncertainty, complexity, diversity, non-linearity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives and temporal and spatial specifications” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 22). The allowance that postmodernism makes for these non-objective and uncertain qualities in education, makes it a perspective that readily fits with narrative inquiry and the concept of play.

According to Dahlberg et al. (2013), the postmodernist movement began to make noise in the 1960s as a response to modernity. Modernity surfaced in the seventeenth century out of a desire to establish an objective truth in areas of knowledge and morality. Incubated in the Age of

Enlightenment, modernity banked on the potential of technology and industrialisation “to transcend place, culture and particular historical experience, and abstract the individual from his or her context” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 19). The individual was seen as the central subject, and value-neutral knowledge, existing independently from any context, was able to be transmitted from teacher to student.

Postmodernism challenges modernity on the basis of “its inability to comprehend and accommodate human diversity, complexity and contingency” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 22).

Postmodernism refutes the existence of absolute truths, instead contending that “there is no external position of certainty, no universal understanding that exists outside history or society that can provide foundations for truth, knowledge and ethics” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 23).

Modern science is not rejected by postmodernism, but “is no longer understood as the only source of knowledge” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 25).

Postmodernism aims to “*decentre* the child, viewing the child as existing through its relations with others and always in a particular context” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 43). The decentred child cannot be understood apart from her relationships with the world. Through this postmodern perspective, the child is not an independent subject, attending school in order to prepare for adulthood. “Childhood is understood not as a preparatory or marginal state, but as a component of the structure of society . . . and important in its own right as one stage of the life course” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 49). This is a rejection of the modernist view of the child as “the ultimate ‘Other’ than the adult . . . who must gain knowledge that has been legitimised by those who are older and wiser” (Cannella, 1999, p. 36). Instead, a postmodern lens would consider the child a co-constructor of knowledge, complete with voice, agency, and relationships

(Dahlberg et al., 2013). Therefore, the postmodern classroom must allow for a level of student autonomy and

provide a space where new possibilities can be explored and realized through enlarging the reflexive and critical ways of knowing, through construction rather than reproduction of knowledge, through enabling children to work creatively to realize the possibilities and handle anxiety. (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 22)

It is my intention to argue that it is play that can provide these opportunities.

Social Constructivism

My thesis is also grounded in the belief of knowledge as a socially constructed phenomenon. One who is “living a postmodern childhood” is a “*co-creator*, rather than producer, of knowledge, identity and culture” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 54). With the rejection of objective, transmittable knowledge, Berger and Luckman (cited in Dahlberg et al., 2013) instead claim that “the world and our knowledge of it are seen as *socially constructed* and all of us . . . are active participants in this process” (p. 22).

Social constructivism challenges the thinking that learning must follow solely from teaching (and ideally within a school setting). Instead, “the young child emerges as *co-creator* from the very start of life” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 50). This is not to say that others (including a teacher) do not play an important role in the student’s learning as “learning is a cooperative and communicative activity” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 50). Teachers, classmates, all relations are part of the inseparable context in which children make meaning. However, from a social constructivist perspective, the myth of some universal knowledge that I, as the teacher, hold over my students is instead replaced by a partnership in meaning making. Knowledge and

identity are *socially* constructed because an understanding of one's world cannot be undertaken in isolation from those who make up that world.

A postmodern, social constructivist perspective informs my view of children. It frames my students as autonomous individuals within a larger context. They are not a group of students to whom it is my responsibility to impart knowledge. Each child is constructing meaning of herself, others, and her world, all in relation to each other.

What then might a classroom seen through a postmodern, social constructivist lens look like? How can these values find a place in the typically modernist structure of school? If I am not the teacher who is leading my students, through a variety of techniques, to predetermined outcomes, what exactly *is* my role within those four walls? If we abandon a modernist view of education, must we abandon school itself along with it? On the contrary, I intend to argue that it *is* possible to honour postmodern and social constructivist settings in a school setting—the key is play.

If a postmodern, social constructivist child is to be “a ‘rich’ child engaging actively with the world” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 50), then she must be afforded the opportunity to make decisions about how she interacts with her classroom environment. Play holds promise for this. A space for play in the classroom allows the young child to be “not only included, but in active relationship with that society and that world” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 50). Play allows the child to be flexible and autonomous, both crucial in children's construction of knowledge and identity. Thus, it is with a postmodern, social constructivist perspective, that I consider children, teaching, and play. It is from this perspective that I examine the meaning making in the 8-week research window.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

While exploring the research landscape on the subject of play, two things quickly became evident: one is that play seems to resist an agreed upon definition; and two, that very little, if any, research has been done on play in middle-years educational settings. Considering this, I have decided to work towards a flexible understanding of play. I have also chosen to examine play in general and then connect these ideas to middle years students myself.

As noted by Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff (2008), “Despite the many treatises on play, scholars still find the term elusive” (p. 2). Play is a deceivingly complex idea; stubborn and complicated, refusing to stand still for an accurate sketch. Play is not a *thing*, nor is it a mere action. It would be better described as a responsive interplay among players, objects, and situations. Play is a “dynamic relationship” (Eberle, 2004, p. 231), and “a category of very diverse happenings” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 3). As with other broad, intangible terms such as love, art, or culture (to name a few), play is best understood by focusing on recurring qualities. Ortlieb (2010) claims that “it is illogical to attempt to define such a vast concept” (p. 241). Thus, rather than reaching for an unsatisfactory, static *definition* of this “omnibus category” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.3), I have found it more authentic and worthwhile to collate an *understanding* of play.

This goal of understanding has led me to highlight several key attributes of play including spontaneity, novelty, engagement, purpose[lessness], subversiveness, rule [dis]orientation, and joy.

Spontaneity and Possibility

The fact that play is dynamic and difficult to define suggests a certain unpredictability. Certainly, several researchers recognise spontaneity and possibility within play (Eberle, 2014;

Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008; Reiber, 2001). This spontaneity might be thought of as the *playful* side of play; a seemingly obvious quality. Sutton-Smith (1997), states that play, “*include(s) the playful*” (emphasis mine), with playfulness referring “to a mood of frolicsomeness, lightheartedness, and wit” (p. 147). Play is an opportunity to “mess about” with objects and ideas, an engagement that has the potential to lead in many different directions. Derrida went so far as to refer to play as “a field of infinite substitutions” (as cited in Rogers & Lapping, 2012, p. 244). The responsive nature of play allows for creative ways of thinking and the possibility for various routes. Play is an engagement that cannot be limited to prescribed outcomes. As Eberle (2014) notes, “players prolong and perpetuate play by helping ensure it is open-ended” (p. 223). It is our playfulness, a willingness to embrace spontaneity, which sustains the possibility of play.

Novelty

For an act of play to be spontaneous, an aspect of novelty is an important attribute. Eberle (2014), includes surprise as one of his elements of play. Possibly, it is more natural for us to be curious and spontaneous with an object or idea that is novel to us. If we are familiar with the “end-point” of something, it can be more difficult to remain open to various possibilities—to remain playful. “Play seems usually to be driven by the novelties, excitements, or anxieties that are most urgent to the players” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 61). Surprise and novelty may pique our interest, motivating us to remain players.

Engagement

Many researchers posit that one sign of play is that of a person demonstrating active engagement (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008; Pui-Wah, 2010; Reiber, 2001; Weisberg, Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013). If play is an active pursuit, then the player must not be passive, as

“play is deep engagement” (Reifel et al., 2014, p. 4). Pui-Wah (2010), equates play with engagement, echoing Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow.” Pui-Wah recognizes play as “the state that is found when children are engaged in deep enjoyment” (2010, p. 79). However, Sutton-Smith (1997), argues that thinking of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow as play may just be filling a societal need “to find meaning in the secular pleasures of individual people” (p. 185-186). Perhaps psychologists are in danger of falling into the trap of overly intellectualising play. Sutton-Smith (1997), also adds that if play is likened to an engaged state of flow, then “play at its best . . . would no longer be distinct from work at its best” (p. 186). Can one be simultaneously engaged and playful, focused yet spontaneous? Still, it seems to be agreed upon that a true act of play at least holds the player’s interest (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008; Pui-Wah, 2010; Reiber, 2001; Weisberg, Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013). Even Sutton-Smith (1997) writes that “what seems most obvious about play . . . is that it is a very exciting kind of activity that players carry on because they like doing so” (p. 18). Whether we refer to this as interest or engagement, an act of play calls out for the player’s attention.

Purpose[lessness]

“Purposelessness with a purpose” is how Eberle (2011) relates humans’ playful history with aesthetics (p. 39). Here, I believe Eberle to mean an act that is unimportant in the grand scheme of things, yet still has a point; like a hockey game, in which thousands of people rally desperately for the home team to win, all the while aware, at least when the heat of the game has passed, that the event has no effect on the “real world” itself other than that which we give it. Is play with a purpose a paradox? Several researches do not seem to view it that way. Reiber makes a case for “serious play” (2001), while Wood (2004) argues that “in more successful play activities children were purposefully engaged and the teachers’ intentions were realised” (p. 30).

In these examples, it is implied that there is more than just one type of play, with some being more conducive to learning than others—namely, purposeful play.

Others argue that play does not require a purpose. Eberle (2014) contends that “first, play exists for its own sake” (p. 215). It “has no extrinsic goals,” claim Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff (2008, p. 2). Why the discrepancy? Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that our obsession with child development clouds our view of play: “This subordination of intrinsic play functions to other extrinsic developmental functions occurs apparently because the theorists are primarily concerned with child socialization and maturity, and children’s civilized progress in general” (p. 18). In other words, psychologists who are interested in potential benefits of play, rather than play itself, will tend to focus on its effect or purpose, rather than the act. So, perhaps play has an indirect effect even if it does not intend to have a purpose.

Subversiveness

While we may be tempted to associate play with childhood innocence, play can also carry with it a hint of subversiveness. Any act that does not carry a predetermined conclusion, such as play, brings with it unpredictability and thus the potential to run counter to conventional expectations. King (1987) speaks of “‘illicit play’ in elementary school classrooms, where children doodle, pass notes, whisper, make faces, giggle, mock and satirize adults” (as cited in Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 111). Children, often feeling powerless in an adult controlled world, might use play to strengthen their sense of control (even if it is only illusory). According to Sutton-Smith (1997), “it is commonplace in play theory to suggest much of what children do in play is a compensation for their general life conditions” (p. 114). If one’s interest is in wielding control over another, often an adult over a child, then play has the potential to be a dangerous act. If, however, we believe that a child actively constructs knowledge and identity, then play’s

opportunity for agency is crucial. It is possible, suggests Sutton-Smith (1997), that “children’s use of play . . . is not only for enjoyment but also for protest” (p. 117).

Rule [Dis]Oriented

“Players play by rules,” claims Eberle (2014, p. 215). There are parameters, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, to the games people play. While rules and parameters might, at first, sound contradictory to spontaneity, open-endedness and subversiveness, rules can, in fact, come *from* the act of playing and the players themselves. Reifel (2014) makes the distinction that “sometimes the play itself dictates the rules. Sometimes it is the children who make the rules” (p. 3). Rules are not always imposed on play, but are often a *product* of play itself. But rules for play do more than just set forth expectations as “rules are not just for organizing games and making them fair, they keep games interesting and keep games going” (Eberle, 2014, p. 223). Adjusting rules can allow play to remain novel and challenging, so “players keep play fresh . . . by negotiating rules” (Eberle, 2014, p. 223). Then, of course, there is the act of playing *with* the rules. Another form of subversion, rule manipulation, or flat out rule breaking, can be a playful testing of parameters:

Rule making also includes rule breaking, ironically, as operating obediently within artificial constraint and restriction unearths bones of contention that invite players to vault the obstacles or dispute the conditions that every game imposes. Thus subversion and mischief often become part of the experience and parcel of the fun. In fact, play will lurch between regulation and abandon, order and disorder, or contain both forces at once. (Eberle, 2014, p. 216)

Thus, play provides a space in which rules have the potential to be flexible. Their manipulation is an action that provides an otherwise missing sense of power and control for the young player and a way for the child to construct identity.

Joyfulness

Eberle (2014) suggests that “we can hear people at play if we listen for the laughter” (p. 223). Could it be as simple as this? Instead of *looking* to define play, should we instead be *listening*? That play is “pleasurable and enjoyable” is, according to Hirsch-Pasek and Golinkoff (2008), a key feature evident in the literature (p. 2). Reiber (2001) refers to learning through play as “very satisfying and enjoyable” (p. 2). Eberle (2014) goes so far as to say that “we would not play if play were not, at least in some measure, fun” (p. 224). A sense of joy, then, could be an indicator of play. It has also been argued that enjoyment acts as a motivator to play “because pleasure offers its own reward and because play entails pleasure, play perpetuates itself” (Eberle, 2014, p. 224). The pleasure that play brings is “an incentive to play some more” (Eberle, 2014, p. 223).

This understanding of play has been critical in informing the data collection and writing of my narrative inquiry. Looking for moments of spontaneity, novelty, engagement, subversiveness, rule creation (and manipulation), joy, and an exploration of the line between purpose and purposelessness, has helped me to focus in on moments of play within my classroom. Whether or not it is possible (or even necessary) to define play is less important for my purpose than the ability to recognise it.

Chapter 3: Methodology - Narrative Inquiry

In a continuous process of give-and-take, the world provides us with the puzzling evidence that we turn into stories, which in turn lend the world a doubtful sense and an uncertain coherence that lead to further questions. The world gives us the clues that allow us to perceive it, and we order those clues in narrative sequences that seem to us truer than the truth, making them up as we go, so that what we tell about reality becomes for us reality. (Manguel, 2015, p. 326)

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach that invites the researcher, or narrative inquirer, to construct an understanding of human experience through the stories of the participants in her study. This may be by way of conversations with others or by “coming alongside participants” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 34) in the present in order to create field texts. In other words, our participants can tell us about their experiences, or we can witness them first hand. As narrative inquirers, we connect these experiences in an effort to understand them narratively. In this way, narrative inquiry can be thought of as the study of human experience as story (Clandinin, 2013).

Narrative inquiry falls in line with a postmodern view of education. It respects knowledge as subjective and socially constructed, as it is the narrative inquirer who makes sense of what she is observing with, and in relation to, others. For both narrative inquiry and postmodernism, context is key.

In addition to being a methodology, narrative inquiry also brings with it a philosophical perspective which includes a view of experience as a narrative phenomenon (Clandinin, 2013). Narrative inquirers believe that “people make sense of their lives according to the narratives

made available to them” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 2). Our experiences are organized narratively in order to gain greater depth of insight into them. These narratives can thus be used to construct an understanding of a particular experience, in this case, play. However, “what narrative inquirers gain in the proximity to ordinary lived experience and the scope of their considerations, they, at times, sacrifice in certainty” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 48). Thus, it is important to remember that “narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience. It is nothing more and nothing less” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 13).

Due to the many parallels between the two, I believe that narrative inquiry is well suited for studying the phenomenon of play. If play is, as stated earlier by Eberle (2004), a “dynamic relationship” (p. 231) then the methodology we use to study it must account for this. Narrative inquiry does not just accept the relational aspect of an experience, it celebrates it. Clandinin (2013) refers to narrative inquiry as a “relational methodology” (p. 23). This includes the relationships between: “the person and his/her world”; “past, present, and future including... intergenerational”; “person and place”; “events and feelings”; “us as people”; “the physical world and people”; and “cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familial narratives” (p. 23). The experience of play, as well, is influenced by all of these relationships that the player holds.

According to Clandinin (2013), “engaging in narrative inquiry entails thinking within the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry—temporality, sociality, and place” (p. 38). Time, social interactions, and space—these are all moving entities in an experience of play as well. Narrative inquiry allows us to embrace this.

I also believe that using a narrative inquiry approach has allowed me to study children’s play in context. While the research window itself took place over a relatively short period of time, as the classroom teacher, I was able to take into account the background and meaning of

the students' play choices as well as potential future directions. In order to construct a full understanding, I needed to consider play in its full context. My narrative inquiry is but a small window into the play experiences of my participants. It is an inquiry into play as it relates to particular people, in a particular place, at a particular time. Narrative inquiry acknowledges that we "always enter into research relationships in the midst" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 43); no starting line to convene at, no finish line at which to part.

Due to its relational aspect, narrative inquiry also acknowledges the fact that I, as a researcher, have a relationship with the participants and that this had an effect on the study. In traditional, quantitative research, this poses potential concerns; namely a dangerous contamination of the data. However, in narrative inquiry "we intentionally come into relation with participants" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 23). Narrative inquiry welcomes the fact that researchers, "relational inquirers" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 24), "are part of the storied landscapes [they] are studying" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 24). Thus, being my participants' classroom teacher became not an inconvenient situation to work around, but an advantageous head start. I already had a relationship with my students and a context for their relationships with their classmates, families, and play experiences. These were important starting points when considering play and narrative inquiry.

Method

The construction of field texts for this narrative inquiry took place in my own grade four and five, multiage classroom in an urban school division. The narrative inquiry took place over an 8-week period beginning at the approximate midpoint of the school year. In order to focus on potential times of play in the classroom, field texts focused on experiences and events that occurred during Explorations periods as well as any occurrences that were directly related to

Explorations. While the majority of field texts came from Explorations, I was naturally cognisant of this narrative inquiry at all times of the school day. Therefore, a research notebook was always in hand and thoughts, observations, and snippets of conversation related to play were scribed during various times of the day.

Explorations

My inquiry focused on particular times in our school day in which student play is prevalent: namely, *Explorations*. Explorations is an inquiry-based, interdisciplinary block of time during our school day in which student interest drives learning choices. With their teacher's and classmates' support, students are encouraged to play with ideas and engage in pursuits that hold intrigue for them. Explorations, which is usually afforded ninety minutes on alternating days in our schedule, includes whole class, small group, and individual opportunities for meeting, reflecting, sharing, journaling, as well as active engagement in students' chosen pursuits. It is intended as an extension of a similar time students may have been exposed to in pre-school, kindergarten, and early-years (alternately referred to as "free-play", "choice time", among other labels), though it is understood that many children may not have consistently received these opportunities for play in their schooling experiences.

Explorations is the ideal setting in which to observe play in a middle-years classroom. As touched upon earlier, Explorations is a period in which student interest, choice, and inquiry become the impetus for learning. It is a setting in which many of the associative qualities of play found in the literature (spontaneity, novelty, engagement, purpose[lessness], subversiveness, joy) have the opportunity to make their way into the classroom.

Because Explorations is concerned more with an engaged process than a defined product, students are welcome to investigate various detours from their original planning. A student may,

for example, begin an Explorations period building plasticine models and, as a result of manipulating them, decide to pursue animation. This quality of Explorations, the continuous opportunity to follow one's own lead, helps students to remain naturally engaged. If one idea is about to reach a dead end, there are various offshoots and alternatives. There is an element of the subversive to Explorations as well. I have seen many students thrive on the opportunity to "mess around" in school. The opportunity to leave their individual stamp on the classroom creates a shift in the balance of power. Explorations also walks the fine line between purpose and purposelessness. Many explorations pursuits may not immediately seem to have a direct relevance in terms of traditional schooling but are personally significant and valuable to students (and often turn out to be more connected to standard academics than one would expect). Finally, perhaps the greatest connection between play and Explorations is joy. Not surprisingly, it is almost always the most anticipated time of our day. Students speak, in school and at home, through great smiles and contagious enthusiasm about their Explorations pursuits. There is simply an atmosphere of exuberance in the classroom thanks to Explorations.

Due to its lack of prescribed outcomes, Explorations requires me, as the classroom teacher, to be observant and reflexive. In collaboration with my students, I must propose invitations for engagements, make appropriate supplies and resources accessible, enter into conversations among students (allowing them to "think out loud"), and document student experiences. Explorations creates the need for a continuous stream of decision making on the part of the teacher. Knowing when to interject, when to introduce a new idea, and when to stay out of the way is never certain. It is a difficult balance to maintain; somewhat of a Goldilocks situation in which the teacher's presence need be "not too hot, not too cold, but just right." Listening, then, becomes the most crucial role of the teacher. If learning is being constructed by

the children, then the teacher must be in touch with what that construction is. Hence, my decisions are made based on the children's experiences and voices, seen and heard through the pedagogical lens of post-modernism and social constructivism.

In addition to being a promising space in which to find play, Explorations is also a natural fit with narrative inquiry. For starters, Explorations is an inquiry in and of itself. Students are posing questions, exploring ideas, experimenting with various techniques, going "back to the drawing board," and beginning the cycle again. Hence, this study has the opportunity to be an inquiry within an inquiry.

Whether they are explicitly aware of it or not, students are already constructing a narrative of their learning during Explorations. Reflecting in their Explorations Logs, sharing in small groups and with the whole class, students are constructing stories of themselves as learners. As their teacher, I am supporting their efforts in doing this. My practice during Explorations is to engage them in conversation, record notes of significant insights and happenings, and make moments visually explicit for them through photographs. Conversations allow the teacher to listen to students' thoughts and emotions behind their experiences. They also afford students the experience of explicitly working through their plans, challenges, and wonderings aloud. By taking brief notes in the moment, I am able to record personal insights, snippets of conversations, and observations of key moments in the present. I can then sit down, outside of our Explorations periods, and use writing as a way to think through our Explorations experiences. Photographs provide us with a visual record of student experiences. They are also extremely effective prompts for students to engage in reflection, both through writing and conversation, at a later time. These approaches to documentation were already a regular part of

our classroom life. In effect, I was able to live the role of teacher and researcher simultaneously, without any jarring effect upon students.

Field and Interim Texts

In a narrative inquiry, rather than collect data, the narrative inquirer constructs field texts (Clandinin, 2013). Clandinin (2013) describes field texts as “the records, including, for example, field notes, transcripts of conversations, and artifacts, such as photographs and writings by participants and researchers” (p. 46). With this in mind, my field texts consist of a more formal and robust version of the documentation that was already taking place during Explorations. My goal was to construct meaning from and about my students’ play in authentic ways. Thanks to the existing relationship among all of us in the classroom, there were a variety of ways in which I was able to go about this.

Much of my field texts were composed of ongoing conversations (between students and the teacher, as well as among the students themselves). These conversations were transcribed via written notes as well as audio recordings. Focusing on conversations rather than interviews helped me to avoid upsetting the regular flow of Explorations. In addition, I believe conversations to be a better fit for the study of play as, like play itself, “conversations are not guided by predetermined questions” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 45).

Student journaling was another source of field texts. Students were already involved in the practice of keeping Explorations Logs. Within the pages of these coil-bound notebooks, students use words, sketches, diagrams and pasted in photographs to record what they have done during Explorations; capture ideas and insights; reflect on challenges and obstacles; preserve their personal feelings and connections; and plan for future Explorations. Ongoing classroom conversations focus on how we can best use our Explorations Logs to document our learning,

hence, students see them as an authentic place to make sense of their Explorations pursuits as well as a place to articulate their learning to others. Insights gained from the students' Explorations Logs as well as direct passages also make up part of my field texts.

Photographs of students "in action" during Explorations are also a key way of constructing a narrative of play both for the students and the researcher. Photographs are regularly taken during Explorations and, in addition to being a source of celebration of their learning, these pictures are a crucial support in helping students construct their own narrative of their experiences. The Explorations photos are saved to an online folder that is accessible to students who, on a weekly basis, print self-selected pictures and glue them into their Explorations Logs. Many students have found great success in writing and talking about what they were thinking, feeling, and doing during Explorations when they have an opportunity to revisit the moment via photographs. Using these photographs to stimulate conversations or written reflections resulted in valuable field texts for the narrative inquiry. It was also of benefit to me, the researcher, to look back at photographs while writing in order to mentally return to a particular moment. While the narrative was based on all of my documentation, having particular photographs in front of me helped to take me back inside the moment as a writer which, hopefully, helped me to set the scene with greater detail for the reader.

Written notes were likely my most prominent field texts (see Figure A). I carried with me a small, easy to handle notebook which made it possible for me to write while sitting, standing, or walking around the classroom. In this, I kept brief but specific records of what was happening throughout Explorations. This included direct quotations of students talking to classmates or to me. I also jotted down the odd consideration or question that I had in the moment.

Seeing as the classroom is a busy place, I needed to be aware of keeping a balance between note-taking and careful observation—between documenting for future purposes, and staying in the present. If I had kept my nose buried in my notebook for the majority of Explorations, it would have been at the cost of missing potentially significant moments. Therefore, my notebook contains many abbreviations and point form lists. Much of it I considered memory triggers—notes that others would find difficult to decipher, but that could act as personal cues for me to expand upon in the immediate future.

After each Explorations, either over lunch or at the end of the school day, I took some time to sit with my thoughts and expand on the field texts. These expanded notes were typed up as a digital document (see Figure B). Using my notes and still fresh memory (this would take place within a maximum of two hours removed from Explorations), I wrote a more developed record of our play and my present reflections on it. This journalling, which Clandinin & Caine (2013) might refer to as interim texts, proved to be an invaluable resource in the writing of the narrative as I, in essence, was able to preserve an in-the-moment consideration of our play. At the conclusion of the research window, I was able to return to the second week, for example, and see what my thoughts were before the influence of the remaining six weeks.

It was my research puzzle (What does play look like in a grades four and five classroom and what potential might it hold?) that guided my decisions around what to include as field texts in this narrative inquiry. I attempted to keep a record of both what was happening and what the effects of those happenings were. While it was manageable to record a general entry as to *what* each student was involved in during an Explorations period, it was not possible to capture every detail of twenty-one students' engagements. Instead, I looked for signs of the qualities of play set out in the Literature Review. Where were the moments of spontaneity and deep engagement?

Were students drawn to novel pursuits and ideas? What happenings seemed somewhat trivial on the surface but held purpose for students? Were there moments of subversiveness and creation or manipulation of rules? Could I find the joy in the room?

Within the play I observed, I attempted to make particular note of what seemed like significant experiences. Whether or not an experience was significant was a value judgement based on my professional relationship and understanding of students. In effect, I was looking and listening carefully for critical moments. These critical moments included, both independently and in relationship with others, instances of heightened engagement or joy, “ah ha” moments from students, expressed challenges and frustrations, points of detour in activities, and student wonderings. Sometimes they were even as direct as a student telling me that a significant moment has occurred.

I also found that as the 8-week period progressed, I started to hone in more on particular students and happenings. I was beginning to see, even within the research window, the broad strokes of a narrative within particular pursuits. In some cases, this was due to some interesting twists along the way. In others, there were particular things said by a student that cut right to the research puzzle of the inquiry. While I continued to develop field texts on all students, I noticed my interim texts beginning to focus more on certain instances.

By the conclusion of the research window, I had accumulated a significant body of field texts and needed to decide what to include and what to leave out. These were difficult decisions in an exercise that Clandinin & Caine (2013) refer to as, “a complicated and iterative process, full of twists and turns” (p.172). I began by listening to, looking over, and reading through all of the field texts. I made notes of particular themes that were emerging and marked pages that

referenced these. I created lists and idea webs that attempted to connect particular happenings to important themes. It was a rather overwhelming undertaking with a few false starts.

In order to make things more manageable and focused for the narrative, I decided to concentrate on a few particular students (Stella, Jay, and an often connected Mark and Kyle) and the play that surrounded them. These were students who my interim texts seemed to lean towards, again, because of paths in their play journey, things they had said, or social position within a grouping. This is not to say that these were the “best” or most exemplary instances of play in the classroom. In fact, it may have been the opposite, as the instances that I seemed to ruminate on the most were ones that challenged and frustrated me. I decided that any play instances worth exploring with other students, could be interspersed within particular digressions in the narrative.

Initially, I had considered organising the narrative thematically. I could take an idea that came out of our play, say the importance of student sharing, and include student stories to demonstrate this. In the end, I decided to write the narrative chronologically for a few reasons. One, it simply seemed like a direct way to get started. Not sure where to begin? How about the beginning. I even wrote in my own notes, “Why not? It gives you a way into this. If it doesn’t work out, you could always reorganise!” I also realised that context, which is key in narrative inquiry and play, is lost unless approached chronologically. I can show the reader an instance of play from week seven to illustrate a point, but without the understanding of where that play came from, its power and depth is lost. Writing chronologically also allowed me to take advantage of my in-the-present thinking. Not only could I write about what was happening at any given point, I could directly quote myself to inform the reader on where I stood, mentally and emotionally, at the time.

Based on the determination to write chronologically, two other important decisions were made. One was that, just as in play, I would have no prescribed outcome to this narrative—I would not write towards a decided upon ending. Even though I knew how the eight weeks “ended,” I would take advantage of my very present field and interim texts. To do this, I concentrated on one week at a time. Before beginning week one, for example, I went back through all of my field texts for that period of time, with a particular eye to those few students, and created new notes to be included (see Figure C). I then organised and wrote the narrative for that week. Only upon drafting week one did I return to the field texts for week two and begin again. This way I was able to be surprised, make connections, ask questions, and gain insight as I went through the weeks. I was able, in the true spirit of narrative inquiry, to make sense of the experience *through* the writing.

The narrative also felt most alive and open to reader engagement when written in the present tense. Remaining in the present allowed me to bring the reader along on the 8-week journey, “to draw [them] into the stories, to lay their own experiences alongside the inquiry, to wonder alongside participants and researchers who were part of the inquiry” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 173). Writing the narrative was a process of wondering for me and I wanted a similar experience for the reader.

Ethical Considerations

Research approval was granted for this narrative inquiry by the Education and Nursing Research Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba (see Appendix I). In order to use student conversations, work samples, and field texts based on this documentation, written assent from students and written consent from their parents or guardians was sought in the fall prior to the research window (see Appendices C and D). A letter introducing the narrative inquiry (see

Appendix A) and an invitation to attend an informational presentation on the process (see Appendix B) was sent to all families. As per the letter of consent, families were informed that providing permission to use any field texts involving their child would be completely voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time. I also provided a possible script which parents could choose to use when having a conversation with their child about considering their assent (see Appendix F). Written permission was also acquired from both the school division superintendent and school administration (see Appendices G and H).

In order to assure families that no positive or negative consequences would arise from their decision to permit or restrict participation, all signed consent forms were addressed to the school secretary where they were placed in a sealed envelope. The consent forms were locked in a cabinet until the final day of the school year, after all student evaluations were completed. Whether or not field texts concerning particular students could be used, was not known to me until this time. This ensured that there would be no intentional or unintentional biases towards those participating or not participating in the study.

Seventeen of twenty-one forms were returned, granting parent consent and student assent to participate in the research project. Four of twenty-one forms were not returned. Field texts concerning any student who did not receive consent and give assent *were not* used in the writing of the thesis.

All field texts were kept in a locked cabinet in my home throughout the writing of the thesis. Field texts will continue to be kept in this manner for an additional six months following the completion of the thesis in the event that I need to make further revisions to the work. At this point, all data will be destroyed. Students and their families were offered a digital copy of the

completed thesis (see Appendix E). A copy will also be kept at the school office and parent council will be informed when it is available for viewing by any interested parties.

Chapter 4: Findings: The 8-Week Narrative

Prologue: “*We are tied to future and past.*”

We officially “enter in the midst” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 43) of this narrative inquiry on Monday, January 23rd, 2017. My class is made up of 21 students—10 grade fours and 11 grade fives (nine of whom also spent the previous year with me in this multiage classroom). At the time of this narrative inquiry, the children range in age from 9 to 11 years old.

So much has come before, so much is yet to come after. A necessary component of context is time. We are tied to future and past. That which happened before January 23rd has influenced all that we are now engaged in. In turn, what happens within this 8-week period will leave its fingerprints not only over the rest of our school year but, in hindsight, will alter how we look back on this period itself. Considering this, I will attempt to provide an overview on how we have arrived at this midpoint of the year, including my own feelings on the previous five months.

“Well, I guess overall I’d have to say that I haven’t been totally enthused.” When sitting down to reflect on the first four school months of Explorations and, thus, play, this is the first sentence that came out. I felt like we were spinning our wheels a little, waiting for something to catch. There were a number of factors behind this feeling. For one, nothing had *really* caught fire yet or, if it had, it had been short bursts of enthusiasm. No one thing had sustained high levels of enthusiasm, among several students, over a long period of time. Why is that even important to me? Part of it is simply something I have *felt* in past experiences. There has been an electric atmosphere in the classroom during certain periods—a palpable energy. I am remembering times, in past years, when a larger, longer, group “project” (for lack of a better term), organically took root through our play at Explorations. These have included a whole-class, massive undertaking

of a hand-drawn animation and a classroom-sized creation of a Rube Goldberg Machine using re-purposed items and including twenty-six discrete chain reactions. They were journeys that blew my mind—ever so rare moments for a teacher when *everything* seems to come together, the pinnacle of what I continuously strive for. These were times when I wanted to open my classroom door and shout for *any* passerby to come in and witness for themselves the pure genius on display! “Play is the key to *everything*!” I would proclaim, and there would be no way to refute this.

But the reality is that this level of near euphoric learning is rare. These two happenings I am thinking of have taken place over a fifteen year span: one in my third year teaching, the other in my twelfth. There are, quite regularly, fascinating things that come out of our play, but that level of intense, common engagement is like lightning in a bottle—a bottle which you can put a lid on and keep in use for a few months. The problem is, once you have tasted it, once the bar has been set that high, *that* becomes your perpetual aim. So to enter this research window feeling not, “totally enthused,” likely says more about my ideals than it does about what is happening in the classroom. In fact, I go on to write, “My expectations for Explorations are pretty high. The more open-ended something is, the more I expect from it. Or maybe, the more potential there is for an outsider to say, ‘this is a waste of time,’ so the more I need to make sure that it isn’t. I don’t think this is a bad thing. I have heard about too many Explorations teachers who have treated it as ‘free time.’ This default setting of mine at least keeps me pushing for more (even if I don’t always know how to get there).” Nevertheless, come the beginning of this 8-week research window I felt we were, or at least *I* was, still searching.

Week 1: “*We are so on edge.*”

We kick off the first Explorations of the week by sharing the picture book, *Going Places* by Peter and Paul Reynolds. Every Explorations begins with some sort of whole-class connection—an Explorations “meeting”. It might be a planning session, student sharing, some media connected to our engagements (videos, books, photos, music, etc.), a deeper conversation about the purpose of Explorations, or just some minor housekeeping (e.g. Who needs a computer? Can this group use the entire carpet area? What happened to all of our white paint?). Some days the meeting is a forty-minute combination of a few of these things, other days a brief, ten-minute check-in.

Explorations almost always falls between first break and lunch. Many students, especially early in the year, especially those whose first year it is in my class, will tumble in from break asking, “Can we just go straight into Explorations?” While I appreciate their enthusiasm, I remind them that part of Explorations is coming together first. If our meeting starts to drag on (and sometimes even when it does not), we can count on one of these same students to pipe up, “Can we start Explorations now?” To this, it is often a handful of my returning students who respond with the line they have heard so many times from me, “This *is* Explorations.” A few years ago, this was asked on a regular basis by a particular grade four student. Not satisfied with my answer, he one day fired back, “No, I mean *phase two* of Explorations.” By this, he meant the guts of Explorations—the independent, active time between meeting, sharing and reflecting. The fun part. Not having a better term to label that portion of Explorations, we all began to refer to it as “Phase Two”, and in the overlapping years that result from a multi-age classroom, it has stuck.

And so, before Phase Two, we read *Going Places*. In the book, students are assigned the task of building a go-cart for an annual race. Raphael and his classmates take home an identical kit and set of instructions. But not Maya. While Raphael rushes to follow every step of the

instructions, he sees Maya, seemingly day-dreaming, sketching a bird in her yard. In the end, Maya builds a go-cart that is different than everyone else's (and likely takes the bird as its muse). In our resulting conversation about the book, many students comment that how Maya tackles the problem would fit well with Explorations. I think to myself that Maya's approach could be an example of play. During the course of the conversation, I ask the class, "What can *Going Places* remind us about Explorations?"

"It's a chance to think outside the box," is one response.

"It's about using your imagination," suggests another.

"Explorations is creating and not just following instructions," offers Stella.

In her own way, this is what Stella is presently involved in. Outside of school, Stella is on a cheerleading team. We hear about her practices and competitions during each Monday morning meeting. In recent weeks, Stella has brought that interest to Explorations. In her Explorations Log and Writer's Notebook, she has been choreographing some cheerleading routines to try with other girls. I surmise that this is Stella's chance to *create* while on her cheerleading team she is *following the instructions* of her coach. Ironically, it seems that the other three girls will be following Stella's instructions.

Stella and her friends have brought a half-dozen floor mats up from the gym for Explorations. They have pushed some stools and benches aside and have laid the mats out in about a two-and-a-half by three-metre rectangle on our carpeted meeting area. "Cheerleading" is not presently a class-wide invitation (it does not occupy a sticky note on our Explorations board), but "Movie Making" is. The working idea is that the girls are going to film a cheerleading-themed movie called "Bows to Toes". Today they plan to "rehearse" some of Stella's choreography.

We have all left the carpet area for Phase Two and there is a noisy buzz in the air as students set up. These are often the most hectic few minutes of my day as this is the most likely time for eager students to swarm me with urgent needs: supplies we have run out of (“Can I go down to the art room to get blue construction paper?”), things that are not working (“I can’t log on to the computer”), tasks they need support with (“Can you help me with the drill?”), and the seeking of permission (“Can we film this scene in the hallway?”). As the year goes on, this bombardment usually dwindles as students learn that much of this can be solved without waiting for the teacher. It is crucial, in a classroom that plays, that I both set up the room and their minds for some autonomy. If not, I would spend my whole Explorations period finding blue construction paper and logging people on to the computer, thus missing the present time to observe and support their ideas.

Making sure supplies are stocked and accessible frees up more than half the inquiries that would tie me down. Students know where to find what they need, and know what to do if we have run out or do not have what they are looking for. At the front of the classroom, there is a white board labeled “Explorations Wish List”. It is a public space where students can write down what they need and see what others are looking for. If “blue construction paper” is on the list, that is something I can find more of or purchase. “Toilet paper tubes” may be something students can bring in from home. Since the “Explorations Wish List” makes visual what is needed, we can try to track down those supplies before the next Explorations.

By January, mundane questions are infrequent and I am not tied-up finding basic supplies for students. This opens me up to more difficult questions like, on this day, Stella’s. Having set-up the mats and taken out their plan, Stella approaches me with the question, “Can we do basket tosses?” She explains that a basket toss is a cheerleading move in which one person stands on the

locked arms of two others, balancing herself by putting her hands on their shoulders. She is then thrown up in the air to land, in a seated position, in the “basket” that the two throwers’ linked arms have created.

Fairly quickly I respond, “no.” We have actually needed some recent, class discussions about safety during Explorations. I assume this is why she has even thought to ask. Stella argues that this is a “basic” cheerleading move and she does them “all the time” with her team at practices. Regrettably, I remind her that we are in a classroom, on thin mats, involving students without cheerleading experience, and lacking an exclusive supervisor (never mind a cheerleading coach). As much as I would like them to explore this idea, I cannot just let them throw each other around. Their safety is my responsibility (and I could only imagine someone falling on their head while I stepped into the hallway for a moment).

“Sorry, Stella, this is just a reality of Explorations.”

“Well, then this isn’t cheerleading,” she huffs, “it’s just gymnastics.”

Stella turns around, and is swallowed back into the general commotion of Explorations. I see, but cannot hear, her report back to her group with a sour face.

Stella may not believe me, but I am on her side. I am making an effort to be as accommodating as possible—to support a good idea. How many other teachers are allowing kids to saw classroom shelves for pinball parts or rehearse light-sabre duels in the hallway? I am *participating* in the subversiveness! I have allowed Stella and others to drag mats up from the gym for the past few Explorations even though I am not yet clear where it is all going. I do not *want* to say “no!” but “safety first” is a reality and a roadblock. Later I write that I am, “surprised that they are surprised by this (decision).” Considering all of the sawing and duelling, maybe I

should not be. I also write, about this first Explorations within the research window, “(It) seems for now we begin with limitations: safety and space.”

On this first day, I am reminded that classroom play, at least *this* classroom’s play, is noisy. The high volume of the early minutes of Explorations, the pent up enthusiasm, the planning conversations, the moving of furniture, does not dial down. Not today. Stella, who decided to practice the safety approved choreography, borders on hollering at her friends to listen. I have noted that she is, “the loudest voice telling everyone to be quiet.” Many, it seems, are shouting out instructions to each other. I recognize the urgency in their communication, but jot down in my notes, “more talking than listening.” Obviously, students will talk, excitedly even, during their play. But I want them doing more than talking. I want them to have *conversations*.

As the waves of sound roll on, the volume builds, and trying to hear (never mind listen) becomes futile. Midway through Explorations, I turn off the classroom lights—a reset signal. As they become quiet, I remind them the importance of slowing down and listening. I try to *will* some calmness into them. They stop and politely give me their attention. I do wonder, however, how much of this will sink in. This is not our first conversation on the topic. When I finish, and turn the lights on, Quinn who had been filming some of the gymnastics on an iPad announces, “I filmed Mr. MacKay’s speech!” And, as he plays a clip back to a student next to him, I can hear my serious, adult voice drone on, until it becomes lost in the clamour that rises back up. “Noise —> another limitation,” I write.

The noise has also been difficult for those trying to film movies. Our equipment is not great to begin with, the built in iPad microphones pick up all sound indiscriminately, and it is hard enough keeping unwanted people out of your shot, let alone their voices. Without an

accommodating hallway space or another adult to take them elsewhere, our filming location is the classroom. There is no such thing as “quiet on the set.”

Despite these constraints, students search for ways to make things work. Due to cold weather, the break before this Explorations was in the classroom rather than outside. Kyle took advantage of that time. Retrieving the class tripod, he faced it towards the book corner. Here, he would have some space to act out the scene with a wall behind creating a solid backdrop. Kyle then extended the tripods legs and neck as tall as they would go (about six feet). He wanted the camera to angle down on this scene. In order to reach the head of the tripod, he gathered our three, wooden box stools. These are hollow but solid, two-foot cube blocks. Kyle created a mini-staircase, lifting one stool on top of another with the third pushed up against them. He could now use the first stool to climb atop the stack where he could sit and manipulate the tripod. Unfortunately, I had to make another mental note about safety, being unsure how stable the stacked box stools would be. After he demonstrated how it would work, it passed my safety inspection so long as Kyle stayed seated. Now he just had to figure out how to attach the iPad to the tripod.

Kyle, along with Mark, Neil, and Vincent have been working on a robot movie. They have written out parts of a story in a loose, script format; some dialogue mixed with scene directions. The writing, the majority of which has been done during our Writer’s Workshop times, has been led by Mark and Vincent with some input from the others. They have also kept a collection of cardboard boxes which have been painted and cut to serve as robot costumes.

On this day, Kyle films while the others play on-screen roles. Not being able to secure the iPad to the tripod, Kyle simply holds it in place with one hand and has the handle of the tripod in the other. This way, he can still use the tripod to swivel and stabilize the camera. Mark, while not

operating the camera, has taken on a directing role. He has a vision of what he wants the scenes to look like and, between takes, will give directions to the other actors about where to enter and exit the scene and how to deliver a certain line. The others seem to accept Mark as their de facto director. Later that afternoon, during Writer's Workshop, the four boys sit together and work on storyboards for their movie. They eagerly talk and write about what they will film next.

There is another movie being created during Explorations. Jay, Curtis, Garrett, Duncan, and Patrick are producing their own version of Star Wars. While I have noted that "there seems to be fairly even input on (the robot movie)," Jay is clearly the leader of this group. Like Mark, he articulates particular views of how scenes should be set up. Unlike the other group, there is not as much back and forth. Jay directs, the others follow.

On this day, the Star Wars group is at the end of the hallway. It is a small space, perhaps thirty-two square feet, but it is a space that I can see from our classroom door and that, being at the end of the hallway, other students will not walk through. It is also quieter than our class space, although they need to take care not make too much noise themselves as they are sandwiched between two other classrooms. I have a lot of trust in this group. I have seen that they are engaged in this project. I also know that Jay, a returning student, "gets it"—they must be on task, they must not be too noisy, they must be somewhat productive, or else they are coming back into the classroom. Jay gets it, and the rest follow Jay. While I will check in on them from time to time, I feel confident that they can be left relatively unsupervised.

When I first take a brief walk down the hallway, Jay is lying on the floor with an iPad while the others, some with light-sabres, stand around him. I learn that this is a scene in which Jay's character is just coming back to consciousness after a battle. Jay holds the iPad in front of him, filming his point of view. With his other hand, he is fluttering his fingers right on the lens

and then removing them. Seeing me observe this, Jay offers, “I’m just waking back up and blinking.” He plays it back for us to see and it is quite effective. Confused by his fingers (which look like a blur), the automatic focus of the camera goes in and out before, upon moving his hand away completely, it rests clearly on the actors standing around him. I am impressed when I leave them.

Within twenty minutes, an educational assistant stops at my door to say that one of the teachers whose classroom borders the Star Wars group, “had to talk with those boys three times about how loud they were.” Exhaling with that special sigh reserved for times when things fall apart just when I am convinced I have it all figured out, I make my way back down the hallway. I do not even open my mouth, or get half way to them, before they begin their explanation. They have made the wise decision to confess honestly, telling me that Duncan kept trying to make them laugh, producing weird noises during a particular scene. Duncan has no denial, just a smile. Feeling that the group got a little carried away in good fun (and owned up to it), I merely give them the standard reminder and another chance. They continue for the last ten minutes without issue.

The Star Wars script is also worked on during afternoon Writer’s Workshop. This one, however, does not appear to be a group effort. Jay has already written lengthy portions in his Writer’s Notebook and is spending time colour-coding actors’ lines by highlighting them with classroom markers. I also notice that Stella, along with Ava, are using the back computer to type up a script for their gymnastics production, “Bows to Toes.” It is she who uses the word “script”. Looking over their shoulders, what I see them typing is a list of gymnastics moves that they have already written in Ava’s Writer’s Notebook.

Next Explorations, the gym mats are once again set up. They are getting quicker and more routine at doing this. Furniture that needs to be cleared away seems to be ending up in the same place. Some of it they have even found uses for. A rolling, white-board stand gets moved but turned to face the mats so that Stella and Ava can write reminders and routines for their group. They have also removed storage bins from a small shelving unit, turned the shelf vertically, and placed their shoes in it like a cubby.

Two boys, Luke and Quinn, have joined them on the mats and it seems pretty clear that they are not referencing whatever “script” they were typing. That seems to be about the only clear thing with this group. I write in my notes, “I wasn’t sure *what* was going on here.” Under the strict instruction of Stella and Ava, Luke and Quinn are being put through a routine of push-ups, sit-ups, and burpees. Two other students, Helena and Ivy, who have been involved in some of the “Bows to Toes” ongoings, are sitting off to the side and seem to be wondering where they fit in.

I have yet to ask anything, but while I stand by observing, Stella reads my face and beats me to it. She often approaches me before I even get the chance.

“We’re warming them up,” she says.

“For gymnastics?” I ask.

“Yeah, Ava and I are going to teach them some basic rolls.”

Everyone around still looks as confused as I feel. Not stopping his set of push-ups, Quinn wonders aloud why they have to do all of this “conditioning” just to try a few gymnastics moves. Luke echoes this, as do Helena and Ivy who are still sitting on the sidelines. Stella simply replies that they want to make sure their muscles are stretched and warm. They will return to the “Bows to Toes” production (whatever that even *is*) with the girls soon. While the boys are, rightfully,

confused by all of this, they do not complain, nor do they simply just choose to do something else. For their part, Helena and Ivy shuffle off after a few minutes and take out some painting supplies.

In this moment, I am right on the brink of shutting the whole thing down. This is not an invitation from off the board. While it had earlier seemed that gymnastics was a vehicle for movie making, it has now moved so far away from that. I do not know what the point of this is anymore and I suspect that they do not either. As a teacher, I have always felt it crucial to have the *purpose* of everything we do in mind and ready to be justified. To spend time on something, to force *others* to spend time on something, and not know *why* would be absurd! I am not handing out worksheets and telling kids they have to do it “because.” If I cannot articulate to a student (or a parent, or administration) *why* we are doing what we are doing, then it is something that, at the *very least*, I need to reconsider. We may not always agree, but I can justify even a little thing that we are doing, with a big picture purpose (Why do we have to do this factor investigation? Because we are exploring the relationship between multiplication and division. We are strengthening our numeracy and critical thinking skills which can be applied to many facets of our lives including, but not limited to, the realm of mathematics). But if a parent or colleague walked into our classroom right now and asked “Why are they doing this?” my response would be something like I gave, or did not give, Stella when she questioned me about play in the classroom. I mean, I know why we are spending time on Explorations, on play, but this *specifically*? And this begins to strain on me.

For now the group is off the hook. In part because they assure me they will begin filming soon, but mainly because I am being really indecisive. For the last ten minutes of Explorations,

they prop up two iPads in order to record the girls teaching the boys a couple of rolls. An instruction video? Helena and Ivy spend the rest of their time painting.

After making great progress earlier in the week on the robot movie, Kyle walks into the classroom with a balloon animal kit. It is quite the hit during morning break with Kyle twisting together little stick dogs, the first animal he has learned to make from the included instruction booklet, for his excited classmates. He approaches me to ask whether he can use this kit during Explorations. Maybe he will try making different animals or “invent something” with it.

Clearly, Kyle has in mind an earlier Explorations discussion about creating your own instructions (and, perhaps, the book *Going Places* too). As far as I recall, this started when paper folding became a bit of a craze during the previous school year. Some students were wanting to print off ready-made templates from a website to merely fold and colour them as instructed. It was agreed that this was lacking some key elements (the words “creative” and “challenging” came up). We decided, for example, that building with Lego is okay at Explorations, but putting together a step-by-step Lego set could be done at home. Colouring your own drawings? Yes. Printing off colouring pages? No. As a result of this conversation, a new criterion was added to our Explorations slide: *Don't just follow instructions, create them!* Thanks to the multiage format of our room, this idea is alive, well, and being passed on.

Kyle goes on to tell me that his mother gave him this balloon kit. “My mom wants me to do more building and inventing things at Explorations, not just playing mini-sticks and making movies about it.” Interesting. I do not recall Kyle making a mini-stick movie. He does have an inventor’s bent and it is good to know that mom has noticed and encouraged this. I more or less tell him yes. It is a yes with an asterisks. It is an okay-you-can-give-it-a-start-and-we-will-see-

where-it-goes, yes. Basically, it is as *yes* as you can get at Explorations. When it comes to play in the classroom, everything, it seems, is on probation.

But, when explorations begins, there is no sign of balloons and no explanation. Kyle and the others are back to work on the robot movie, and it looks like a good decision. Once again, they are carefully using the tripod to film scenes smoothly. Mark is editing on the fly, stitching some shots of dialogue together quite nicely. Once again, all four boys appear to be playing a role—to each be contributing. Kyle continues to find creative ways to set-up the iPad in order to get the desired shot. Maybe he is using those inventive instincts after all—combining them with his current interest in movie-making.

I am also pleased with how the Star Wars movie is humming along. Jay in particular is exemplifying another criterion from the Explorations slide: *Take the time to sloooooooooooooooooooooooooow down* (it was decided we needed one “o” for each student). In fact, they do not record anything for the entire Explorations. Instead, Jay explains to me that they need to rehearse some scenes. They are back in their space at the end of the hallway, working through dialogue and choreographing some light sabre battles. I still wonder a little about dynamics within this group, noting, “How do I feel about Jay and maybe Patrick leading that group with Duncan and Curtis along for the ride?” They appear to be doing well, though and, on this day at least, there are no noise complaints.

The same cannot be said within the classroom walls, where voices regularly seem to build to a crescendo. The volume can be a concern (it makes it difficult for people trying to film a movie) but what troubles me more is the need for so many to constantly talk. And it is not just at Explorations. During any of our class meetings there are a number of students who cannot seem to stop themselves from expressing every thought that runs through their mind. In my notes, I

write that so many need to, “have a running commentary on just about anything we do.” I do not believe they are trying to be disruptive, their interruptions are on topic, but if everyone is busy speaking it leaves me to wonder who is listening. I had always believed that if I gave students an outlet, an opportunity to speak their mind, that they would then not feel the need to fill in all of the other spaces with their voice. If a person knows that she is to receive regular meals, she would not constantly gorge herself. “Does Explorations not give them a voice?” I reflect. But even when playing Scrabble this week, so many were talking over each other with an adrenalized volume. Scrabble! There is a busy tension in this classroom. “We are so on edge!”

Week 2: *“Is that just a generational thing?”*

We begin the Explorations week with a meeting. Movie-making has taken over the classroom. Actually, it is debatable that all of this is *movie*-making, but presently, almost everyone is involved in something that is being filmed on an iPad. The meeting is to be a whole class conversation about challenges and advice when it comes to “filmmaking” (which is the term I notice myself using).

I am opening the floor to students. This is a meeting, not a mini-lesson. My role is to help mediate them through a conversation on the topic. This is to say nothing against a well-timed and executed mini-lesson, but if you are presenting an open forum for students, then do it honestly. Do not disguise a mini-lesson as a sharing session. For today, I do not plan to present them with challenges or advice on filmmaking in the classroom, but ask them about it. I think it is a conversation that is necessary, based on some frustrations I have noticed, and believe that they have spent enough time playing around with filmmaking to, at least, start us off. It is the art of conversation I would like them to develop, so why not provide an opportunity for it under my guidance?

The meeting does not last more than a few minutes. Perhaps I was sensing more frustration than there actually is. Either that or they are eager for Phase Two. Stella kicks it off, though, with a challenge: “It’s so hard to film with so many people in the room.” Maybe she has summed it all up for us.

To Stella’s challenge, specifically the issue of background noise, Kyle poses an interesting solution. He suggests adding some quiet sound—instrumental music or even some white noise. Assuming the interfering voices are quieter than the voices you are filming, adding sound at the same volume will drown them out while still allowing the viewers to hear your actors. Yes, you are left with a backdrop of sound, but it is less distracting than a dozen voices. This is something he is experimenting with on the robot movie.

As we move to Phase Two, Kyle, Mark, and the others do not work on the robot movie. The iPad that holds all of their footage was not plugged in and now has no battery power. Because they need to film and edit everything on the same iPad (more limitations, this one due to the incompatibility of the iPads and our classroom computers), it is no use recording anything new on another iPad. Mark, Vincent, and Neil decide to use their time planning out some trick shots with mini-hockey sticks. This could be a separate project they work on for today, filming with a different iPad. Kyle does not join them, which is interesting in the context of his conversation with his mom. Instead he seems a little lost—playing with some editing techniques on another iPad, watching what others (including the gymnasts) are doing, and popping in occasionally on his mini-hockey friends. They invite him to participate but he declines.

This is not the only movie that has stalled. Jay leads his group over to run a new idea past me. They want to make a “Challenge Movie”. Curtis is away today so they are unable to film new scenes for Star Wars. It seems that one group is down an iPad and the other down a friend.

Jay casually informs me that they intend to start this new project with a “slap challenge.” I shoot this one down quicker than the basket toss. I learn later that a “slap challenge” is exactly what it sounds like. One person slaps the other across the face. The challenge is in seeing how hard you will allow the other to slap you. They would be recording this so, in their minds, it would all fall under the umbrella of the movie-making invitation. I am surprised that they think this would be an acceptable thing to do and even *more* surprised that, like Stella and the basket tosses, they are bewildered at my shutting it down. Were my students really thinking I was going to allow a room full of kids being thrown through the air and slapped in the face? The four boys play with Lego instead. If they cannot slap each other in the face, they will act out battles with Lego creations.

Once again, it is Stella, Ava, Luke, and Quinn who are involved in gymnastics. Helena and Ivy, who were literally left on the sidelines last time, have gone back to creating art. Ivy has covered a paper in hot glue and is now scribbling on top of it with various colours of marker. While this is happening, Helena draws a picture of Ivy. They had seemed excited about the gymnastics. Now, I wonder if they are just killing time until they come up with a better plan.

The gymnastics group is sticking to whatever it is they are doing. They continue to bring in the mats, set everything up, put the boys through thirty minutes of conditioning, and then film the girls teaching Luke and Quinn for the last ten minutes. I consider the fact that they are only filming the parts in which they are teaching the boys a new gymnastics move. Maybe I am beginning to see where this is going.

“So, is this like an instructional video?” I ask Stella and Ava. I figure that I am either correct in my observation, or I am tipping them off to a great idea for this whole thing.

“No.” Stella replies quickly “It’s not going to be an instruction video.”

“No.” Ava echoes with a laugh.

I have only drawn their attention for a moment. Without providing an alternative, their focus returns to the finer points of a front roll. I am left standing over them, still thinking that an instruction video is a great idea. They are clearly engaged in passing on their expertise to the boys who, for their part, are accepting of their coaching. I have offered their group a purpose and they do not take it, even though they seem to be without one of their own. It is like they are filming just for the sake of filming. “I’m not seeing the point of it,” I write later. “Is that just a generational thing?” I continue to wrestle over what to do with this group. Presently, it is their complete engagement, and that alone, that nudges me into letting them press on.

After school, I receive an email from Stella’s mother. At Stella’s request, she is passing on some photos and videos of a weekend cheerleading competition. Stella had told the class about this during our Monday morning sharing session. Opening the photos I see a large, organized production. There are several cheerleading teams, as Stella has shared, with everyone in makeup and uniform. The video shows a short clip of Stella’s team performing. A couple of dozen cheerleaders, all girls, run through a highly synchronized routine (complete with basket tosses), in front of a sizeable crowd. The distance of the video makes it difficult to tell which one is Stella but I know, from her sharing, that she is one of the younger members of her team and thus has a minor part. It is certainly not the role she plays in our classroom.

Before the next Explorations, I give the class some planning time. Not long. Ten minutes, perhaps. They can talk together, brainstorm, jot some ideas down in their Explorations Logs. I see it as my way to help them “sloooooooooooooooooooooow down.” The iPads are charged. Curtis is back. Maybe this planning time can provide some momentum for the robot and Star Wars movies.

Instead, Kyle has plans to build an airplane. He uses cardboard from old boxes and an enormous amount of hot glue. It does not yet fly, but he tells me he will worry about that “next time.” For now, Kyle is concerned about getting the wings the right shape and creating a body that will last. He is adding another thick layer of glue around all of the corners so they will not get “smushed.” “I learned that from a video,” he says.

As for the robot movie, Mark writes that, “It’s going very well.” For today, though, he makes plans to start a different movie—something to work on while he waits for Kyle to finish his airplane. He and Vincent shoot some dialogue scenes. There are only two of them, so they take turns filming each other’s speaking part. I watch as Mark splices these shots together to create a surprisingly believable conversation. “They used to ask me for help with editing, but not anymore,” I note. I am impressed, and Kyle must be too. With about ten minutes left he has abandoned his airplane in order to see what Mark and Vincent are doing.

Curtis’s return does not reignite the Star Wars movie. He, Jay, Patrick, and Duncan (Garrett has decided to create a digital comic on the computer program, Comic Life) want to film a “mannequin challenge” with the class. Duncan will walk through the classroom, iPad in hand, video recording as he goes. Everyone else will be frozen in position. The mannequin challenge, like many things, I am beginning to notice, is inspired by the world of You Tube. I find it amusing that You Tube has, unintentionally, made tableau cool. They get it in only two takes (I note, somewhat sarcastically, “so *now* the class can be silent and cooperate”). The result is a fascinating snapshot of Explorations—like walking through a frozen moment of play. I wonder what they will use the footage for.

When I ask Jay and the boys what is happening with the Star Wars movie, Patrick responds, “We’re just taking a break” and the others agree. Their enthusiasm, for now at least,

has shifted and I know that it is possible it may not return to Star Wars. “This is becoming The Challenges group.” I write.

“We are (or I am) taking a break” is an oft uttered line at Explorations. It is something that I reflect on regularly. Several years ago, when I first incorporated this model of Explorations into my classroom, I had a number of questions for those colleagues of mine who were acting as mentors. Top of my mind, however, and the question I specifically remember asking first was, “What if someone decides to just do the same thing at every Explorations?” Since then, so many of those who have conversations with me about Explorations (teacher candidates, classroom visitors, colleagues, and parents) pose that same question. And while it is a question worth unpacking, I have found in practice that the more pressing question is, in fact, just the opposite: What if someone keeps changing what they are doing at Explorations without seeing much (if anything) through?

This is not a question I have the answer to, but it is one I have thought a lot about. On one hand, I worry about worthwhile pursuits fading away like mist. The Star Wars movie was likely the most sophisticated example of movie-making in the classroom and I had hoped that the boys could not only learn from it, but provide an excellent model for other classroom filmmakers. It was a “good” Explorations choice. But whose values determine what is “good”? Yes, I am the classroom teacher and have a responsibility to play in this, but do I not already make countless judgements over the course of a school day? While my decisions are always made with my students in mind, *I* am deciding how our reading time will be structured, which direction we will go in mathematics, that we will even spend time on Explorations in the first place! Even in those times in which student interests or suggestions dictate our study, it is still *me*, their *teacher*, who makes the decision to follow that path. Could Explorations not be the one place in our school

day, perhaps in a student's *entire* day, where they are allowed to make that judgement for themselves? Is this not actually a crucial opportunity for a young person to develop a sense of self?

If we accept this, we still must ask: What does switching focus mid-endeavour teach these young minds about commitment? Seeing something through requires discipline and dedication—crucial, life-long lessons for students. I believe that these are important qualities. Flipping on a whim can just *feel* wrong. I remember a conversation I had on this topic, a few years back, with a Learning Support teacher, and long-time mentor, Jennifer Miles. I was really struggling with this, worrying that my students would fail to learn any perseverance. Jennifer responded by posing a rhetorical question that tilted my perspective: Are there other times in the day in which it is an expectation that students see something through? Of course—just about every other time of the day. For even when allowing for differentiation, there is still the expectation that things get accomplished. When we write in our reading journals, for example, we may be writing different thoughts about different books and may even need different amounts of time to write for different lengths, but we are *all* going to complete an entry in our reading journal. If there were no expectations about completing anything in the classroom, then students leaving ideas hanging at Explorations could become an issue (although I think this would point to other, more pressing issues to address first). But since obedience to a task is being preached for the majority of their day, should there not be a little room for that other important life-skill, the ability to change your mind and direction when necessary?

It is also important to remember that Explorations is not without expectations. The overriding expectation is that students are *engaged* in a *worthwhile* pursuit. And while the practical meaning of this, and who defines “engaged” and “worthwhile”, need to be continually

revisited, we have a foundation for ongoing conversations about the expectations of our classroom play.

Considering all of this, I am generally open to frequent changes of direction during Explorations. I would like to hear the reasons and consider the alternative choice, but if a student feels it is time to change her play, then I am respecting that decision. This time, after all, is called explor(e)-ations and not complet(e)-ions. It still stings, though, when it feels like a student has abandoned something that had real potential. I will continue to engage them in conversation about their choice. At times, I may even interfere. And I will struggle with that judgement always.

As for that supposed struggle of students spending all of their time on one activity—well, it has not really been one. On the rare occasion that someone chooses to paint, say, for months on end, it is my role to see that they are nudging forward within that domain. Perhaps they are trying new brush techniques, mixing media, connecting their work to other artists, or planning for a classroom gallery. If a child chooses to paint, or write, or read at every Explorations, maybe this means that he or she needs more time to explore that discipline than the regular, dedicated class time. Do we, as teachers, not have bigger issues to resolve than a student who is *reading* too much?

It does not seem that I need to be concerned with Stella and her gymnastics group “taking a break” any time soon. They continue to talk intently throughout the day about the gymnastics moves they can teach the boys next. I read through Stella’s Explorations Log. She has two, new photos pasted inside. One shows her, Ava, Ivy, and Helena sitting together at a high counter with paper and art supplies. “In this picture,” she writes, “we were doing some art for our Bows to Toes and planning our script.” In the other, Stella stands on the mat looking at something she has

recorded on an iPad. Based on her writing, I believe she is observing Luke work through a move. Under the photograph is written, “I was teaching Luke how to do a back bend and we had Luke and Quinn as guests on the show.” Ivy is also visible, sitting and waiting at the edge of the mats. Stella does not reference her. Stella’s last line hints at a shift in this murky undertaking: “P.S. it’s now called *Beginners to Experts*.”

Week 3: *“I feel better once I’ve seen them share.”*

I am feeling somewhat disconnected from my students’ play. More than usual, I am unclear about where many of their ideas are coming from and, perhaps more importantly, where they are going. I am aware of all that is physically happening but feel like I am on a different plane. I have a handle on the “what” but am struggling to grasp the “so what.”

I need to get inside their heads. Some weekend pondering has reminded me that we have just not reflected enough lately—either through writing or sharing. We will fix that this week. I plan a couple of things. First, I will give them a template for their photo reflection. They will glue their chosen Explorations picture to a paper divided into three columns. The columns, from left to right, are labeled past, present, and future. In “past” they will consider what came *before* the photograph: how did you arrive at this point? “Present” will take us inside the photo itself: what, specifically, are you thinking and doing? “Future”, I hope, will get them to consider the purpose of it all: Where do you see this idea going?

We are also in need of some whole-class sharing. There has been a squeeze on our time lately (although, I have to admit that I am regularly feeling that) and the first thing to be trimmed from Explorations during these times is sharing. As highly as I value it, we never share as much as I would like. I think a simple reason for this is that sharing takes place at the end of Explorations. If we are running behind, Phase Two creeps closer to lunch and suddenly all we

have time for is cleaning up. So, *before* our first Explorations of the week, we will have a pre-share. I will give everyone who desires, the opportunity to present and talk about their present pursuit. Hopefully this, along with receiving questions and feedback from their classmates, will push them to think out loud before diving back into Phase Two.

Some insight, certainly for me and hopefully for them too, results from all of this. Helena has chosen a photo of her sitting at a table, drawing cartoon versions of her friends. This was from when she and Ivy seemed to lose their place with Bows to Toes and started painting and drawing simply, I had thought, because they did not know what else to do. That was my assumption leading up to this, but Helena's "past" portion of her reflection tells a different story. "Every year I make a picture of my best friends," she writes, "so I can remember them when I am older." She goes on to relate that her grandma makes a scrapbook with her every year and this drawing will be included. In the final column, Helena writes, "In the future I hope we will still be friends."

Other suspicions are confirmed through this process. Jay and his friends share with the class a preview for, *Dabs for Life Challenge Movie*. "Dabbing" is the current pinnacle of kids' pop culture. It is a dance move in which one arm is extended out straight while the head gets buried into the bent crook of the other elbow (not unlike sneezing). It always reminds me of Dracula, posing in that dramatic fashion behind his cape; without the cape, of course. Just trying to describe it makes me feel so out of touch and, I am sure, would have Jay and the boys rolling their eyes.

The preview shows short clips of introductions, laughing, and, of course, dabbing. I also notice that Jay's last Explorations Log entry has a photograph of the five boys holding a dab with the caption, "So, um, this happened." Clearly we have moved far from the Star Wars movie. In

reference to that venture, Patrick's "past" portion of the reflection reads, "We were making movies but it all just fell apart and people weren't being serious and it all just was destroyed."

The class loves their preview. They are all locked in on the iPad that displays it—sitting up on their knees and crowding in closer to not miss anything. There are smiles and laughter and eager questions about when they can see more. While it is pretty goofy on the surface, I note that they have put some thought and experimentation into the editing. They have used titles, quick cuts (which likely added to the engagement of their audience), and interesting zoom techniques. And in their sharing, their connection with the audience, their camaraderie with one another, it is clear that this *means* something to them. While I may not get "dabbing", and still struggle with You Tubing over filmmaking, I am beginning to recognize that this is more than just killing time because the Star Wars movie was too challenging and they did not know what else to do (something I had feared). The question moving forward remains: just because it is important to them, is it important that it happens at school?

As a result of all of this reflecting and sharing, I feel a greater connection. Not all becomes clear (I wonder if it ever could), but I get to hear what all of this play *means* to them. There is more thought behind what they are doing than I had given them credit for. I make a note for myself: "I feel better once I've seen them share."

Other movies are previewed during this sharing session. Mark and Vincent share some of the dialogue they have filmed. Kyle joins them even though he did not have much of a hand in this portion of their work. The boys include some outtakes from their filming at the end. This mainly consists of them tripping over both their lines and furniture. It is unclear if these are truly outtakes or filmed to look like them for comedic purposes. "I don't think the bloopers are real," I

hear Quinn remark to those around him. Either way, it is the portion that Mark, Vincent, and Kyle are the most excited about.

Quinn, who had stepped away briefly from gymnastics, joins Neil to share a “trick shots” video. The footage is of the two boys with mini-hockey sticks in the hallway. They take turns shooting a small ball into or at various targets. It has been edited to show only the successful attempts. This too is very You Tube inspired. I have specifically heard these boys talk about watching You Tube videos by a group of young men who call themselves “Dude Perfect.” Their videos are also trick shots but on a much grander scale. Stella raises her hand and asks, “So what’s the movie going to be about?” The two word answer is, “Trick shots.”

Almost everyone seems to be involved in some sort of movie-making process. This is a real change from all of the designing and building that was happening earlier in the school year. “It seems strange not to have glue guns plugged in and Exacto knives pulled out,” I write. When this many students are involved in a similar endeavour, it gets me thinking about ways we could pool our talents and resources to create something even bigger. The possibility of producing a whole-class movie, with interested parties at the helm, creeps into my mind. Mark would make a great director. Or Jay. I could imagine Kyle as a head camera person. We have a classroom full of great writers and potential actors. This is something I will have to bring up with them.

As we move into the first Explorations of the week, Kyle has approached me with another new idea. This is becoming almost expected. “It’s a science idea,” he says. Without further explanation, he leaves me to collect some dry-erase markers and a white, plastic pail. Returning, he shares that this idea came from home (whether from a book, You Tube, his mother, he does not say). You use the dry-erase marker to draw a stick-man at the bottom of the pail then fill it with water and watch the stick-man “come to life.” A few of us watch this quick “science

idea” (or magic trick?). It does not work. I think what was supposed to happen was that the water would lift the drawing from the top of the bucket but the dry-erase ink would hold itself together, making the stick man look like he was floating and moving in the water. Kyle puts his supplies away and seeks out Mark and Vincent.

“I started writing a script for a new movie,” Vincent has written on the “Present” reflection, “We will be holding auditions by the golden table” (an old coffee table, spray-painted gold, that has become a popular meeting place in our classroom library). Kyle hangs around for this, and two other grade four boys, Neil and Edwin, come by as well. The title of the script is *The Break In 2*. Neil is interested in being a camera person and the others agree to give him this role. They also need someone to play “the dad”. Edwin puts on a deep, serious voice, pats Vincent on the shoulder like a child a couple of times, and lands the role.

The boys, minus Kyle, begin filming some scenes for *The Break In 2* in the same area where they held auditions. Neil stands behind the camera yelling “action” and “cut” when necessary. Mark is deeply involved, multi-tasking as both actor and director. It is clear he has a particular vision of how the scenes should play out. Between takes, he directs Edwin as to specifically where he should walk into a shot. At times, Mark, on screen, will even call out “cut” when someone does not deliver a line right. Kindly, but eagerly, he will walk and talk through his imagined ideal for the scene before he or Neil calls out “action” again.

Somehow, Kyle has ended up on the mats with the *Beginners to Experts* group. I notice a paper taped to the wall and learn, from Ava, that it is a sign-up for “guests”. Quinn and Luke will remain regulars, but others who are interested in trying gymnastics now have the opportunity to sign-up and spend one Explorations under the guidance of Stella and Ava. Kyle goes through a similar (but seemingly shortened) warmup that the others have gritted through. He expresses

more questions and complaints than the others, however, which leads Ava to slip into the role of stereotypical, controlling teacher. After losing her patience, she simply declares, “Okay, Kyle, you’re out.” Kyle is visibly upset by this (although he does not argue his case) and stands, pouting, off to the side. After a few minutes, Ava calls him back over for another chance.

I consider Stella’s “Past, Present, Future” reflection. In the “past” portion, she had written, “I started Beginners to Experts because I am a cheerleader,” but the “future” portion is not quite as direct. She writes about wanting to help Quinn and Luke (“because at the start they had no clue what they were doing”), but still gives no insight into what form this might all take.

Beginners to Experts are spending less time warming up today. For the majority of the period a couple of iPads are propped up in order to film Stella and Ava coaching Quinn, Luke, and (on and off) Kyle through some back-bends. I attempt to observe without interrupting but Stella notices and moves to stand next to me. I realize that this is something she often does when she feels me watching, like she assumes I am waiting to make a comment and arrives expectantly. I oblige her with what I think is an innocent one: “So, I notice that you’re doing more filming this time.”

Stella’s response bursts forth. She sets off on a long monologue that begins as an explanation of their filming, but moves into a defence of their entire undertaking. “We’re doing this because you’re letting us do it so we’re filming to try to make it something.” As four returning students, they are well versed in my high expectations for Explorations. It is not “just free time,” she says, “we don’t want to just do random stuff and, like, fool around so we’re trying to actually teach them something that they can learn.” What else should I have expected from the student who said, “We can’t just play at Explorations?”

Once I let Stella's words (both spoken and written) settle for a while, my biggest take-away is that she, like me, does not know where this is going. Neither of us can put our finger on the "so what" of it all. And then it hits me—the filming, the unrequested defenses—Stella is buying time for her group. She knows I might shut them down if I do not see "the point" or if they are not working from an invitation off the board. But, "I am a cheerleader" she writes, and this is what she is compelled to do and if that means filming it, teaching it, defending it, keeping it alive until she figures it out, then that is what she will do. There is deep connection and engagement here, not just from Stella but, for reasons less clear, Ava, Quinn, and Luke as well.

Should that not be the ultimate purpose of Explorations? To provide the opportunity that play affords that, traditionally, school does not? *Time* to explore an interest, a pursuit, a passion without the pressure and limitations of where it must lead. A compelling journey does not need a set destination. Can we not have expectations for the process but not necessarily for the product? Why should I be making Stella, or anyone else, feel the need to justify something that is building her confidence, identity, and joy? Stella is playing and both she and I, almost by reflex, are feeling the need to defend it.

As a whole, however, what I see before me is almost an entire class, choosing to make movies but limited by various factors. For many, it is equipment issues—iPads, particularly for recording sound, are not ideal video cameras. Space is a problem for almost everyone—try filming something outside of just a small corner of the room and your shot will be overrun by other students. For some, lack of direction or commitment has stalled them—I think of the lost potential of the Star Wars group. A larger crew, under my guidance, with students volunteering for roles based on their strengths and interests, could really create something special.

At the next Explorations meeting, I propose the idea. “I’ve been thinking about all of our moviemakers in here,” I start, “filmmakers, YouTubers—I don’t know what we’re calling ourselves.” There are many affectionate calls of “Jay!” when the class hears “YouTubers.” Jay smiles. I articulate some of the great things they are doing, but also some of the challenges that I see holding them back. I explain that committing to this larger movie would be completely voluntary. I push the possibility that I could track down one good video camera and a more accommodating space in which to film. There is near silence. I note later that I imagine you could hear crickets in the background. Then Jay puts up his hand and offers something completely unrelated: “My brother was telling me about something he did in grade four or five where they re-did Titanic.” His brother had been in my class. With a student teacher, they had participated in a short role play of the sinking of the Titanic. It had nothing to do with the movie. We were not filming anything. I explain this. “Oh,” he replies.

The awkward silence continues (rare for this class). I sense that they have politely listened and are ready to move on to Phase Two. It catches me off guard. I had expected at least a few to be quite enthusiastic about this. I had mentally planned for a bit of a debate on the merits of this idea and then meeting further with anyone who was on board. Instead—nothing. “Okay, well, something to think about,” I conclude, and send them off from the carpet. A little stunned, I write in my notes: “I don’t think I’ll throw the idea out yet. I still think it’s a good one. It may not have been presented properly or they may not be there yet. They *are* engaged in the movie making that they’re doing. But still.”

Even though I continue to use the term “movie-making”, it is likely not the best descriptor for much of what is happening. Two grade four girls, Rachel and Brittany, are a good example of this. They work side by side but separately. Each sits, with an iPad propped up in

front of her. They are using the inside camera lens so that they can see their faces on the screen while they record themselves. It is a little like looking into a mirror while filming. I suppose one could call this a video selfie.

Rachel and Brittany have had some injuries over the school year, both, on a couple of occasions, spending time on crutches. Previously they had made a movie (in this same “selfie” style) called *Hurt I* in which they explained both how they were injured and how they got around the school while on crutches. I ask them about their previous movie (noting the possible significance of the Roman numeral one in the title) and Brittany replies that they will not, “have to do another until they get another injury.” For now, they are each making what Rachel refers to as a “vlog” (a video blog). “We’re keeping track of things in our life,” she says. Rachel is talking into the camera, telling about school, family, and favourite activities. Brittany tells me that she is interviewing her friends. What I see her do though, is bring someone into the camera frame, tell a little bit about them, have them say “hi” to the camera, then send them on their way. She does this with a handful of her friends and with me. I clarify with her that an interview is asking people questions and allowing them to respond. “I know,” she says.

After continuing to film for most of Explorations, Vincent and Mark spend the last ten minutes or so huddled tight around the iPad in our library corner. They are editing. Just before clean up time, they come up for air and show me what they have done. It is a trailer for *The Break in 2*. The editing program they are using, iMovie, has a number of templates for doing this. It will instruct you to add three seconds of video here, type in a title there, and so on, providing you with built in fonts and transitions. Many students have done this, but so far always *before* creating the movie itself. They film short clips specifically for the trailer and then may or may not go on to make the movie. Mark and Vincent have actually found a way to import footage

they have already shot into the trailer. I was not aware you could even do this. The result is effective and they are clearly quite pleased with it.

Jay and his friends are actually a lone group who do not have an iPad out filming today. Curtis is away again and Jay tells me that they are not working on the Star Wars movie because of this. Star Wars movie? Are we just keeping this charade up for each other? When I come back to the boys, they have the sewing bin out and are sitting at one of the round tables. Jay is wanting to fix a hole in his sweatpants. Garrett is helping him thread a needle while Duncan and Patrick observe. Garret looks up at me and, holding the needle aloft with a big smile, announces, “We’re making ideas!” It seems as though these boys will follow Jay to anything. Citing their passivity, I send Duncan and Patrick off to find another pursuit. Jay and Garrett continue to battle with the sweatpants, but never do manage to fix the hole.

Week 4: *“Maybe this is a new way of looking at the role of the teacher—not as reigning them in but as casting them out.”*

Mondays can be a difficult day of the week for this class. Many seem to stumble into the classroom from the waist down only—as if the rhythm and momentum of one leg following the other is all that has brought them to us. Their yawns confirm to me that they have not fully arrived yet. The first coherent words of the day come from Rachel, “Can we have nap time today?” Duncan shuffles to the carpet area and consults our whiteboard agenda. Seeing Explorations, he says, “Oh. I don’t know what I’m going to do today.” We will start quiet and unfocused and, if past experience predicts anything, will end the day noisier than usual with several agitated or emotional people. I can often count myself among that group. These are our Mondays.

In light of Duncan's comment and the general atmosphere of the room, I decide to make a little extra time for planning before Phase Two. During first break, I have spread their Explorations Logs out on the carpet. This has become familiar to them. They will come inside, pick up their Explorations Log, grab a pencil, find some space with their friends, and discuss what they will get up to at Explorations. I am happy for them to plan through conversation (How else do you plan for working in a group?) but I also want them to record some planning on paper. They know this, and oblige with something—many a quick sentence near the end of their time.

The writing in their Explorations Logs does feel more like it is for me than for them. It makes me reexamine my need for their paper and pencil documentation. This reflection manifests itself, while they are planning, as a list in my own notebook. It reads as follows:

“I'm pushing them to write independently because:

- There is a time for everything
- We need time to reflect on who we are as individuals within the group
- I think we need some opportunities to think through writing (and some practice in doing it)
- Right or wrong: I want some documentation of their thinking and ideas
- Right or wrong: it will put an academic bent to our play”

Writing is also a physical and direct way to slow down their thinking. Because so much of what they do comes out at warp-like speed, it is almost a gut feeling to want them to slow down. I do wonder, however, if any of their thinking is actually *pushed* by their Explorations Logs. Do any of them actually develop new ideas or questions through the writing process? Then again, maybe all the more reason to take these opportunities to try.

As much as I want them to learn through writing, I also want them to learn through conversation, so on a Monday morning I am more than happy to hear eager conversation burst through. In one corner of the room, *The Break In 2* group are brainstorming. Their faces read serious and intense, but they speak with great energy. I notice that in discussing scenes to shoot for the day, Mark is referencing notes from his Explorations Log. He is also jotting down new ideas that come up. I hear a buzz of words from their table as I pass by, but the one phrase that rings in my head is, “then he will kill you.” I make a mental note that a conversation about violence and its limits in school will have to happen with this group, but for now I keep walking. I will have to think about what those limits are.

There is a lighter but just as enthusiastic conversation at another table. Jay is at the centre of it and I catch him suggesting to Duncan that if he were to be back on camera for any of their movies, they might have to draw a goatee on him. Duncan’s face suddenly comes alive for the first time that morning as he responds, “Sweet! I always wanted to have a goatee!” There is laughter that starts at their table and seems to ripple out into the classroom. We are awake now.

To my surprise, the five boys inform me that they are getting back to the Star Wars movie before disappearing to their location at the end of the hallway. But, within about ten minutes, before I have even had a chance to pop in on them, they are parading back into the classroom. Jay says Curtis does not want to do it anymore. Duncan claims too many people (himself included) are fooling around and it is all falling apart. No one seems angry at anyone else, but they all seem resigned to its fate. Patrick and Curtis pull out a bin of Lego and sit down at a table. Garrett finds a computer and pulls up a digital comic he has been working on. Jay and Duncan (eventually with Garrett joining them) go back down the hallway to work on the “Challenge Movie.”

Later, Jay and Duncan share what they have filmed with the class. On screen, the two of them sit in chairs (Garrett is filming) and banter back and forth. They introduce themselves using their first names (Jay tells the class, over top of the video, that he decided not to use his “YouTube name” for this video). Not much is said, and there is not a challenge to be seen as far as I can tell, but they have chemistry, and Duncan displays good comedic timing. The class laughs along with the video, except for Duncan who, feeling uncomfortable seeing himself on screen, has stepped just outside the classroom door. He returns, once the video has finished, with a big smile and flushed face.

Prominent in the video is an interesting zoom technique that enhances its humour. While the entire few minutes is an unchanging, medium shot of Jay and Duncan in the frame, there are a number of one second, in and out zooms on the boys’ faces. This is effective in drawing the viewer’s attention to a particular line or expression. It gives the whole production an exaggerated, cartoonish feel. There are many questions about how this was accomplished. Jay explains that it was done in the editing process and reveals to his classmates (and his teacher) a feature in iMovie that allows for a digital zoom with just a few taps of the screen.

Stella also leads the gymnastics group through this same sharing session. This time, neither she nor Ava demonstrate anything themselves, instead wanting to show what Luke and Quinn have been working on. “Today Luke was learning his handstand, falling bridge, kick over,” begins Stella. With Ava spotting, Luke goes through all three positions and the class applauds. She then has the boys show part of their warmup including V-snap sit-ups and split jumps (at which point Duncan can be heard calling out “Mario Jump!”, likening Luke and Quinn to the adventuring, video game character). Luke then wants to try a backbend on his own. Without the help of a spotter, he arches backwards from a standing position until his palms reach

the floor. As he makes a bridge on all fours, stomach pointing to the ceiling, the class erupts into a very spirited applause. A smile cracks on the otherwise serious face of Stella, and enough of a proud laugh comes over Luke to force him to release his bridge.

Quinn is brought forward next. He begins by sliding into a fairly impressive version of the splits. While holding the position, Stella comments, “So the one thing that he kinda needs to learn is to just keep his front leg not bent. But this is good enough for what he needs to do.” I cannot help but remark on his malleability. Then, with Ava moving back in to spot, he goes through some of the positions that Luke did. At the conclusion, in an improvised move, Quinn jumps up and touches his toes in the air. He is rewarded with another round of boisterous applause.

The sharing session wraps up with Kyle and Mark sharing a video they shot quickly near the end of Explorations. Putting *The Break In 2* on hold for the last fifteen minutes, they tell us, they quickly made a *Failers* video. Before hitting play on the video, they challenge the class to try not to laugh. By this time, even I know that “Try Not to Laugh” is a popular YouTube genre in which someone (the “YouTuber”, I suppose) stitches together a number of short, unintentionally funny clips. Popular scenarios seem to include people unsuccessfully attempting stunts and pets just being generally comedic. In this video, Kyle and Mark trip over things in the classroom and get “caught” dancing. I am not sure if their audience is *trying* not to laugh, or if it is just coming naturally. For their part, Kyle and Mark are thoroughly enjoying their onscreen hijinks. “A lot of these movies are for their own amusement,” I write, “They love laughing and sharing them (probably more than the audience).”

The audience. I think later that it is the audience that seems to be the missing component in some of the movie-making that is happening in the classroom. Whether the audience can

understand, is invested in, or can even *hear* what is going on in these movies does not seem to be a huge priority for those making them. Why is this? I do not think that it is simply some YouTube factor—a scenario in which a “filmmaker” considers her audience while a “YouTuber” does not. In fact, I get the impression that racking up views and subscribers is the ultimate end goal of the YouTuber. The YouTuber’s bragging rights hinge on the number of eyeballs she has attracted. Audience is everything. However, while many of the videos being made at Explorations are YouTube styled and inspired, none of our classwork is actually being uploaded to the Internet. Knowing that their audience will be fewer than twenty people and capable of real world admiration but not digital “likes,” I think their interest falls back into what *they*, the ones making the videos, get out of it: the making itself—the process. So maybe this is *not* such a bad thing? Still, even if the audience is not your highest priority, must they still not be kept in mind?

At our next Explorations meeting I make a suggestion that, I hope, keeps both the students as autonomous movie makers and the audience in mind. I suggest that later the following month, during the week before spring break, we hold an early Explor*celebration*: a full day’s dedication to sharing, talking about, and *celebrating* all we have been engaged in at Explorations. This is an event that I have normally held at the *end* of the school year, as many of my grade five students are aware. However, with all of this movie-making (not to mention gymnastics choreography) it feels like the knowledge of an awaiting audience would be appropriate. Why not have an Explor*celebration* before this next, natural break and then hold another at the conclusion of the school year?

In presenting the idea, I suggest that a part of this Explor*celebration* may look more like a film-festival. We can show their movies on “the big screen” (our classroom projector) and hold a question and answer period with the cast and crew. This is actually met with enthusiastic

feedback (a completely different feel than the lack of response to my class movie idea from a while back). Excited chatter spreads through our meeting but suddenly we are talking about awards. “We could vote for the best movie,” is one suggestion. “Or different categories, like funniest video,” is another. I had imagined general appreciation, not awards, so I am a little surprised. I probably should not be, though. This is the same group who, after our Scrabble lunch club just yesterday, needed to have a talk about winning with humility and losing with pride. There had been such an intense, competitive atmosphere that I had actually thought about shutting the whole thing down. For many, that competitive streak is not something I am interested in fostering at Explorations. We agree to talk details at a later time.

Ironically, we move from there into a Phase Two that does not include the use of iPads, and thus lacks any filming, being movie-making or YouTubing. The iPads, of which there are eight, belong to the school and are kept in the library in a locked, rolling cart. They do not seem to be used regularly by any other classes, so it has been easy enough to keep a standing booking during our Explorations periods. Today, however, it has been my decision not to take them. In recent days, the class has been inconsistent in our care of them. Like our other supplies, I have given them the responsibility of retrieving and returning an iPad as needed. But after several, post clean up talks about iPads not being plugged back into the cart, or their covers being left around the room (not to mention a little heat from the school librarian), I have decided that a stronger message is needed to get through to some of them. We are taking the use of this expensive, school property for granted. Thus, there are no iPads today.

Perhaps a day without iPads will have some indirect benefits—a forced slowing down. Jay starts work on a new script called *Age of Time: Part II* (I am not aware of a first part). Garrett proudly “publishes” his comic. After getting some editing help from Edwin, he has printed and

bound his comic in an extra duo-tang. Its story is based heavily on a few games Garrett plays on his iPad. He displays the comic in our classroom library. Mark, Kyle, and Vincent take a bin of Lego to a table and build small cars and airplanes. Will all of these pursuits be one-offs as they await the return of the iPads, or will some seep their way into our coming weeks?

I flip through their Explorations Logs at the end of the week and am taken aback by an entry Mark has written. Slipped casually into the middle of a fairly standard reflection is a small bombshell. “Vincent, me, and Edwin are making our movie,” writes Mark, “It is going very well. I think this might be my future job. Anyway we are going to be in Kyle’s movie for now but I know we will continue making *The Break In 2*.” Wait— *future job*? While Explorations is not intended as work experience, if having the opportunity to play opens a student’s eyes to future alternatives, I cannot help but feel a little giddy about that. Mark may never be a professional director, but the fact that he has recognized (and in such a matter of fact way) that there are possibilities out there, personal ones, is a crucial development. And it helps push me, their teacher, through the daily doubts of safety and appropriateness and productiveness. It reminds me to trust the process of play.

Stella’s Explorations Log offers some interesting insight this week as well. All three photos she has chosen to print and paste into her pages show her teaching (demonstrating, reviewing, or spotting) gymnastics moves to three different boys (her “beginners”). I have observed her this week, sitting on the sidelines with her notebook, part coach, part judge, while the boys attempt the movements she has shown them. At times she is critical and bossy. At one point I cannot help but hear her lay into the others with, “You guys need to watch and learn! You’re fooling around and not listening! That’s why you’re not learning anything!” Ava also says that Quinn has not been listening, “so today we are working him harder.” To my ever lessening

surprise, the boys respond to this. “There is a constant, argumentative tension with this group”, I note, “but it feels like their normal.” They continue to press on. “I’m not quitting,” Luke says during a sharing session with the class, “because they actually gave me an opportunity to do something with them.”

While her patience seems regularly thin, clearly Stella cares about this. I go back to the three pictures in her Explorations Log. She could have chosen other pictures. She could have chosen pictures of *herself* performing gymnastics moves. But she has not. In the top photo, she is down on all fours, demonstrating to a “beginner” how to do a mountain climber. In the next picture she holds an iPad up for Neil to watch. “I was teaching Neil his dive roll and I was taking a video to see the difference of him doing it compared to me.” The final photo shows Stella spotting Luke while he attempts a handstand. It is taken during a sharing session and the rest of the class is circled around the mats, watching. “In this photo we were sharing the things that Quinn, Luke, and Neil learned?” I notice the question mark she ends with and wonder if it is intentional. Does she not remember exactly what was happening in the photo? Or does she question whether or not they really *have* learned anything? I am not sure about this. I wonder if she is. And I wonder if having to write about it has pushed her to new questions.

Weekend Interlude: “*In the face of nothing, I will do something.*”

I find myself thinking about play a lot this weekend. I guess this is to be expected. I *am* at the midpoint of my research window. But it is not that simple. The play that I find myself thinking about is not my students’ but my own and my son’s. Appropriate, I suppose, considering it is the weekend.

These thoughts are first triggered on Saturday morning. My wife, Kitty, my ten year-old son, Finlay, and I are walking down the frozen river near our home. It is a mild, mid-February

morning, and the sky is a deep, sharp blue set off from the whiteness all around. Our eventual destination is a local coffee shop, but it is the walk itself that we are out here for. Finlay and I have our hockey sticks and an orange, rubber ball which we have been passing back and forth on the cleared off river path. We are not planning to stop and play any hockey, but it gives us both something to mess with while we walk.

After a while, our passing and stick-handling peters out and I put the ball in one of my pockets. The three of us walk quietly, somewhat spread out with Finlay and I lagging a little behind. Kitty's laugh breaks the stillness. "He is *just* like you," she says, referring to Finlay. I must give her a questioning look because she continues, "Everything's a game." I look down and realize that I have been scooping up snow chunks with the blade of my stick, tossing them in the air, and exploding them with a two-handed swing. I look over my shoulder and see that Finlay has been doing the same thing.

This is far from the first time Kitty has laid this accusation at my feet. And I guess I do often turn things into a game but I never see this as anything out of the ordinary—not until she draws my attention to it.

But I was not, *am* not, alone in these playful transgressions. I think of my close friend, Brett, who was born just four months after me and grew up two doors down. For four decades we have spontaneously turned such *stupid* little things into games. To transcribe them all would be a fool's errand—an attempt to make the ridiculous, logical. To illustrate this with one, representative example, I offer the "game" of rocks and a volleyball (none of these things had actual names). More than a dozen years ago, while sitting off between games at a beach volleyball tournament, I tossed a small pebble at our volleyball (which lay in the sand, at our feet, as we sat perched on his car's back bumper). I wanted to see if I could bounce the pebble

off the ball and back at Brett. It worked, grazing harmlessly off his leg. This led to him attempting the same and then us both picking up a handful of rocks and firing them off the volleyball towards each other. And then, in the following moments, rules came forward, and, somehow, a game started to form out of this. Ten rocks, we decided, is what you could use each round. We would alternate throws. All but one rock had to be smaller than a designated, sample rock. Each rock that struck the other player counted for one point. You could not move your body to dodge. If an opponent's rock came to your hand (which must rest upon your leg), you could catch it, but you could only move your hand from the wrist down. Catching an opponent's rock was worth a point and you could add it to your own arsenal. If your own rock bounced back and struck you, you would lose a point, but catch your own rock and you could use it again.

These rules did not come all at once, but were added as we played as a way to make the game clear, fair, and enjoyable. The game never came from any place of intention. It was the product of our messing about. We played this game between so many volleyball matches over the years. Sometimes, it felt like we were more engaged in that game than the actual volleyball.

There were, and continue to be, so many silly games like that: trying to pin paper airplanes to a dart board; keeping a golf ball rolling on the car's dashboard while driving; keeping score of how many volleyballs go, unintentionally, through the legs of each other during volleyball warmups (and the loud reaction that would erupt from us, to the confusion of everyone else in the gym, when this rarity would occur). These are but a few examples, all of which grew organically from, seemingly, nothing and became shaped by the parameters we would build in.

I am fairly certain that had Kitty not broken the spell on this February morning, Finlay and I would soon be coming up with stipulations to shape this mindless activity of the snow-block whacking into a game. That just seems to be how my mind works. But now I am thinking

of Finlay and if he will really be the same way. Recently, he has floated the idea past us that he would like to use some birthday money to buy a Playstation 3 video game console. I am torn on this one. It *is* his money, and he should have some say in how he spends it. He is very reasonable and responsible, so deciding on fair rules about its usage would not be an issue. But this is the same child who we have pushed (sheltered even) to have “real world” experiences. He did not see the light of a television or digital screen until the age of four. He is a reader, an artist, a builder. What if a video game system reverses all of that? People talk about *playing* video games, but to me what the “gamer” does in front of that lit up screen could not be any further from true play. Video games are a *consumer* product. This is a decision that feels like it will carry so much weight. So, for now, I am taking the route that I often do when faced with a difficult decision in the classroom: I have delayed the conversation.

I want Finlay to live a playful life. I want my students to live playful lives. I am a part of the responsibility for all of these young minds and I am pulled to feed them with play. But why? Why is this so important to me? A playful mind does not need a continuous stream of stimulation, does not need to be told what to think or who to be. A mind that can play is a mind that can create, adapt, consider possibilities, imagine, take care of, entertain, and maybe even form itself.

When I was school aged, our family spent most of the summer months in a little cottage well north of the city. It is a five-hundred and fifty square foot place that my father built the summer before I was born. There is no electricity, and it is not exactly roomy for a family of four, but there is so much to do out there. As long as you are not stuck inside. I recall one summer, I was a little older than Finlay is now, in which it rained for at least a week straight. Stuck inside, I read, and sketched. I played every card game and board game in that little cabin,

and the rain continued to fall. Spurred on by literal cabin fever, I grabbed scissors, glue, markers, a large paper bag, and my lone W.W.F. wrestling magazine. Based loosely on Monopoly, I created my own game, “The Wrestling Game” as it would come to generically be known. By the time it was ready to be played, the sun came back out. We moved out to the porch and played it anyway.

The Wrestling Game grew. It came back to the city with me and was visually enhanced by better paper, pencil crayons, and more magazines to cut and paste from. Like the rocks and volleyball game, rules evolved with each playing so that the game began to look less and less like its Monopoly cousin. I would update it to keep current wrestlers in the game (professional wrestling was a *huge* part of my childhood) and we would play it not just on rainy days, and not just at the cottage, but in the city as well. As teenagers, I will admit, we could sometimes be found playing it in my basement on a Saturday night, the lure of television, video games, going out, all turned aside for the moment.

The Wrestling Game would never have come into existence if I had electricity, never mind a Play Station 3, at the cottage. Something else would have filled the void. Play is not a *pacifier* of boredom, as I fear video games and smart phones to be. Play uses boredom for fuel and burns it out. It is actively defiant instead of passively accepting. In the face of *nothing*, I will do *something*. And I suppose *that* is what I really want from play for Finlay, for my students—the ability to play with the world—instead of being played *by* it.

A few years ago, Finlay found The Wrestling Game on the shelf at the cottage. It had not been played for years, and even though he was clueless about these outlandish, nineties characters inside, the game held up well. Once again, it now comes back and forth from the city to the cottage with us and is in our regular rotation of family board games. We have even made

some character updates and rule tweaks. In the rare moments when Finlay expresses boredom (something, I think, he tries not to do in front of me), I try to spin it into a positive. “The Wrestling Game would never have happened,” I tell him, “if I were never bored.”

On Sunday afternoon I am out grocery shopping. It is even milder than the day before. Warm—I would go so far as to say. You can hear water dripping from melting snow on roofs and trees. As I return home down the back lane, I spot Finlay and his two friends from down the street. They are in the middle of the alley, crouched over the streams of flowing water that the sun has carved into the ice. I smile. They are toothpick racing. This is also something Brett and I did as kids, starting at the top of our street, each dropping a toothpick, and racing, on a good day past ten houses, towards the sewer that would act as a finish line. Of course, we had built in a number of rules. As I watch the three of them talk excitedly through my car window, I wonder if they are doing the same.

Week 5: *“I’m running between ‘groups’ right now, hitting everyone but not spending quality time with anyone.”*

We begin the week without iPads for what will be the second, consecutive Explorations. This time it was not my intention. It is a maintenance day with our librarian that I was not aware of. The class will not be happy.

I decide to use this as an opportunity to introduce some stop motion animation. I have brought an old iPod into the classroom and know that several students have something similar with them at school. This is all they would need.

While they are in gym and outside for break, I piece together a small example. Setting my iPod to camera mode and propping it up on the counter, I grab some blocks and a couple of toy animals. I place one, single block in the centre of the frame and click a still photo. Adding a

second block beside it, I click another photo. I continue this process of alternating between manipulating the blocks and taking a photo, being careful to keep the iPod stationary between shots. Eventually I add a giraffe. After about twenty minutes of this manipulation, I connect the iPod to a classroom computer and upload the one hundred plus photos. After that, I simply import them into Windows Movie Maker, shorten the still clips to run at twelve frames per second and add an uninspired title (*Ten Second Animation*) and some generic music.

The animation goes over pretty well with the class. There are enough students who want to use my iPod to try this, that I decide to draw a name for its use. Brittany is the lucky winner. She had come in that morning with her finger in a splint (and a smile on her face) as she shared with me her intentions to make a *Hurt II* vlog. With the iPads not available for that idea, she is happy to experiment with animation instead. Vincent is the most vocal in his disappointment of those who were not drawn. He follows Brittany, at a bit of a distance, as she sets up at, coincidentally, the same counter space where I filmed the example. Ten minutes in and Vincent has found himself a role. He has offered to tap the screen of the iPod, clicking each picture, while Brittany sets up the next frame. She agrees and, for what I am sure is the first time this school year, Brittany and Vincent collaborate by choice.

In my mind, the people most affected by the non-existent iPads are Jay and his followers. The script he was working on last week is closed up in his Writer's Notebook and instead he, Duncan, Patrick, and Curtis have gone back to their fallback, Lego. They are building little things that they spin like tops, crashing into one another. "Building" is an invitation on the board, and Lego is a material to choose from, but I just cannot help but feel that they are slipping further and further away from what was such a rich engagement in that Star Wars movie. I scrawl a

quick line in my notebook, “No iPads for a second day... for some that’s spurred them into new areas... for others (Jay’s group) it’s a day to waste (Lego).”

Kyle has dumped the bin of dominos out onto the high counter. This is new and, again, I am under the assumption that the iPads have influenced his choice as well. And while this may also turn out to be no more than a side diversion, there seems to be some serious thinking and planning here (“carefully concentrating,” I have jotted in my notes). He begins placing the dominos into a spiral formation, working from the inside out, so that the last domino stands at the edge of the counter. Kyle, who always seems comfortable articulating his thinking aloud (usually without provocation) tells me that he is going to create a zip-line for that final domino to slide all the way to the floor and trigger something else. There is innovation in this play.

Stella and I are long past the pretence that her gymnastics has anything to do with movie-making. The iPads have no repercussions for her. What does weigh on her, however, is her present health. She has mentioned that she is not feeling well and at one point turns to me and asks, “Can I just sleep?” I do not answer her, and she presses no further. You can see the effect on her patience, though, as it is more strained than usual. Her instructions to Luke and Quinn come with fiery glares and she is less hands on, which probably adds to her frustrations. “Stella ... trying to find patience in teaching the boys,” I note. And she does. Along with Ava, the four of them push forward. Suddenly, their end game is no longer a mystery. Not to me, and not to them. They plan to have Luke and Quinn ready to perform *some* sort of routine at Explorcelebration. Stella paces the edge of the mats, shaking her head and trying to figure out exactly what that routine will be.

The iPad cart rolls back into the room for the next Explorations, and the *Break In 2* is back on set. Mark holds an iPad but has not opened it yet. He is busy setting up the scene,

physically and visually, with Vincent and Edwin. I am happy to see these guys back in action, but I have been avoiding what will be a difficult talk with them. Their movie is starting to push some school taboos. The character of the father, played by Edwin, has “gone crazy”. He has broken into the house and is stalking the other boys, who play rough approximations of themselves (boys). Yesterday I had written, “I will have to think a little bit about where the line of school appropriateness runs.” It does state, on a prominent Explorations slide we regularly reference, that their choices must be “safe and school appropriate,” although there is not a concrete definition of any of that. I suppose it would be easy to say, “no violence in school,” and be done with it. Except it would not be easy, not to shut down Mark’s movie, not after reading that last entry in his Explorations Log. For all of his commitment to this role, I know that he can get discouraged and frustrated easily. I do not want to risk snuffing out his vision of being a director. And this theme, this situation, must hold some significance for them. Playing out violence in a movie is not the same as actually *being* violent in class. Right? And so I have hesitated, as I seem to do so often with their play, to address any of this. “The fact that killers are a theme in the movie must mean something,” I go on to reflect. “Is it okay for them to *film* movies that we wouldn’t let them *watch* in school?”

I find part of a storyboard in Edwin’s Exploration Log. Beside some rough sketches is the line, “Yo... I’m a psychopathic dad drugged with heroin.” There is no delaying this conversation any longer. The heroin is something that I know I am not comfortable with. I approach the boys, still early in Phase Two. Whether it is a way to turn this into more of a conversation than a directive, or just a roundabout, passive aggressive way of breaking the bad news to them, I start by saying, “Guys, I think we need to talk about some of the stuff in your movie.” Judging by their response, they had been expecting this. Mark, Vincent, and Edwin talk over each other,

saying the same things, telling me not to worry, they are not using, “the idea about the heroin.” Vincent explains that they have decided the character just has amnesia, “and that’s why he went psycho.” Somehow this will explain his rampage. “And the ax?” I gesture to the rubber toy I have just noticed in Edwin’s hand.

“We’re not going to use it,” says Mark. “Edwin (the dad) just gets hit in the side of the head with it.”

“Yeah,” adds Edwin, “And that could be how I get knocked out and get amnesia.”

They are all in vigorous agreement. I am appeased by this. Does it somehow make it better, though the father is still “psychopathic” and after his own children, that it is because of amnesia and not narcotics? Any more appropriate that the ax is not wielded but is just used as a weapon of blunt force? That the violence is not shown on screen but merely implied (as they have also assured me)? For some reason—yes. Or at least, that is what I have decided for today. “But that will be an ongoing decision,” I write. Like so much else, it seems.

That is a danger, or opportunity (there is a fine line here), of inviting play into the classroom—it will be accompanied by subversiveness. If you give children a voice, then you better be prepared to hear it. So while I welcome all of this as a sign of developing personal growth and independent thinking, I am also responsible for its consequences. Here I am, encouraging students to explore the boundaries, when I am the keeper of those same boundaries. I am the *teacher*! “What’s my role in that?” I reflect in my notes, “Isn’t it to keep them in check? Maybe this is a new way of looking at the role of the teacher—not as reigning them in but as casting them out... and maybe,” I go on to consider, “that’s why we are so busy along the way. Maybe that is to be expected as they are learning how to deal with this new found freedom and responsibility.”

Kyle, who seems to have a somewhat tenuous relationship with *The Break In* boys, has been in and out of their movie-making. Today, he continues to be out. Standing at a table, he is folding sheets of white paper. “I’m making paper airplanes,” he volunteers, “and I’m going to film it to show other people how.” I notice an iPad resting on a book stand so that it is angled down at what his hands are doing.

My attention is diverted as Jay, Duncan, Patrick, and Curtis come back into the classroom. They finally had an iPad back in their hands and were last seen heading down the hallway to get back to work on their *Challenge Movie*. Now, walking through the room, Jay holds the iPad above his head and calls out to me, “battery’s dead,” from across a few tables. While he plugs it back into the cart, I watch Curtis grab the Lego bin from the back shelves. They begin building these spinning tops again and it looks like they are now taking turns facing off against one another. There is a fair amount of noisy excitement coming from their round table, particularly when one of their Lego tops crashes to the ground, a burst of laughter acting as an exclamation point from the other three. I notice that Garrett has not joined them in their “Plan B” (or are we much further down the alphabet now than B?). He has begun work on a new digital comic with Edwin, who is between shooting scenes and presently by his side. “I’m his editor!” Edwin announces.

A sharing session at the end of Phase Two really changes my perspective. “Sharing is so important,” I reflect, yet again, “More often than not, when I’m not sure if something is a very worthwhile choice, once I hear students share and talk about it, there is more value than I had thought.” I see something with the Lego that, somehow, I had missed all along. Hearing the boys talk about it with the rest of the class, it hits me that *this* is pure play. In retrospect, it has unfolded not unlike that childhood play I was reflecting on over the weekend. It started as a

“break” from movie-making (Jay cites frustrations within the group and an unreliable iPad), followed by, perhaps, a little boredom (or at least a lack of direction). One of the boys put a few pieces of Lego together and mindlessly spun it on the table. That sparked the others to try and soon they were all spinning their constructions, trying to knock each other’s off the table. “It’s going to be a tournament now,” Jay concludes, “to see which one will survive.”

With thoughts turning to my own childhood play with friends, I ask, “Are there any rules?”

“Not to building,” says Jay, “but there are rules to the tournament. If a piece breaks off yours, you can’t put it back on.”

“Unless it’s the piece you hold to spin or the bottom piece that it spins on,” adds Patrick. The rest of the boys nod and agree with a, “yeah.”

And there it is—the rule-making. This is probably the closest we have come to what I think of as *pure* play in this entire research window. But if this is such a fabulous example of play, why was I (*am* I) so uncomfortable with it? If another adult walked into the room at this time—colleague, administration, parent—I know that I would feel an almost panicked urge to justify their actions. Is this because, even with a teacher who encourages play, actually writes a *thesis* about play, in his classroom, the parameters of school are so firmly set in place that even alternative practices somehow have to align with them? Do I still have some tradition-for-tradition’s-sake thinking to shake off? Or, should this feeling of unease be seriously listened to? Is that nagging doubt over ten-year old boys making and crashing Lego tops in the heart of the school day poking at me because I really should not be allowing precious school time for this pointless activity? All of that play that I think about from my own childhood, it all happened *outside* of school—it all happened “in real life.” What if—even accepting my hunch that play is

“good” for these kids—I am misplacing it? What if play is not necessary at school because it can happen at home? “The question remains,” I scrawl in my notes at the end of the sharing session, “does this fit into school and what is my role in it?”

What has made tackling these questions, and even Explorations itself, even more challenging in recent years is my feeling of professional isolation. At a school level, there are no other classrooms with similarly-aged students who are incorporating play into their learning—at least, not on such a regular, prominent stage as Explorations. I do not have a learning support teacher with whom I have had broader, philosophical conversations about education. I do not even have any other adults physically in the classroom—learning support, educational assistants, or teacher candidates. While the opportunities to confront the problems of play with the Socratic method have not presented themselves in my current situation, I could be just as guilty for not instigating them myself. True, there may not be an obvious colleague to take this trip with, but neither have I attempted to drag anyone along.

This lack of collaboration and support not only silences professional conversations, it also limits Explorations in some practical ways. While my students and I have worked our way into a relatively independent and streamlined groove for them to gather their needed supplies, it is never perfect. I am sure that I spend at least five minutes of each Explorations helping students solve or organize necessary, little things (pull a project down from a high shelf, investigate a quirk on the iPad, supervise some sawing, et cetera). Five minutes may not sound like much—and it is certainly less than earlier in the school year, possibly as low as we could get it—but it still adds up to more than ten percent of Phase Two. That is a lot of time that I could otherwise be listening, observing, and, possibly, understanding the motives behind their play. Having another

adult in the room just to take on these menial tasks would free my attention up to the important aspects of Explorations.

The addition of a second adult during Explorations, especially a skilled, learning support teacher would also allow me permission to spend more quality time with particular groups. So often, I feel as though I am “making the rounds”—making sure to pop in on everybody for at least a couple of minutes each. These often feel like superficial visits. A handful of years ago, in another school, when I worked with the aforementioned Jennifer Miles as my learning support teacher, Explorations was truly supported in my classroom. Along with insightful advice during after school conversations, she was willing to spend time in the classroom during Explorations. At times, she would come in and be that general presence so that I could spend the entire block with a small group. Sometimes we would reverse those roles. I might ask her to spend the period with a small group—one, perhaps, who seemed stuck and needed a fresh pair of eyes.

I find myself pining for the support of someone like Jennifer. “I would love, so much, to spend an entire Explorations with that (*Break In 2*) movie group, just helping them with sound, location, etc.,” I write, “I’m running between ‘groups’ right now, hitting everyone, but not spending quality time with anyone.” But I know that to have someone support us in that way, someone who can be trusted with that delicate act of interacting with students and their play and not just be a supervisor, takes someone with the right mindset and experience. Teaching, particularly at times such as Explorations, is such a responsive undertaking. I could not simply provide that visiting adult with a list of things to do. Even if the problems of context and relationships could be overcome, that person would need to be receptive to the play in the classroom. Which leads me to wonder: does one need to be playful in order to incorporate play in the classroom?

I consider a “Teacher Talk” meeting from the previous day. The early-years teachers were allowed a portion of the afternoon for professional dialogue. This day’s topic was how to improve our students’ writing. The afternoon felt like a missed opportunity. Much of what was shared were rote exercises to be performed by students in order to improve their use of conventions. Writing seemed to be understood as penmanship, spelling, and punctuation. While these skills make up a part of writing, they do not define it. It made me wonder if one could teach writing without being a writer. And what about the other disciplines? Can one teach mathematics without being a mathematician? I do not mean because a teacher needs to be an *expert* in a particular subject matter in order for successful transmission, but that one might need to feel *comfortable* in an area in order to allow for student voice and, in return, be responsive—an open and flowing, cyclical model of teaching and learning. “Not because you have all the answers,” I reflect at the end of Teacher Talk, “but because you’re prepared to let go, muck about, and play within those realms.” And if this is true of areas such as writing and mathematics, would it not also be true of play? If we find that play has a role in the upper-elementary classroom, then will we need to find playful teachers?

Stella returns the next day, feeling better and acting much more like her regular self. She seems to be working at double pace with the boys, perhaps attempting to make up for lost time. Ava is spotting while Stella directs Quinn and Luke through some backbend walkovers. The iPads have made their return, and Stella has one in hand, recording the boys’ movements and playing it back for them along with a line or two of critique. As I walk over to the mats to observe, she draws up beside me, as always, and begins, “Mr. MacKay ...” before stopping and amending to, “wait, wrong person. Never mind.” She redirects herself towards Ava and holds a busy conversation over the iPad. She has deferred to someone else—to a peer.

I move on to Jay, Duncan, Patrick, and Curtis. Even with the iPads back in play they have converged, once again, around a circular table and are spinning their Lego tops. It seems they have begun their tournament. Two of them face off at once while the others cheer and ... *wager?* Bingo chips are spilled on the table and they bet on favoured tops. I should ask about this. Maybe add gambling to the list of delicate topics alongside safety and violence. They spin, and crash, and bet, and rebuild. They talk, and laugh, and negotiate the rules of their game. And I choose not to interrupt them. For today, I decide to stand back and watch them play.

Week 6: “*Like it or not, right or not, they are truly bringing themselves into the classroom.*”

We seem to have slid into a very regular groove this week. Planning discussions among students are brief and we slip from meetings to Phase Two without a lot of discussion, if any, about what to do next. For most, each day seems to be about picking up where they left off. Mats are set up, iPads are pulled from the cart and students move, without negotiation into what have become familiar spaces.

For Jay, Duncan, and Garrett this means down at the end of the hallway. They have picked back up on the *Challenge Movie*. And while they still call it this, Jay himself now describes it as a video full of skits. Today, they film one in which Jay stars in a mock commercial for the newest iPhone. The idea behind the satire is that every time he tries to promote a new feature of the iPhone, he accidentally turns it into a negative. It is a commercial that does not go well, which is exactly how it is supposed to go. They continue to add new lines and ideas as they go—laughing as their commercial grows longer.

Patrick is not with the others at the end of the hallway. He has worked himself into Mark and Vincent’s moviemaking. They are back in our library corner, filming what they tell me are the last scenes of *The Break In 2*. Mark continues to play the role of director, and the others are

open to creating his vision. They have kept their word with the drugs and violence. There is no mention of heroin and any use of the rubber axe is only implied. It seems we are all satisfied with this compromise. Patrick does not have an on-screen role, but moves around the peripheries—making the odd suggestion and working the iPad camera when there is an opportunity. This might be an example of a situation where I spur a student on to either be more involved or find something else, but in this case, for now, I do not. I know that Patrick was not ready to leave the Star Wars movie as the others were. Of them all, he always seemed the most frustrated with all of the stopping and starting with that group. Patrick is a huge Star Wars fan. He has shown no enthusiasm for any YouTube shenanigans. I am happy to see he has connected with the only people in the room who you could say are making a *movie*.

Kyle is one of the very few who begins something new today. However, for him, starting in on a new idea *is* a regular Explorations routine. Today, he has pulled the blocks, dominos, and marbles from the back shelf. Once a regular fixture of Explorations, it is now a rarity to see these materials in use.

“So, I’m going to make a marble run,” he says to me, a spiral of dominos already taking form on the counter in front of him, “and then make a time-lapse movie of it.”

The iPad camera has a setting for this. Kyle goes along as planned, following the toppling dominos with the iPad camera, but later in Explorations I find him roaming the hallways, coming back from the direction of Jay’s group and still filming as he goes. I question him about this.

“It’s part of my video,” he says in defence.

I remind him of a few things. One, his “video” was supposed to be a time lapse of the marble run he built. Two, he needs to come and check with me before leaving the classroom.

And three, “just wandering around filming with the iPad is not a choice.” I am a little annoyed and send him back into the classroom.

I realize that I do not spend nearly as much time hovering over the gymnastics group as I did in past weeks. For her part, neither does Stella saddle right up to me when I do. I am feeling more comfortable with what this is becoming and so is she. Today plays out like a re-run—Stella barking out orders, Ava spotting and assisting, Luke and Quinn working through the movements, sometimes pushing back against instructions but never quitting. Sometimes an iPad is out and recording. Sometimes it is not.

The longevity of this gymnastics group is something I could not have predicted back in January. At this point it would surprise me if any of them “quit,” but I still do not know what exactly is bringing them back to it every time. Other than Stella (“I am a cheerleader,” continues to echo in my mind), what is the draw for the other three? Possibly, the time already put in is one factor. Luke has acknowledged as much. Whatever kept them going at the start (Novelty? Lack of other options?) they now react with pride when the length of their commitment is mentioned. I am certain that this is a factor, but I am also confident that it cannot be the only one.

While considering other possibilities, something occurs to me that, in hindsight, should have a long time ago—movement. Maybe the boys, maybe even Ava, are drawn to gymnastics because it is a way to be physical in the classroom. Both Quinn and Luke have a reputation for being active students (in meetings with former teachers, kinder descriptors have ranged from “busy” to “unfocused”). Luke regularly chooses to stand instead of sit and can sometimes be found pushing his arms hard against a table’s edge (an almost isometric exercise) while quietly reading. Quinn is a kid in motion. He spends much of his time walking and talking, his mind moving as fast as his body, though not always in the same direction. Both Luke and Quinn often

choose to use a special stool in our classroom that is rounded at the bottom of the base, allowing them move on the spot while sitting in one place. All, including Ava, are entrenched in hockey outside of school. I hear about weekend tournaments and extra training sessions. I know that at times they are on the ice as late as 10:00 p.m., and often have more than one practice per week before school (school starts at 8:00 a.m.). They are habitually active and, I can only imagine, tired. How unnatural it must be for them to sit, indoors, in a poorly lit room, for hours on end, and complete some monotonous task. Should it come as any surprise that when given the opportunity to play, they will choose to move?

I turn away from the mats to scan the room. There are only two students sitting down (a couple of girls editing some animation). While no one else is engaged in quite as much physical vigour as the gymnastics group, just about everyone is up on their feet. Even many who do not *need* to be upright (like the pair of boys looking over a storyboard) have nonetheless chosen to stand. Is this because it is a more natural state of being, or has enthusiasm brought them out of their chairs?

There are a few students who, outside of school, fall on the opposite end of the activity spectrum from the hockey players. If they are sitting too much at home, imagine doubling down on that at school. Maybe the movement that comes with play is just as valuable to them as it is to Luke, Quinn, and Ava. Play is benefitting us in a way that I had not planned for, nor truly considered until now. Play has spurred us to get up and move—to learn one-handed round offs, walk in and out of a scene, or just wander the halls aimlessly with an iPad.

Stella's voice turns my attention back to the mats. "That's not an Explorations choice!" she loudly announces. This is directed at Rachel, who has just sat down on a bench at the edge of their mats.

“I just want to watch for a minute,” responds Rachel.

“Well, watching is not an Explorations choice,” Stella reiterates.

Technically, Stella is correct in her orders (we regularly talk about the expectation that students be “active and engaged” and she, maybe more than anyone, is well aware of this), but I let them know that it is okay if Rachel takes a couple of minutes to see what others are up to. A few minutes of student-to-student inspiration can be a positive.

It is fairly easy to see, however, that Rachel is not gripped by the gymnastics. She has not sat down with them in hopes of inspiration, she has sat for a lack of ideas. She says as much when I approach her. “I don’t know what to do,” come the predictable words. It is not the first time Rachel has uttered this, and she is certainly not the only one. For some, at times, it seems that starting play is as hard, or harder, than starting work.

There is, perhaps, an assumption that play is easy. Is this because of where we situate play in our language? It is commonly thought of as the opposite of work. It is associated with laid back, leisurely pursuits. It is seen as a common activity of very young children (and if young children can do it, then it *must* be easy). But the example with Rachel (and it is just one example of many that involve her as well as other students) is a reminder that play is not easy—not for everyone, and not at all times.

When I ask students to play in the classroom, I am asking them to be critical thinkers. During play, a constant stream of decision making must happen: What are my interests? How do I make this work? With whom and how do I collaborate? Where is this all going? This is the only way that play moves forward. For some, at school or at home, the way a child spends her time is often decided *for* her. She may have little, if any, opportunity to direct herself—to be the protagonist in her own world.

Does this lead to a conflict in my thinking? On one hand, I have always considered play to be one of the most natural things we do. Play is simply a responsive interaction with one's world. A baby, turning a found object over in her hands is playing. However, here are these examples of students having a difficult time fully engaging in play—moments in which it seems they would rather just be told what to do. So which is it: does play come innately or does play take practice? How is it possible that I have seen evidence for both of these seemingly contradictory possibilities?

Perhaps the idea that play comes naturally but also requires some tending to is not the paradox it may at first seem. Consider the possibility that, yes, play is innate and does not need to be learned but can be *unlearned*. This is a worrisome thought. Imagine a child with few opportunities for agency in her life: family directing home life; teachers directing learning; coaches directing recreation; iPads and computer screens directing leisure. Without the opportunity to exercise it, can the ability to play atrophy? Can that once curious baby settle into an indifferent ten year-old? Should we be surprised that, for some students, after years of schooling, being asked to play is suddenly a challenge?

After sitting for a few minutes, Rachel gets up and turns toward the sink area. "I guess I'll just paint," she says to no one in particular. She grabs a brush and a palette and squeezes out a few globs of acrylic colours. On the way back to a table she grabs a piece of white paper. There are only five minutes left in Explorations. She mixes a few colours and begins brushing stripes onto the page. When it is time to clean up, Rachel has covered less than half the page. She cleans all of her tools in the sink and drops her paper in the recycling bin.

The next Explorations comes directly off of a dreaded indoor recess. It is too cold to send the students outside so they spend the break in their classrooms under the supervision of

educational assistants. Some sit and socialize, many hover around electronic devices, others spend their time accumulating reminders that they cannot run around the classroom. Indoor recess can make for a difficult transition back to class. I find it particularly challenging when we are moving into Explorations. There are fundamental, structural differences between indoor recess and Explorations, but I understand how they could look, on the surface, similar—busy, noisy, somewhat self-directed. Both fill the atmosphere with a busy energy and, thus, it sometimes takes us a little longer to transition. We have to move from “hanging out” to playing. It is yet another confirmation to me, to us, that play in the classroom is not, as sometimes *misunderstood*, “free time.”

For some, that transition from recess to Explorations is invisible today. They congregate at the carpet for our check-in meeting, then go back to what they started during the break. Mark returns to a table littered with black construction paper, scissors, and glue. He is making a Robin mask (Batman’s sidekick, not the bird). It is a simple black band with eye holes which calls to mind the archetype of the burglar’s mask. I ask if it is a costume for *The Break In 2* or a future movie, but the answer is no. “I just feel like making it,” he replies.

Mark’s usual collaborators have returned to the book corner where they had left a couple of toy light sabres. Vincent and Patrick had them out during indoor recess and are now destroying some styrofoam packing with them. When asked, they justify their actions in the name of “rehearsal.” For what, I am unsure, as I have not seen any plans nor heard any talk about a new movie. The broken bits of styrofoam are clinging to everything and I ask them to clean up before it gets worse.

Brittany and Rachel continue a minor argument that had started over the break as Brittany sets up an iPad camera at a counter table in order to get back to her injury vlog. She plans to talk

about the athlete's brace she has been wearing on her right leg. Rachel is adamant that Brittany did not have the brace before today. Brittany claims she has been wearing it for a week. I am unsure as to why this is important to either of them, particularly Rachel, and I steer the two apart.

Still blaming indoor recess, I am irked by the start of this Explorations and am trying, without much success, to hide my annoyance. It feels like we are wasting time. This is *not* my idea of play. Wait—this is not *my* idea of play. This change in emphasis rattles around in my head a little. In preparing for this narrative inquiry, I attempted to define play. After consulting the literature, I settled on a working understanding. Seven indicators (as noted earlier) would keep me and my students on the trail of play. I decided on what to look for, then went back into my classroom and began seeking it out. And now I get frustrated when it all does not fit. “There’s a problem here,” I write, “*I... defined play for them. Like it or not, right or not, they are truly bringing themselves into the classroom... the YouTubers, the cheerleaders, the injury prone vloggers. This is them.*” Their play is intertwined with their identities. I cannot ask the question, “What does play look like in a grades four and five classroom?” and not listen to what they are telling me. This is what I have invited into the classroom.

Our sharing does not take as much time as I had expected. We are treated to another demonstration of Luke and Quinn's progress. Since being introduced to the idea of having an Explorcelebration before Spring Break, this foursome has pitched their focus, exclusively, to teaching the boys. Their improvement is visible—their movements look more natural, more confident.

Mark shares his construction paper mask. He is genuinely surprised that he has to explain to most of the class who Robin is. None of the filmmakers or YouTubers take me up on the offer to share. They are not interested in showing a work in progress, instead wanting to include their

finished product at our Explorcelebration film festival. Instead, Vincent offers to share a thirty second, stop-motion animation he has experimented with in between other movie-making endeavours. Like mine, he has used blocks and some toy animals for characters.

We end more than ten minutes short of lunch break, so, seeing that we are already gathered at the carpet, I decide to build on Vincent's sharing. I turn on the projector and look up the website of a filmmaker named PES so we can watch some of his stop-motion animation. In a two-minute film called *Submarine Sandwich*, a variety of objects are animated to stand in as toppings on a sandwich (the tomatoes are bicycle reflectors, purple Slinkys take the place of red onion). Impressed by this, the class is eager to watch a "making of" video that PES has posted. In it, PES shows how this particular film was made, but also talks in general about where his ideas for animation come from. In referencing the creative process, PES drops a bomb. "It's play," he says, "It's really like being a giant kid." I had seen this video before, but it had been a while and I had forgotten that word was coming. I smile to myself.

When it is over, Stella, who sits on a bench near the back of our carpet, is the first to speak. "He must have a good imagination!" she announces.

"I guess that's why he said he plays," I respond.

Week 7: *"I'm never quite comfortable at Explorations."*

The week begins with some reflection. The students have each selected a few Explorations photos and now, having been printed, are gluing them into their Explorations Logs. It is time for some writing.

Every time we open our Explorations Logs, or at least when it is at my behest, I cannot help but think about how I am *using* play to accomplish some writing. Using play for more than just writing, actually. I milk that forty-five minutes of Phase Two for many literacies—speaking,

listening, sketching, planning, *thinking*. For me, it is often what surrounds our play that satisfies the “So what?” I think of myself as some truly alternative teacher, but even I keep putting much of the weight of our Explorations into traditional literacies.

For the majority of students, I sense it is the opposite. They will glue the little pictures in their books. They will write a few lines down. If their teacher makes them reflect, then they will reflect. If that is the cost of being allowed to play in school—consider it a bargain. So they dutifully write a few sentences alongside each of their photos but the conversation, and energy, is turned towards what is next, not what has already been.

Quinn has chosen a photograph of Luke and himself seated at the edge of the mats. “In this photo,” he writes, “I am watching the girls dance. Then we did the dance. It is very hard but me and Luke pulled it together.”

For her part, Stella’s photographs are of the boys in action. In one, Quinn and Luke are mid-synchronized cartwheel, while Stella stands behind, leaning against a shelving unit with one arm pointed out at the mats. Beside it is written: “In this photo Luke and Quinn were doing their routine and I was in the back yelling out what they were supposed to be doing.”

But when we arrive at our first Explorations of the week, Stella is away. She is at an out of town cheerleading competition. For Stella, it is her first team event outside the city and her anticipation has been high. The rest of her foursome carries on, however. “Good,” says Quinn who (I think) is joking, “No Stella to boss us around.”

As hinted at in their Explorations Logs, their gymnastics is beginning to morph into dance. It reminds me that play is never static. Even though this group has now decided on a purpose behind their practice (to teach the boys some gymnastics moves, set to music, that they can demonstrate at Explorcelebrations) their play continues to evolve.

They have selected a song and seem to have choreographed about the first half minute of a synchronized routine for Quinn and Luke. Ava directs them both today, calling out, “Handstand. Cartwheel. Dive roll. *Dive roll!!!*” They have missed the dive roll.

“Oh,” says Quinn, still lying on the mats while Ava resets the music, “that’s the new thing.”

They are not the only people who are working on a dance. Brittany and Rachel have asked me about using mats. They have collected two from the gym and are working in very cramped quarters in a back corner of the room. Brittany, who takes gymnastics outside of school, has written that first she, “will have to teach [Rachel] some simple skills.”

We are about fifteen minutes into Explorations before I make my way over to Mark. I was aware of him, behind an iPad, filming scenes with Edwin and Vincent, but I was unsure of what project they were working on. It turns out to be some additional scenes for *The Break In 2*. It is just the three of them. Kyle has not even pretended to be a part of this endeavour for the last little while. Patrick, who I thought had gravitated towards these filmmakers in order to resurrect *Star Wars*, sits alongside Duncan, with a bin of Lego.

Mark has turned aside my few inquiries with brief, one word answers, not once, I believe, even stopping to look at me. Presently, he is a director—a director at work. And as the camera rolls, he silently directs his actors with a motioning hand or a thumbs up. I am happy to be brushed off.

Jay sits at a computer on his own today, a rare sight. Garrett and Curtis are absent, and Patrick and Duncan have defaulted to Lego. I look over his shoulder. He is Googling, “How to make your own secret language.” “We’re making our own secret language,” he tells me. They are

thinking about incorporating it into a skit for the *Challenges* movie. I leave Jay as he considers which letters of the alphabet to swap around in order to create his code.

As the week goes on, Jay's crew all return to school and, thus, return to the end of the hallway. "We're at five challenges now," Jay informs me. The term "challenges" has stuck, but they are now mainly producing comedy sequences. This is yet another instance of play morphing organically.

During a sharing session, Jay even introduces their work in progress as a series of skits, explaining to the class, "a skit is like a little movie." The class crowds around the small iPad screen to watch some of these skits. There is "The Mannequin Challenge," shot a couple of weeks previously, in which the entire class was asked to freeze during an Explorations (a la mannequins), while Duncan walked through the room taking a video. We are also treated to a "Whip Challenge" (an individual dance contest), a satirical commercial for the iPhone 9, and some bloopers from the long lost *Star Wars* movie. I take note of how much laughter there is, both onscreen and off, from both the sharers and their audience.

When they have finished screening the skits, I take the opportunity to ask two questions. "Are we ever going to see a *Star Wars* movie?" is the first.

Curtis, Duncan, and Garrett all look around at each other, perhaps considering who will answer, while Jay cuts in to hold his place with a drawn out, "Uh..." We all now focus on him. "I doubt it," he settles on, "because it's only like a minute and we aren't really working on it anymore." There is no disagreement from the rest. I look over to Patrick, who is in the audience. I read nothing in his expression—neither surprise nor disappointment.

I ask my second question, and preface it with the fact that I have been thinking about this one for a while. “I don’t know if this will make sense or not, but... would you guys consider yourselves filmmakers or YouTubers?”

“YouTubers,” Garrett answers immediately, with echoes of the same from even their audience.

“Yeah,” Jay adds, “more of the YouTube kind.”

“Is there a difference between filmmakers and YouTubers?” I follow up.

“Oh yeah,” Garret, again.

“Yeah, you can make more money,” Vincent interjects from the carpet.

“Filmmakers are kind of people that, like...” Jay struggles to articulate the difference, “they share it, but it’s more just, like, friends. But YouTubers, it’s in, like, the *public*.”

I name drop Steven Spielberg as an example of a filmmaker who is both rich, and has directed more than a few eyeballs towards his movies. Like he has considered this before, Jay counters that this is only because he is a *famous* filmmaker. I wonder, but do not ask, whether we have got the cause and effect in the right order here.

My sense though, is that they are referencing the *accessibility* and *immediacy* of creating and sharing YouTube videos. I also think that they are now using YouTube in a generic sense, since none of what they are filming at school is being uploaded to the Internet.

For our classroom purposes, it is hard to argue with them. On one simple device (in this case, an iPad), they have recorded and edited a number of challenges or skits (call them what you will), and played them back for the entertainment, and *joy*, of not only their classmates, but themselves.

Mark's group, if it could be called that, is fractured again. While he looks through footage of an older movie he had filmed, Patrick and Edwin try their hand at stop motion animation, and Vincent begins filming himself being goofy. I sit down next to Mark. He offers me nothing.

"Editing?" I ask him.

"Well, I just wanted to look back at some old stuff." I think that is a no.

I so often feel out of synch with these guys. When I think they are on to new things, *The Break In 2* moves forward in earnest. Once it is rolling along, they splinter off into random pursuits. And I am at the centre, trying to balance it all out. "Speed up! Slow down!" I write, "Either I'm on them for rushing or (I'm asking), 'Where is this going?'" I have allowed a lot of time for Explorations—a third of every second school day, one sixth of our time together. We cannot waste it.

But time moves irregularly during Explorations, if such a thing is possible. Certainly, time *feels* different during Explorations. Students often comment that it goes by so fast. At times I am in agreement with them, and at others it drags on longer than any other block in our day. "I'm never quite comfortable at Explorations," I write at the end of the day, "Either we're rushing things or spinning our wheels. I'm waiting for it to feel right, but what does that feel like?"

But what if feeling uncomfortable *is* the right feeling? It would make sense that I, the teacher, would feel this way when great autonomy is handed over to students. My need to trust the process coupled with my responsibility to use class time productively, really *should* lead to this sense of disequilibrium. Would it not be more worrisome if I felt completely at ease while, around me, students are *literally* doing cartwheels? That uncomfortable feeling is a signal to me,

a reminder that I must continually analyse the level of value in what we are doing (including the question of what *is* valuable in the first place and who makes those decisions).

Weeks ago, I almost shut down the gymnastics group before they got started because I was feeling *uncomfortable* about how they were using their time. But their apparent idling turned into something. Sometimes it does—often it does not. How do we recognise the difference? Can we? Do we need to? All of those discarded ideas, things left unfinished, are they all just wasted time, or are they part of the prologue of something important that later comes? Maybe our students, like those classic examples of great scientists, inventors, artists, need to swing at a few pitches before actually hitting the ball. Those first at bats cannot be dismissed as worthless. They are part of the equation. And if those opportunities do not happen in the classroom, where do they happen? We may gripe about not having the time to fit everything in during the school day, but we have more time with these children than anyone. And maybe that is why time can feel uncomfortable during Explorations, because we always feel we should be “getting something in” during school. And when we do not, when we allow time for play, for student pursuits that may or may not have something come of them, during *school*, when colleagues and principals and parents might poke their heads into our room and wonder what the heck we are doing—well, maybe the *least* we could feel is a little uncomfortable. Who said we should be striving for comfort anyway?

Stella has returned to school a little earlier than expected. She left her competition due to illness, but is well enough to be with us. Seeing Stella back, in charge and now with a clipboard in her hands, does make me feel a little more at ease. Not only is she pushing her usual group forward, but she has expanded it. Brittany and Rachel have joined them at the front, on the “main stage” of mats. Since dance has been incorporated into what was formerly just gymnastics, the

girls want to prepare a few performances for Explorcelebrations. Quinn and Luke will still demonstrate what they have learned (although now to music, in what Luke is calling “gymdancetics”), but there will also be a couple of additional performances by some combination of the four girls. The song selections, and early choreography, are scrawled on Stella’s clipboard.

They are shouting at each other over the music (although I think that we could turn the volume down on their songs and it would not change theirs). These are six strong and vocal personalities and I am sensing some self-inflicted pressure. We are two weeks out from Explorcelebration and to them, this performance, this product, must be right.

By the time we begin sharing for the day, we have lost Stella. Still not feeling well, she has gone to the office to phone home. Brittany and Rachel are not ready to share their part so that just leaves us with Ava directing Quinn and Luke. We see the first half-minute of their dance, including the handstand, cartwheel, and dive roll (which this time they remember) combination. Quinn then announces an impromptu handstand competition with Luke. They each try to hold the move for as long as possible, but Quinn goes right over, putting his feet down and landing in a bridge. “I’ve never landed that before!” he announces.

They take a few questions. Helena asks, “How long have you been working on your dance?”

Quinn and Luke’s faces light up. Their smiles confirm what I have always suspected—that they take pride in how long they have stuck with this. They are pleased the class has noticed.

“Well... lots. Lots!” Quinn says.

“About fifteen Explorations,” Luke helps out.

“No!”

“Yeah!”

“WAY more!” insists Quinn.

“Well,” Luke concedes, “just the dance part.”

Ava, who has let the boys answer until this point, chimes in, “It’s kind of hard to get it done when they’re not listening.”

The class laughs. I look back through my book, seeing if I can determine a start date. I find the page in which Stella is in a huff over the basket tosses. “I have notes back to January,” I offer, “so it probably depends on what you’re counting.” I do not believe even that day to be the true “day one” as so much of what came before is connected. It all is. I think they are starting to see that too.

“Yeah,” Quinn decides, “probably for *successful* Explorations—three. Maybe five.”

As this research window wears on, and my attention is turned to play, it seems as though it is revealing itself everywhere. “Play in other parts of the classroom keep coming up,” I write. Although, in an attempt to keep things manageable, I have chosen to limit my focus to play within Explorations, it is impossible to ignore the fact that play itself has not respected those limits. Playfulness runs through our day.

For the purpose of context, allow me to provide a one day snapshot of playfulness *outside* of the boundaries of Explorations. It begins first thing in the morning when we congregate for math. As a class, we are going through a sheet called, *By the Numbers*. On one side is an infographic of various numbers and statistics. Based on this information, the other side contains a handful of problems to be solved. The real purpose of this activity is to think together about what the questions are asking and how one might approach them. The actual calculations, while important, are, thus, secondary and can be accessed in various ways. We are not just “going over

the answers,” but sharing and layering our thinking. There is room for creativity and, because of this, some playfulness with how many approach the problems. Quinn demonstrates this when explaining how he multiplied sixty-four by five. Chopping an open array in half on the Smartboard, then moving one rectangle below the other, he tells us that, “sixty-four times five is the same as thirty-two times ten, and that’s easy—three hundred twenty”. Numbers, Quinn has shown us, can be manipulated—can be played with.

Another traditionally rote exercise becomes infused with play. Students are given a sheet with five sentences I have written. Each sentence is either complete, incomplete, or a run-on. Working together, they turn each sentence into a complete sentence. Some accomplish this by creating two sentences, adding a connecting word, or providing more information. This activity has come to be known as “Hot Dog Sentences,” thanks to the content of the very first sentence we worked through. I never know what might come up during Hot Dog Sentences. Today there is a long debate about apostrophes as one student, mistakenly, felt that by adding an apostrophe to a plural word the sentence would somehow become complete. With a little guidance from me, everything we needed to know about apostrophes came up in a (quite passionate) discussion. Had they not been allowed to play with these sentences, I am not sure they would have cared one bit about a lesson on the apostrophe.

As they move on to some free writing time, play is everywhere. A few boys continue their fixation with codes and write notes for each other to crack. Mark and Vincent write “Spy Notes”, mysterious clues to be hidden around the room for next year’s students. Brittany works on a story called *7 Book Covers*, a playful mystery inspired by our class novel, *Escape from Mr. Lemencello’s Library*. Others have taken up the Writer’s Notebook Challenge—a little something I periodically offer for those who may need some spurring on. Today’s challenge is to write a

piece in which each word begins with the next letter of the alphabet. For me, the challenge produced a poem called, Apple Blossoms. It also allowed us to conclude our Writer's Workshop with another lively discussion, this time about the various forms that words can take, which arose from the fact that one student completed their writing piece by describing something as "zebraish".

I now wonder if that acceptance of play in our learning is what allows for a level of playfulness in our relationships. Today's library period is a good example of this. I am seated at a table with Duncan, Patrick, and Jay. We each read our own book, but Duncan seems more interested in what Jay is reading. Ms. Walters, our librarian, looks across the room to Duncan and says, "Duncan, I don't want to hear your voice. I want to hear your eyeballs reading".

This makes Duncan laugh. "What? How can they?" His mock exasperation draws laughter from his table mates.

"Duncan!" one eyebrow raised, the librarian's tone is now laced with sarcasm, "You know how I feel about laughing."

I cannot resist getting in on the fun and whisper to the boys, "Yeah guys, to Ms. Walters the sound of children laughing is like cats crying."

The table now bursts into laughter. Duncan is in near tears, shaking his head and repeating, "cats crying." The rest of us are trying our hardest to keep the volume down.

"Okay, that's it," jokes Ms. Walters, "next recess—all of you! You too, Mr. MacKay!"

I paint my face with incredulity. The boys can see that we are all playing along, and they love it. A short round of permissive subversiveness in the library before we all settle back to our own reading.

And the significance of an event like this? Is it just a funny anecdote? “It breaks down the fourth wall of the classroom,” I write, “A little ‘Hey, that’s not supposed to happen’ moment.” For some students, often those who have had less than positive experiences in school, it is a signal that something different is possible—that it does not need to be school versus them. A little playful humour has, at times, been my only way of hooking some students. That laugh in the library is like a bank deposit for me. The next time I have to talk with one of those boys about a more serious issue, when I need to make a withdrawal, I will not be seen simply as “the other”—the teacher who is just out to catch them. There is now, not just with that one moment, but with a cumulative effect of that atmosphere, an implicit understanding that we are on the same side.

One area of play strengthens another in the classroom. On one hand, the explicit play at Explorations primes students to play with multiplication. But this relationship also works in reverse. Thinking playfully and creatively during what might be thought of as more teacher directed parts of the school day helps ground us in an understanding of how play and student autonomy connects with learning. With this experience, Explorations is no longer a difficult, one hundred eighty degree turn in our thinking. I believe that if the majority of the day consisted of top-down, procedural tasks, it would be not only discordant but hypocritical to suddenly ask students to take the reins for an arbitrary 45-minute block of time.

There is a tone in classrooms, a hidden curriculum, that is initiated by the one in power—the teacher. It is the adult at the front of the room who students, quite literally, look to for signals of what is valued and what is rejected. In this scenario, the old adage of actions speaking louder than words is true. There is no use in instructing children to play in the classroom unless one is prepared to saturate the day with playfulness. This gets at the true importance in that library

interaction. That playfulness, like a knowing wink, sends the message to children, straight down from the people at the top, that it is *okay*. It is okay to let your guard down. It is okay to shift roles and perspectives. It is okay to be yourself. It is okay to play.

Week 8: *“And school, instead of eliminating possibilities, is providing opportunities.”*

It is now a somewhat regular routine that we begin our Explorations week with some planning and a check-in meeting. When you factor in the weekend, it has been a full three days since we were last at it. Experience has taught me that if we jump right in at the beginning of the week, most will spin their wheels for five to ten minutes anyway. We may as well use that time to actually record some plans, and maybe even reflections, in our Explorations Logs.

For whatever reason, today is more difficult than most days. I have set a timer for ten minutes, in which time they need to be jotting down their plans and reflections. At the buzzer, we will meet in a circle for a quick check-in. I use the timer because I do not want students coming to me after a few minutes saying, “I’m done.” Time, I have found, is a better agreement than number of lines or sentences. Some are faster writers, some need more thinking time—the expectation is that everyone puts in their best ten minutes. Usually, this works. Not today.

Today it feels as if we are killing time—letting the clock run down until Phase Two. I pipe up, provide a few verbal reminders to, “make sure you’re actually getting something down in your Explorations Logs,” but it is not resonating. I end up resorting to something I do not normally do—I tell a handful of students that they will have to return to their Explorations Logs when the rest of us begin Phase Two. Usually I avoid this. I do not want to position Explorations as a bonus—an extra students get to partake in only once the serious work is completed. Writing should not be punishment. Today, however, it is a natural consequence. We have talked, at

length, about the importance of documenting our learning during Explorations. It must get done before moving forward. I wish they could see the importance behind it.

There is some good that comes out of the planning. During our check-in meeting, Vincent announces to the class that they are starting a new movie and have decided upon a title, *The Bad Strikes Back*. It will be Star Wars themed and will involve Patrick. Patrick cannot help but smile.

The boys spend the first twenty minutes rehearsing a light sabre battle between the characters played by Vincent and Patrick. Although they are not yet filming, Mark still directs. He suggests an extra spin from Vincent, repositions Patrick so that he will not have his back to the camera, and reminds them both that their expressions should probably look like they are in a battle (there has been a lot of smiling up to this point).

Once they are comfortable with the scene, Mark takes out an iPad to begin filming. There are a few takes, which I note by hearing Mark yell “action” and “cut” a number of times, but Patrick is having trouble with some of the timing. Mark steps in to demonstrate, and Patrick asks, “Why don’t you just play this part?”

Mark trades Patrick the iPad for the light sabre, but he does not trade away his role as director. In the heat of battle, it is still Mark who voices the choreography. It seems more natural for him to do it from the centre of action anyway.

I can see that Patrick is satisfied with working the camera. He moves quietly and steadily about as the other two clash. He even improvises his own camera dolly in the form of a swivelling stool. By placing the iPad on the stool, not only is he able to hold it steady, but Patrick can now make smooth camera movements just by turning the stool top. Patrick looks comfortable, he looks content. He is finally filming Star Wars.

Over at the mats, Brittany is standing in for both Quinn and Luke this morning. Luke is away sick, and Quinn is one of the few who has been sent back to his Explorations Log. Stella and Ava are testing their knowledge of the boys' routine, trying not to look at their notes on the white board as they direct Brittany through each step. The girls remember the majority, but it is new to Brittany who is one step behind the music as she waits for the girls to call out the next movement.

"Timing, timing, Brittany!" calls out Quinn from across the room. His Explorations Log pushed aside, he watches Brittany run through *his* routine and cannot help to offer some pointers. Stella leaves Ava to direct Brittany and storms over to Quinn in annoyance, shouting out, "Quinn, get your Explorations Log done! We need you for the dance!" She sits next to him in an effort to keep him focused.

I look over Quinn's shoulder to see that he is still at two, simple sentences: "Today I am doing a dance with Luke, Stella, and Ava. It will be going to Explorcelebration." Stella is trying to nudge him on with some ideas. "Write about what's been challenging," she tries, offering one of my favourite suggestions. "Just give some details of the dance."

Stella and I are both distracted by a small group huddled around Brittany. We return to the mats to find that she has hurt her ankle. The mats had become a little crowded with a few others trying to practice and Brittany collided with another student. Helena is wrapping it up with a tensor bandage that, I believe, she got from Brittany's own backpack.

"Everybody kicks everybody," comments Ava.

I turn to Stella with a smirk, "Imagine if I'd let you do basket tosses?" She turns from me without smiling and attempts to clear everyone off of the mats and reset.

I go back to Quinn. He has added: “And it is hard. We have to memorize 4 minutes of the dance.” He looks up at me. “Alright, go work on your dance.” He throws his Explorations Log into the bin and races to the mats.

The *Challenges* group is centred around Garrett this morning. He has downloaded an application called “Soundboard” on his iPod and is putting it to use in their video. I had mistakenly taken it for a sound effects generator (Garrett would tap a button, a funny sound would emit), but Jay has corrected me. “They’re memes,” he says. All of the “sounds” are audio from viral videos on the internet. There is a high-pitched laugh, something about a taco, and several other noises that I cannot make out. Each one sends Jay, Patrick, and Garrett into knowing laughter. As far as their video goes (we are long past calling this a movie), the “challenge” is to lip synch one of the audio memes on camera.

I find myself thinking a lot about relationships this week. “Relationships are so important to this,” I write. For Jay, Duncan, and Garrett, their relationship with each other is central. These are three friends who, for various reasons, do not often see each other outside of school but truly value their time with each other. There is a strong element of togetherness in everything that they choose to do. The Lego, the YouTubing, these allow them the opportunity not just to hang out with each other, but to *interact*—to brainstorm, to make up rules—in a forum that is light hearted and is *theirs*. These are three soon-to-be teenagers who are engaged in their relationships with one another through play.

I spend a lot of energy convincing my students to, “Make an Explorations choice based on *your* interests, not your friends’.” I feel strongly about this idea. Develop your own values. Avoid mindlessly following others. These are important things. But what if your interests *are* (or at least *include*) your friends? Should that not be taken into account? Do we not also need to

support students in building relationships? I am starting to realise that I have not put enough consideration into relationships.

I recognise that while there is academic learning happening during play, there is also something bigger at work. For lack of a better term, I have often labeled that as personal development. Students are developing interests, responsibility, confidence, self-knowledge, critical thinking, and broadening their sense of the opportunities that are available to them. But perhaps I have too often thought of these things in isolation—qualities that each *individual* is developing rather than co-constructing with their peers. I would always have recognised “working together” as a skill to be developed through play, but I now believe that to be too narrow. Nobody exists in isolation. Students cannot develop a sense of self that is not in relation to others. Once again, context cannot be ignored.

I have always seen Duncan, for example, as following Jay, and I am often, gently, trying to steer him into making his own choices. But let us consider *why* Duncan may be following Jay. For starters, Duncan is new to the school this year. It was noted to me, by parents, that there had been some tension in his relationships with others (both classmates and teachers) at his previous school. I was also informed that Duncan had struggled academically and did not articulate positive feelings about school with his family. Jay is the opposite. Not only has he been academically successful, he has always presented a favourable attitude. Jay *likes* coming to school. If Duncan sees Jay as a friend to look up to, then he has made an astute choice. Jay is intelligent, confident, has a sense of humour, is genuinely kind, and has a positive relationship with school. The fact that Duncan chooses to follow Jay at Explorations should not be a surprise, and it should *certainly* not be something to battle against. He likely needs that relationship as

much, or more, than he needs the experience of whatever it is they are actually engaged in. Duncan needs opportunities for positive, school-based relationships.

And he is not alone in that. I look around the room and think about all the different relationships being constructed (and de-constructed), all with varied dynamics. There are Quinn and Luke, working with Stella and Ava even though they do not seem to socialise outside of Explorations. The boys continue to take orders from Stella in a situation I did not think they would ever put up with. Brittany and Rachel work through the ebb and flow of their lifelong connection through both school and family. One day they might be working together on a project, the next be literally at opposite ends of the room from one another. There is Kyle who swoops in and out of collaboration with Mark and Vincent, sometimes leading them to new ideas, other times leaving them (or being pushed out) due to disagreements. And there is Patrick, who actually moved *away* from his friends in order to pursue that elusive Star Wars movie. So maybe some of this takes care of itself. Maybe, at least most of the time, students *are* engaging with what is important to them, whether that is a particular pursuit, a relationship, or some combination of the two.

As the week wears on, most students are in a full press to have things ready for Explorcelebration. This lends a different vibe to the room—a little more focused, but also a little more tense. I can see it in Stella who, again, is testing her memory of the routine by running through it, this time with both Quinn and Luke, without looking at the whiteboard. She misses instructions for a cartwheel with Quinn, who remembers anyway and performs the move in time to the music. When it happens again, Luke cannot help but pipe up, “Wow! Maybe *we* should be teaching *them!*” Stella is not amused. “It’s been three months and they don’t know it yet,” he continues. Stella snaps at Luke and he gets back into position, but not without a little smile at the

corner of his mouth. I catch a smile on Ava's face too and she turns to try to hide it from Stella. I need to turn away too.

Explorcelebration is not the only thing staring us down from the future. Parents will be visiting the classroom as part of Student Led Conferences at the end of the week. We have used some of our Explorations time to thumb through our Explorations Logs and select an entry or two to share. I look forward to these sessions. They are an opportunity for the students to educate their families about Explorations by providing them with some specific Explorations examples, and maybe even begin a larger conversation about the importance of Explorations. By starting with their Explorations Log, students are supported by a three step approach to their sharing. They show their family the photos, read the entry, and then talk about it. This last step is crucial. Some students only have a few, basic lines written in their book, but it is enough to excite their memory and kick off a conversation.

Jay shares an entry with his mom that includes photos of the Challenges group at the end of the hallway. It includes a written piece that explains what they are doing, but Jay has also added speaking bubbles, like a comic strip, to each of the people in the photos. "We made this joke," he explains to his mom, "that in every picture we would have Garrett talk like a caveman." All of Garrett's dialogue contains stereotypical "caveman grammar" ("Garrett not understand iPad.") Jay laughs unreservedly at this while explaining it to his mom who, for her part, politely smiles. It reminds me that we really have created a world of play in the classroom, one that, without context, is a little hard to explain. I also see that subversiveness, by its very definition, does not translate very well into a formal setting.

A flash of that same feeling comes over me—that one I get when an adult pops their head into the room during our play and, without any context, likely thinks we are all crazy. With it

comes the urge to defend Jay's entry. But I do not. Jay has already moved the conversation past the goofy dialogue. He is opening up an iPad to show his mom a portion of the *Challenges* movie. Jay taps on the iMovie icon and the editing application opens up, its interface busy with video clips and virtual tools. Jay's mother is impressed before he even plays anything and begins asking questions about the technical aspects. They begin talking about *how* the boys put the whole thing together—splitting clips, zooming in and out, slowing shots down, adding visual and audio effects. Jay explains his technique as he might explain how he breathes or walks. Most of his sentences begin with, "Well, I just..." From his mother's perspective, Jay is working in another language which, I suppose, he is. It occurs to me that for all of the YouTubing Jay talks about doing at home, he has not shared his process with his mother before.

After a few minutes, they get around to watching the video. They both laugh, although Jay does a little louder and a little more often.

When I have a moment between conferences, I begin uploading students' movies from the iPads onto our classroom computer. Many plan to screen their work on the "Big Screen" of our classroom projector for Explorcelebration. I start with the *Challenges* movie, and while I may not laugh through the whole thing (clearly, there is still much I do not "get"), I find it impossible not to smile every time Duncan smiles. He looks so comfortable, so happy, with those boys, at the end of the hallway, in their space. I upload Brittany and Rachel's *Hurt* vlogs. I listen to them describe, with detail and increasing briskness, all of their injuries. I watch as they "interview" their classmates—pulling each in front of the camera for a brief moment, introducing them and explaining their connection to them. I even see my own face during this segment. I move on to *The Break In 2*. As promised, there is no blood, no explicit violence, no mention of heroin, just lots of shots of Edwin wandering around, a crazed look in his eye, and the red, plastic

hatchet in his hand. There are also some effective cuts of dialogue between Mark and Vincent's characters. And in just about every scene you can see and hear the rest of the class in the background—our painters and gymnasts and animators all busy at play.

I chuckle to myself as I upload a couple of opening scenes from *The Bad Strikes Back*, the new Star Wars undertaking. Like *The Break In 2* it is filled with background interference, and a reminder of the limitations I wrote about at the beginning of this research window. Mark and Vincent walk through the classroom, light sabres in hand, Patrick following them with the camera. I believe they are discussing how to defeat the evil empire but it is difficult to hear them over the music of the gymnastics routine, and, I admit, I am more drawn to the background footage of their classmates that they have accidentally documented.

And it hits me. I drop the iPad, grab a pen, and scrawl in my notebook, "Whoa. These movies, *they* are their stories. They've been documenting this whole time." Both deliberately and accidentally, a record of our play has been captured within these half dozen iPads: Brittany and Rachel, keeping a living journal; Jay and the gang, a visual gag reel; Mark and his crew, an inadvertent video archive. All of the filming of trick shots, the "Try Not to Laugh" videos, the iPad camera was rolling in order to capture what would have otherwise slipped away. Stella's gymnastics group *were* never considering their footage as an instruction video. I had wondered, (long after they dropped the pretence that their gymnastics would turn into some sort of movie) why an iPad would still occasionally be out, propped up against some piece of furnishing, filming cartwheels and backbends. It is a way to collect an instant and automatic record of their lives. A way to stay fully immersed in the present, and then crowd around that little iPad screen to live that moment all over again.

I have been so focused on contextualising their play in time. Where can you trace your idea back to? Where is it all going? There were those reflection sheets: Explorations Past, Present, and Future. I have been pushing documentation so hard all while questioning their “YouTubing” and looking for their movie-making plans. But they are not making movies, they are *documenting*—themselves, their friendships, their lives in school.

All along they have lived in the present. They are exactly where they should be, and all of my meddling with them, spurring them forward then reeling them back in, has, thankfully, had less of an impact than intended.

So, am I wrong? Should their Explorations Logs be tossed aside? Shall we all tear them apart in some grand gesture of freedom? Well, no. Naturally, my students are going to value the play itself over the talking and writing about play, just as I, the teacher, seem to value the meaning of the play, the “so what?”, over the play itself. These are our roles. It would almost be irresponsible of us not to follow them (and in my case, I think you could drop the “almost”).

Helping to turn their attention is part of my role. I must support them in making connections—help them to see the greater picture of how their play fits into their learning and identity. If I do not, then who will? The fact that many will not yet on their own, should give me all the more reason.

But I must also remember to allow them to live in the present. School is not a preparation for life, it *is* life, and watching them gather around that small screen talking and laughing about whatever shenanigans ensued mere minutes before, reminds me of that. It reminds me too, that documenting our learning can happen in many unexpected ways. They have not been avoiding it, they have been doing it all along.

Conferences continue the next morning. Mark is in with his mother. Before they begin, his mother approaches me and tells me how much Mark has enjoyed school this year, how that had not been the case in the past, and how pleased (and relieved) she is about everything. She tells me how excited he is at home to talk about all of the “projects” he works on in class. Mark interrupts us. He has retrieved his iPad from the cart and is anxious to show his mom *The Break In 2* and early footage of *The Bad Strikes Back*. It is the play itself, not all of this talk about play, that Mark really wants to get to. I step aside and let him do that.

* * *

This is the final day of my research window. We do not know what happens next—with Mark, with the rest of the class. Exploration will come and go next week. We will share and laugh and celebrate, and then we will continue forward. We cannot see any further into this school year, we do not know what comes in later years. What if, as written in his Explorations Log, Mark *does* become a director? The opportunity to play in school will have delivered him to his future career. Would that not *completely* change my findings? Should it?

We may not know the future but we are immersed in our present. It is my students who seem to understand this most deeply. “Whether Mark becomes a director or not,” I write, “doesn’t matter because it hasn’t happened yet.” His experience, *their* experiences, right now, are what we are living. Our classroom play has Mark thinking about what is possible, and school, instead of eliminating possibilities, is providing opportunities.

What comes later can be considered later. Right now, Mark *is* a director. Within the walls of our classroom, Jay is already a famous YouTuber. Kyle is an inquiring scientist. Ava is a teacher. We are painters and dancers, animators and vloggers. “I am a cheerleader,” Stella has stated and, because of play, she is.

So maybe, Stella, maybe we *can* play. And maybe we will not always know what will come of it, and certainly we will have our restrictions (there will be no basket tosses), and there will be moments where it will feel like we are wasting time. But with that play will come communication, honesty, trust, and a willingness to remain open to possibilities.

Because in the end, Stella, it is you, next week during Explorcelebration, who will put it best. When Luke and Quinn have finished their dance, and have taken their dramatic bows, a classmate will ask you, “Why did you do this?” And you will need to think for a moment. Your face will betray your uncertainty. But before Ava or Luke or Quinn or anyone else fills the silence you will say, “We didn’t know we would stick to this for that long.” You will shrug your shoulders and, I think, allow a hint of a smile to cross your face, and then you will sum up play in a way that I was unable to do for you—“It just kind of happened.”

Chapter 5: Discussion

In writing this narrative, I attempted not only to document the play that was happening in our classroom, but to reveal some of the meaning behind it along the way. It is my hope that the narrative itself, along with providing a particular snapshot of classroom play, was able to unpack some of the pedagogy behind it. However, I have yet to directly respond to my research puzzle: What does play look like in a grades four and five classroom and what potential might it hold? In this chapter, I will begin by discussing the research puzzle in light of our classroom play. I will then consider a lingering question from the narrative that has yet to be satisfactorily addressed: Even if play holds value for children, does it need to happen at school?

Reflecting on the Research Puzzle

It is somewhat ironic that I have questioned what play “looks” like as, I think, to understand play in a particular setting, one must extend past what one is seeing on the surface. According to Gray (2017), “play cannot be defined in terms of the motor activities involved; it must be defined in terms of the motives and attitudes that underlie the activities” (p. 219). I would not pretend to know play by what I saw physically happening in our classroom—play cannot, of course, be defined as gymnastics, or YouTubing, or whacking snow blocks with a hockey stick. Instead, a picture of play emerges from a consideration of what unseen qualities these pursuits may share. What prominent themes and qualities continued to surface during the 8-week research window?

Our Play is Social

For these nine to eleven year-olds, play is social. This was a predominant theme in the classroom. *Who* students played with often seemed to matter as much or more than *what* students played at. Planning sessions usually began with a small group looking for an idea, rather than an

individual with an idea looking for a group. While there were exceptions to this order of proceeding (Patrick pulling away from Jay's group in order to resurrect *Star Wars* and Vincent jumping in to animate with Brittany come to mind) very little of the play I observed was solitary. Even those involved in individual pursuits such as painting, drawing, or writing, often chose to sit in close proximity to a peer, casually conversing or bouncing ideas off of one another. They were also just as likely to participate in our whole-class sharing sessions.

Providing face-to-face, social opportunities for children is critical as shared, unstructured time with contemporaries has declined (Gray, 2011 & 2017; Harris, 2014). Studies have shown that children prefer active, social play to solitary activities such as watching television or playing electronic games (Gray, 2011). Given a forum in which to play, children will likely choose to be social. This showed itself to be true in our classroom setting.

To sustain social play, children must practice key interpersonal skills. Players must continually attend to one another's ideas, interests, and emotions. This makes play an ideal setting for the development of social skills as it is, "children's natural means of making friends" (Gray, 2011, p. 457). Children are drawn to play with others but, in free play settings, play is voluntary. Children must work to support everyone's needs and interests as players are free to quit at any time. Stella and Ava must check themselves, for if they are too bossy or dominant Luke and Quinn, or others, may choose to abandon the play. There were numerous instances of students proclaiming to "quit" when groups could not mediate their ideas. Often these differences would later be negotiated and the play would continue.

Sociality in play allows children to glimpse and ponder their reflection in the world. No individual self exists in a vacuum. All actions are in relation to and have an effect on others. Social engagements, through play, become a continuous co-construction of children's identities.

Our Play is Busy and Loud

A byproduct of all of this socialising was that play in our classroom was often busy and loud. Perhaps play is easier to recognise if we listen rather than look for it. Prominent in my earliest field notes are examples of movement and noise—the shuffling of desks and setting-up of gym mats; loud voices of collaboration among groups; even those engaged in more solitary pursuits were often standing, gathering supplies, and talking with others. There was regularly a busy energy, a buzz that felt heavier than other times in our day. There was vitality in the classroom and it could be heard.

Providing an opportunity for children to talk and move in the classroom runs counter to the traditional view of students sitting in orderly rows, speaking only when called upon by the teacher. Instead, hearing children's voices aligns with the postmodern concept of social constructivism. In a play environment, children are active, rather than passive, in voice, body, and mind. They construct identities within a group context as they, quite literally, find their voice in the crowd. That busyness during Explorations is the product of children figuring out who they are in the context of their classmates, the classroom, and their world.

All of that movement may also be helping to fill a need to be physically active. This was touched upon in the narrative when considering the motivations of the gymnastics groups as well as the observation that many students were choosing to stand instead of sit. While examples of vigorous exertion in our classroom were limited to the students involved in gymnastics, for most, Explorations was the most physically active time spent in the classroom.

While play in the classroom may not always result in a full-on sweat, it is, at the very least, keeping children from remaining sedentary in the classroom. There is general concern about the rise in childhood obesity (Gray, 2011) and its likeliness to continue into adulthood

(Everley & Macfayden, 2017). Some schools are increasing the amount of physical education classes or implementing structured activity breaks (Everley & Macfayden, 2017, p. 153). While these enhancements, “may improve activity levels during the school day, because of their mandatory nature, they do not necessarily encourage children towards a more active lifestyle” (Everley & Macfayden, 2017). Not all children are going to choose to play sports outside of school, but the majority will choose active, social play with friends (Everley & Macfayden, 2017; Gray, 2011). Our ideas around physical activity need to expand. General movement should be part of a child’s lifestyle. As educators, we can contribute to these good habits by including classroom play.

Our Play is Messy and Unpredictable

While movement and noise could easily be observed as a tangible energy in the classroom, there was something else adding to the buzz of play. My feeling is that, just below the surface of our classroom play, there is a sustained anticipation of the unknown. This includes both the potential for gratification as well as the possibility of disappointment. This is because play in our classroom is messy and unpredictable.

Because students’ Explorations pursuits had no mandatory product, it was never certain where one was going. The gymnastics group lived through much uncertainty on their journey, and Kyle often switched engagements each Explorations, if not within the same period. Even when students had a set product in mind, such as the group that began by developing a Star Wars movie, plans regularly changed. I believe this uncertainty contributed to the sometimes frenzied pace of students’ play—the concern that if they do not race to reach a destination that it may cease to exist. However, it also adds to the spontaneity of play—a spontaneity that is instrumental in play’s novelty and engagement. That promise of the unknown creates an, “open-

ended exploration in which the participant is absorbed in the spontaneity of the experience” (Ortlieb, 2010, p. 241).

The absence of outcomes in play allows students to focus on the process of learning —“means are valued over ends” (Gray, 2017, p. 221). There is no longer the distraction or, “worry about getting the wrong answer or having to select the correct choice on a multiple-choice examination” (Ortlieb, 2010, p. 244). Learning and growth can be constructed without limits or consequences of failure which allows for greater experimentation and consideration of various possibilities (Gray, 2017). As noted in the final week of the narrative, through play, school, instead of eliminating possibilities, is providing opportunities. What powerful potential this shift in thinking holds.

But the unpredictability of play is just that—unpredictable. While certain play choices resulted in powerful moments, others fizzled out. Allowing children to play means inviting moments of back-tracking, cognitive wheel spinning, and potential dead ends. This can feel uncomfortable in the classroom, a place where traditional teaching and curriculum is based on outcomes. Play turns this on its ear, allowing for a pedagogy of social constructivism. With this view, activities without a product do not need to be considered dead ends. It is the engagement itself, the process, in relation to the people and space that allows for the continuing construction of learning and identity.

Our Play is Emotional

It was rare to be present in that buzz of our classroom play and be apathetic. In fact, I would argue that the few examples of indifference from students, such as Rachel watching the gymnasts or Easton wandering around between science experiments, only occurred when a child was still searching for something to engage with—was not yet playing. Once at play, we were

emotionally charged. This was not a surprise to me since, as noted in the literature, play is strongly associated with joy. However, equating our play emotions with joy alone would form an incomplete picture. Yes, there was laughter in our play, but there were also arguments and exasperation. Many emotions, including those we might traditionally consider both positive and negative, come to the surface during play. There was the uncontrollable giggling that Duncan regularly fell into, the sighs and eye-rolling from Stella during challenging routines, and the disappointment from Patrick, and others, when the movie-making was falling apart. Conversations were often tense and sped up. Students wedged their voices in where they could and were wary to pause unless another voice filled their place.

Play *is not* all fun and games. When something of personal value is being pursued, there is potential for joy, yes, but also for fear, frustration, conflict, and disappointment. This is a likely factor as to why, as wrestled with in week seven, play is not always comfortable. But to be uncomfortable in a safe space—what an ideal environment for children to experience a range of emotions. Gray (2011) goes so far as to argue that, “without play, young people fail to acquire the social and emotional skills necessary for healthy psychological development” (p. 444). There is even a correlation between the decline in play and mental health among children over the last several decades (Gray, 2011). While this is not a causal link, it is a logical inference that play, with all of its social, busy, unpredictable, and personally invested qualities, is an ideal environment for children to learn to recognise their emotions. As Ortlieb (2010) states, “playing allows humans to stay mentally and physically healthy” (p. 244). In fact, lack of play has such huge consequences that Gray (2011) sees it as, “the factor that has most directly caused the decline in children’s mental health” (p. 453).

All of this is not to take away from the pleasure that came of our play during Explorations. Seeing it on the schedule was often met with cheers and group sharing sessions were the place of regular laughter. More than one family expressed to me how important Explorations was to their child. Is this not something worthwhile in and of itself—should children’s joy not be a factor in how we choose to structure our school day? Gray (2011) worries that, “we have increasingly forced [children and adolescents] into settings that make them unhappy and anxious and have deprived them of the activities that make them happy” (p. 458). Children do not constitute a hollow audience in our classroom. They are fully emotional, individual, beings. It is our moral obligation to consider this in all of our decision making.

Our Play Demands a Responsive Teacher

Inviting busyness, noise, unpredictability, and strong emotions into the classroom is not the path of least resistance. As a teacher, it would likely be easier, or at least more predictable, to transmit information, hand out worksheets, and grade tests—to “teach.” Yet, when I have discussed Explorations with colleagues or prospective teachers they are often surprised to hear me refer to it as the most demanding time in my day. There is an impression, by some, that if students are following their desired pursuits and making their own decisions then there is very little left for the teacher to do. It is as though it is believed that only a finite amount of activity can happen in a classroom and if the students are doing more, then the teacher must be doing less. I hope that this narrative has illustrated that it may in fact be the opposite. Demanding more from students demands more from teachers. Play comes with infinite possibilities, which asks the teacher to respond, in the moment, to any one of these. During Explorations, I often feel that I am giving up some control to students but still ultimately, as the teacher, need to be in charge of the classroom.

Those educators who do recognise the complexity of play may be scared off by that very fact. Play does not necessarily lead to a product and this, by definition, makes it unproductive. This potential for a perceived lack of accountability is, I believe, what makes many teachers, school administrators, and curriculum developers leery about play infiltrating their schools. Ortlieb (2010) writes that because of its “plasticity... educators are often frightened at the prospect of using play within their instruction” (p. 241). Even I, someone who not only schedules regular time for play in his classroom, but chooses to write a thesis on it, found myself with doubts and consideration over outcomes during the research window. I was conscious of other teachers’ impressions, struggled with the early spinning of wheels from the gymnastics group, and, I will admit, *really* wanted Jay and his friends to produce a Star Wars movie. While I was most concerned with engagement in a worthwhile pursuit, Ortlieb (2010) notes educators’ other common fears about play such as the difficulty of grading without a product, the lack of predetermined outcomes, and the time taken away from direct instruction. In my anecdotal experiences with colleagues, many recognise and value the benefits of play but have enough hesitations around accountability to fall short of committing it to practice. These conversations leave me dismayed—that professional educators see the value of a particular approach but are unwilling or unable to put it into practice because of, perceived or real, outside pressures. It is a conundrum that the same spontaneity that makes play so powerful for learners also makes it too risky for many classrooms.

Our Play Makes us Players

I contend that the most significant quality of play I observed was that through play, students became *players*. This was evident, of course, in the regular decision making and active engagement displayed by students during their play, but it may have been most telling in its

details. I think of the way that the gymnasts would move furniture and stack their shoes on a shelf, claiming their space in the classroom, or how Mark could be heard yelling “action” and “cut”, confidently but kindly leading his actors through a scene. Even those who were eager to push things a little too far (the basket-tosses, slap challenges, and homicidal fathers) must have felt fully in charge of their own learning to even consider these possibilities.

During those hours of Explorations, and any remnant times throughout the day, each individual became the protagonist of their own world. While it may sound self-evident to state that one is the protagonist of one’s own world, we cannot take this for granted in the case of children. A study conducted by Twenge, Zhang, and Im (2004) found that, “children, even those as young as age 9, increasingly feel that their lives are controlled by outside forces rather than their own efforts” (p. 315). Think about the number of decisions that are made *for* children at school: when to arrive, where to go, what to study, when to eat, and, quite often, when to speak, where to sit, and when to go to the bathroom. This does not even take into consideration the lack of input they may have at home. Children who do not have opportunities to take on an active, decision making role, “grow up feeling that they are not in control of their own lives and fate” (Gray, 2011, p. 455).

As I alluded to during my “Weekend Interlude,” strengthening our ability to play with the world may be akin to strengthening our immunity to being played *by* it. Play is an act of rebellion—a basket-toss to passivity, a slap challenge to boredom. Once upon a time, it was boredom that may have forced us into play, but now there are too many pacifiers ready to jump in and fill that potentially active space into one of disconnect. Why look up and interact with the world when there is a portable computer in your pocket? We are at risk of defaulting to the easiest option, and the easiest option is *not* play. If we want to reclaim boredom as a creative

force instead of a soul-sucking vacuum, we need to fortify the act of play. As a teacher, my place to do this is in the classroom.

Play Belongs in the Classroom

For the whole of this research window, and throughout my teaching career, a question continued to bother me—one that I could not shake and, at times, chose to ignore. While there are continuous, difficult judgements to be made during the course of play, I have always depended on my ability to, while not always get things right, at least justify my decision as a professional. I have never been at a loss to provide a run-down of the benefits of play. But that only takes us so far. Even if I can show that play is crucial to children’s learning, developing, and being, the question, the one that I have avoided eye contact with for so long, remains—just because play is important, does it need to happen at school? By working through this narrative inquiry, I now feel able to address this question—it does.

A large argument against play in school is that it already happens at home. This is a stance which is often taken even by those who are proponents of play in general. In my experience, the idea that children already play at home is used as the silver bullet to shoot down play in the classroom. Ortlieb (2010), though not in agreement, states this position as, “there cannot be a valid reason in allowing children to play in class if they do it all the time outside of class” (p. 242-243). Perhaps, but this rests on the assumption that children are playing freely at home. Are they?

Recent studies have actually shown a decrease in children’s time spent on free play (Gray, 2011, 2017; Harris, 2014). Based on historical analyses, diary studies, and surveys, Gray (2017) concludes that there has been a “huge decline in children’s opportunities and freedom to play—to really play, with other children, in their own ways, without adult interference” (p. 225).

Among other reasons, such as a fear of allowing children to play outside, increased involvement in organised sports and clubs, and decreasing familiarity with neighbours (Gray, 2017), school itself is to be blamed. Gray (2011) states that “children now spend more time at school, and at school they spend less time playing, than was true in times past” (p. 447). Added to this is a general increase in homework as students move towards middle school. If school is part of the problem, should it not be obliged to be part of the solution? If more and more of children’s time has adults’ fingerprints all over it, then we must make a conscious decision to give some back. School is a place where we can do this.

My own students’ situations seem to fall in line with the research on declining play. Most of our “Monday Meetings,” in which we hear about each other’s weekends, are filled with stories about organised hockey, dance classes, or individual pursuits such as video-games. Usually, when students get together outside of school, the children themselves refer to these times as “play dates.” Even this play is a scheduled, and organised event. I have even had a student share that he plays video games with a friend, but they do it online, each at their own home, because if they were physically together the television would have to display their game on a split screen.

I also began to realise that while my students’ Explorations choices were sometimes extensions of pursuits from outside of school, the classroom setting provided additional layers. One could argue, for example, that Stella already gets to participate in cheerleading outside of school. However, what was happening outside of school and at school were two completely different experiences. As demonstrated by the video her mother provided, as well as Stella’s own sharing, her role in cheerleading was as a junior member. She followed directions and practiced organised choreography. While this carried its own significance for her, it was not the play that

was happening in the classroom. At school, the script was flipped and Stella was the one making the decisions and calling the shots.

Jay's YouTubing took on a different twist in class as well. While he did create videos at home, they were solitary undertakings. School provided the social dynamic as well as the challenges and rewards that come with it. When showing his videos to his mom, it also became apparent that his home video making was never shared. At school, not only did he get to work through the making of videos with others, he was able to share the process in a whole-class setting. For Jay and Stella, outside interests made their way into the classroom where they became a source for play.

Evidence, both in the literature and anecdotally among students, does not support the argument that play is a regular occurrence outside of school. But even if it were, or for the minority of children for whom it is, would that be reason enough to exclude play from school? To think that schooling should be organised only around those specific skills that might otherwise be missing, skills which would prepare young people to one day become responsible contributors to our political and economic system, is a rather troubling view of education as it is one that fails to imagine the greater potential that schools could have.

Schools are places of people. Have we forgotten that? At times we seem to be so focused on *what* is being taught that we lose sight of *who* we are pushing it on. Our schools exist because of our children, should they not be central to our decision making? Decision making regarding education is both a democratic and ethical act and needs to be seen as such. Above all other reasons, play belongs in school because, both politically and ethically, *it is the right thing to do*.

In democratic countries such as ours, where is the democratic space for children? We know it is not in the voting booth. We cannot assume it is around the dinner table. If our

classrooms are places of top-down curriculum where decisions are being made by forces outside of the building or exclusively by the teacher then we cannot call our schools places of democracy either. This is a missed opportunity—a tragic underestimation of the power of schools and of children.

Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) argue that it is the role of public schools to act as a venue for democracy. They imagine schools as forums in civil society, “in which children and adults participate together in projects of social, cultural, political and economic significance” (1999, p. 73). This is far from a given, however, and is instead a scenario that schools must actively choose and work towards. Schools as forums in civil society must carry a pedagogy that acknowledges:

that the child is co-constructing knowledge, not being taught an existing corpus of knowledge; and that producing knowledge, making meaning, is done in relationship with other co-constructors, both adults and children, who must not only take the young child’s ideas and theories seriously, but be ready to confront and challenge them. (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 76)

If our teachers are not providing a space for children to construct meaning and then considering and responding to that meaning, then we cannot pretend that our schools are places of democracy.

Play, as understood in this narrative inquiry, is a crucial component of this vision of schooling. Through play, my students were active co-constructors. More than just acquiring pre-determined skills and knowledge, they became autonomous learners, making sense of themselves, the world, and themselves *within* the world all in relation to others. They were engaged in what Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) would refer to as the discourse of meaning

making which, “not only adopts a social constructionist perspective, but relates to an understanding of learning as a process of co-construction, by which in relationship with others we make meaning of the world” (p. 107). A discourse of meaning making, practiced through play, is one of the means through which schools can become more democratic places for both teachers and students.

Through their play, my students were, “audible and visible” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 85). They had a presence in the classroom. And while play provided a space for students’ identities to emerge and evolve, it kept individualism in check. Self-absorption is avoided during play because children’s identities are always positioned in a social context which leads to the need for continuous compromise in order to keep the play going. Luke and Quinn had to grit through the “conditioning” sessions to be included in gymnastics, but Stella and Ava needed to be careful not to go so far as to drive them away. There was a fine line to find and walk in every moment. The act of play requires this kind of consideration of the Other. Individuals actively situating within and contributing to a group is part of democracy. Through play in the classroom we were able to move closer to Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence’s (1999) idea of school as a forum in civil society.

Promoting a democratic school, a public forum rather than a knowledge factory, respects a postmodern view of ethics, a view that is missing in much of the current approaches to schooling. Instead, according to Dahlberg and Moss (2005), “a universalistic ethical approach underlies much policy and practice in the early childhood field” (p. 67). This universal stance on ethics carries with it a black and white, abstract viewpoint of right and wrong dictated, “by some supra-individual agency or by experts acting as legislators who prescribe what needs to be done” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 68). This approach is apparent in the push for greater

uniformity in public schools, taking, “the form of curricula, goals and targets, standards, quality measures, standardised measures of assessment” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 67). Thus, decisions are readymade not just for students but for teachers as well—a safe and comfortable handing down of curriculum to passive students.

Postmodern ethics does not seek out an eternal truth. Instead, ethics is an active process which values, “responsibility, relationships, situatedness, and otherness” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 69). Ethics are approached by individuals in particular situations, rather than outsiders applying blanket principles. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) contend that this change, “offers the possibility to re-personalise ethics and assume the responsibility which comes from facing and making choices rather than following universal codes or laws” (p. 70). Being so tied to context, the decision making in play can only be made by the students and teachers who are physically present.

A postmodern perspective would view ethics in education as being, “built from the bottom up, through negotiation” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 72), among the students and teachers in the school. Of course, this practice has the potential to look different in every classroom. The “uncertainty, messiness and provisionality of decision making” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 69) is acknowledged and, indeed, central to the experience. To many, I believe this is a potentially scary idea. I think back to my own reflection during week seven of the narrative that, “I’m never quite comfortable at Explorations.” It is easier, perhaps, to merely apply decisions made by others rather than to make those judgements together with students. But this, according to Dahlberg & Moss (2005), is when, “the ethical becomes the technical” (p. 70). We must ask more of our schools. We must ask more of ourselves. We must ask more of our students.

Including play in the classroom fosters an ethical life. It demands that those who are *present* tackle critical decisions and, “not attempt to reduce what is going on to fit preconceived categorical criteria” (Dahlberg, Pence, & Moss, 1999, p. 109). Because play is open-ended, we are unable to make absolute statements about what one will pursue. Instead, we must together examine each decision along the way. We can begin with general expectations for a time like Explorations, such as students being engaged in something of value, but we must constantly be in negotiation of what it is we value. And as we have seen, these decisions during play, whether by the teacher, the student, or in negotiation, “are ambivalent and uncertain, they are often provisional and contested” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 71).

As I remarked during week one, every decision around play is “on probation.” Quite frankly, it can be exhausting to examine and re-examine each situation in context. Still, I cannot avoid a conversation about weapons and drugs with Mark. Stella must struggle to justify bringing mats up from the gym every day. Jay and I will be locked in an ongoing and, at times, unspoken debate between filmmaking and YouTubing. And I might feel a few beads of sweat run down my brow when colleagues and parents poke their heads in the door to see ten year-olds playing with building blocks. But these are indicators that we are *living* our ethics in the classroom. A pedagogy of play makes our classroom social, busy, loud, messy, unpredictable, emotional, and personal because we are doing the work of meaning making. We are challenging each other to think critically about how we live our lives in school. Our play is a reflection of the values of democracy.

Conclusion

“It just kind of happened.” These were Stella’s words, spoken so simply, offered with a matter-of-fact shrug, yet so directly insightful. School is not normally seen as a place where things can “just happen.” There are outcomes and standards to abide by. There is an expectation that we are accountable for every moment.

Does that mean that our classrooms needs to be inflexible? Accountability, a term that may come with negative connotations, is not an inherently restrictive thing. The question needs to be what, or perhaps more importantly *who*, we are accountable for. Is it our students? Are we ensuring that school is designed with their best interests in mind? I am happy to be accountable for providing a democratic space in which students can construct meaning within the relationships that connect them. I call this play.

We need Stella to know that she *can* play at school. We owe it to her to create a space in which things *can*, “just happen”—a place of learning that includes possibility and not just prescription—that includes the personal and not just the procedural. When we are playful, we invite intrigue and surprise, harbingers of curiosity, back into the classroom. We give children their voices. Our schools begin to reflect the people situated within as we take up the work of democracy in public forums. We become accountable for creating an ethical classroom.

We cannot risk play becoming a dying art. There is too much at stake. As educators, we have an entire school system in which to find play a home. As such, I believe it is our moral obligation to do so.

Stella reminded us that in play things can, “just happen,” but without our advocacy, without a conversation with her and with others, play *itself* may not “just happen.”

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Figure A. Field Text Sample

Feb. 17

- [redacted] template to write a script for his YouTube video at home

[redacted] → I'm not getting b/c they actually gave me an opportunity to do something with them

[redacted] you said you weren't doing it today"

[redacted] and getting some writing in and helping him edit

[redacted] - Waterloo painting (they all wanted to finish her French) - I criticized them for making choices based on those friends, but it's that right of me!

[redacted] sitting with her notebook like a coach/judge

- all criticism and pissiness

- she and [redacted] had the gym

- "you guys need to watch and learn. You're looking around and not listening. That's why you're not learning anything."

- the way you're communicating to us is with this group, but it feels like there's more!

- M [redacted] leads did something else rather than movie prep.

- [redacted] playing music while they play *Don't Worry*

- → Age of Core Part II ([redacted] script which I should look up)

- B to E - all of the training is going into a gymnastics/dance routine for Exhale. The idea is that [redacted] and [redacted] will have been framed. I wonder if the movement feels good for those two fidgeters.

- Today felt more like a day than some other days

- [redacted] = published his comic (very proud!)

- [redacted] and [redacted] literally just played with some Lego

*Figure B. Interim Text Sample*Wednesday, February 23

Man. Sharing is so important. More often than not, when I'm not sure if something is a very worthwhile choice, once I hear students share and talk about it, there is more value than I had thought. Today, the Lego group is a good example of this. ___/___/___ were planning to work on their challenges movie. The iPad wasn't charged. They tried plugging it in in the hallway, I thought they were all set up, but they were back in the classroom after about five minutes saying, "We're just going to play Lego today". The four of them then sat at a round table, made Bey Blade like things, and spun and crashed them into each other. Since Lego was a choice, I let them keep going, but I was really disappointed that they weren't working on the movie. Then, in the afternoon, they shared and I realized that it was pure play. ___ explained that it was a tournament to see which one could survive. I asked, "Were there any rules?" "Not to building", he said, "but there were rules to the tournament. If a piece broke off yours you couldn't put it back on (unless it was the piece you hold to spin or the bottom piece that it spins on)." By request, they demonstrated to the class and most were pretty enthusiastic. This was the pure type of play that I talked about in my weekend thoughts. They had to make up and negotiate their own rules. However, the question remains... does this fit into school and what is my role in it?

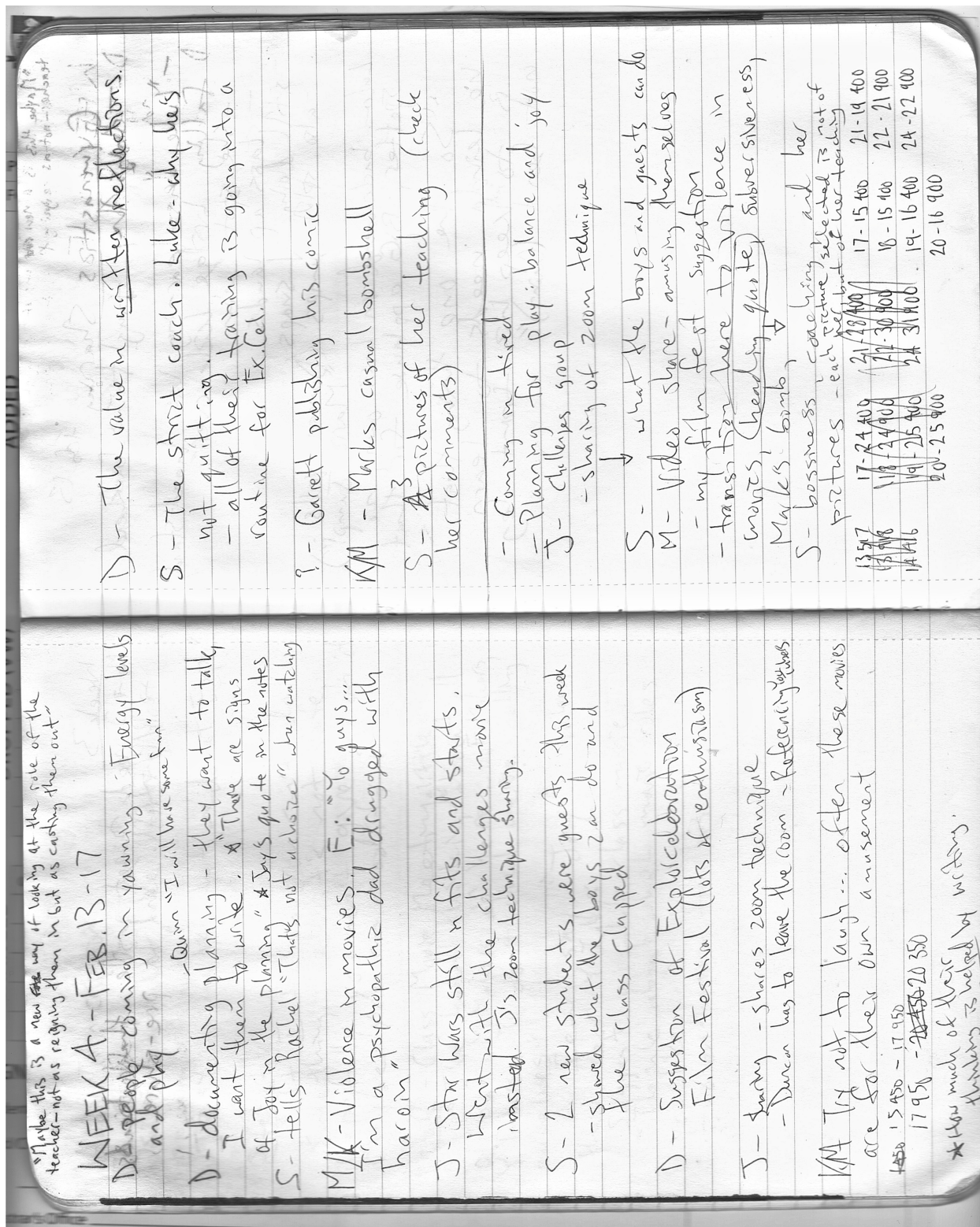
___ and ___ animation - Here's something I tried to push. I think stop-motion animation is cool. Anyone can do it, but you have to be really good to do it well... or do it differently. Well, these two (and ___) were interested. That's probably worth it. It could be that the others are just interested in what they were already doing... which is good.

Boys and "appropriateness in school"- So this one had been bugging me for a bit. ___/___/___ are totally into this movie... doing some great stuff. But, some of the content in their movie has been bugging me a bit. It's horror, so there's some violence. Is it okay for them to film movies that we wouldn't let them watch in school? Turns out, ___ is the dad who was drugged with heroin (this from the mind of ___). Next thing I know, ___'s brought in a toy axe to use in the movie. I decided I needed to talk to them about this (two of our criteria points is that their Expl. choice must be "safe" and "school appropriate"... two I think I almost didn't mention for fear of it seeming too obvious). So... I went to talk with them today and before I could even begin, they told me that they realized they can't have heroin in a school movie... instead ___ has decided that the character just has amnesia ("And that's why he went psycho"). They also suggested that they

only use the blunt end of the axe, and have any violence off screen or only implied. And somehow... I feel like that's okay... but that will be an ongoing decision. I wish I had J. Miles this year. I would love, so much, to spend an entire Expl with that movie group, just helping them with sound, location, etc. I'm running between "groups" right now, hitting everyone, but not spending quality time with anyone.

***Hmmm... my play or their play? Wait, there's a problem here. *I just defined play for them.* Like it or not, right or not, they are truly bringing themselves into the classroom... the YouTubers, the Cheerleaders, The injury prone vloggers. This is them. But... does that make the other parts of school harder for them? Is Explorations too compartmentalized?

Figure C. Narrative Organisation Sample





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OF MANITOBA

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January, 2017

Dear [REDACTED] Parents/Guardians,

As some of you may be aware, I am currently working on a thesis as part of a Masters of Education degree at the University of Manitoba. My thesis is a narrative inquiry that will explore the educational significance of play in a grades four and five classroom. I am writing to seek parental consent and student assent to refer to classroom documentation in this thesis. This would be documentation *that is already being collected* for classroom use during Explorations periods (including student conversations, journalling, and work samples; non-identifying photographs and/or videos; and my own observational notes). No new or artificial classroom engagements will be planned for students for this study as it will occur within the existing context of classroom life. In short, I am asking for your permission to refer anonymously to classroom documentation involving your child in the writing of my thesis.

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach in which the researcher, or narrative inquirer, attempts to construct an understanding of human experience through the stories of the participants in his or her study. Some of the questions I hope to explore include: What does classroom play look like as early years bridges to middle years and what significance might it hold for students? What role does play have in terms of student learning, creativity, development, personal growth, identity, relationships, and well-being? The resulting thesis will contain a narrative of students' experiences of play and a discussion of the role of play in school in general.

Your permission for me to use documentation involving your child must be given voluntarily. In order to relieve any potential pressure, your consent forms will be returned to the school office (not to me) in a sealed envelope where it will remain until the end of the school year. At this time I will open the envelopes and compile documentation *only for the students for whom permission was granted*. If at any point you change your mind regarding consent, you are free to withdraw your permission by contacting [REDACTED] ([REDACTED]) or, if it is after June 30, you may contact me via email.

This research has been approved by the University of Manitoba Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB) as well as the school principal, [REDACTED] and Seven Oaks School

████████ Assistant Superintendent, ██████████. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you are welcome to contact ██████████ (██████████, ██████████), the Human Ethics Coordinator at the University of Manitoba (204 472 7122, humanethics@umanitoba.ca) or my thesis advisor with the University of Manitoba, Dr. Melanie Janzen (204 474 9015, Melanie.Janzen@umanitoba.ca).

You are also welcome to contact me at the school (██████████, ██████████) for further information or with any questions you may have. In addition, I have scheduled a parent information evening at the school on Tuesday, January 17, 2017. Please see the attached information for more detail if you wish to attend.

Attached you will find two copies of the consent and assent form (one to be turned in and one for your records), a request for a copy of the completed thesis, and suggestions about how to discuss the study with your child. Please read and discuss these forms. When you are ready, please return a copy of the consent and assent forms (sealed in the provided envelope) to ██████████ in the school office (ideally by February 1, 2017). Thank you for taking the time to read about and consider this study.

Sincerely,

Cameron MacKay
Grade 4/5 Multiage Teacher

██████████



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Dear [REDACTED] Families,

As you are aware, I am currently working on my thesis for my Master's of Education degree at the University of Manitoba. The title of the thesis is Stories of Play in a Grade Four and Five Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry. You will have already received a letter about the study, including information about the research and use of student documentation, as well as parental consent and student assent forms. It is a fair amount of information to digest. With this in mind, I would like to take this opportunity to invite you and your child to an information session about the study.

Thesis Information Session

Tuesday, January 17, 2017 - 7:00 pm

[REDACTED]

The session is intended to provide you with and opportunity for in-person information about the study. I will present a brief summary of the thesis plan as well as an explanation of the use of student data for which I am asking your permission. Following this, I will respond to any questions you may have. I have invited [REDACTED] and Dr. Melanie Janzen, my thesis advisor from the University of Manitoba, to attend the session as well.

If you would like to attend this information session but are unable to make it on this date, please contact me, at the school, by phone ([REDACTED]) or email ([REDACTED]) and we can arrange an alternative meeting. Thank you for your time and consideration regarding this study.

Sincerely,

Cameron MacKay

Grade 4/5 Multiage Teacher - [REDACTED]



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Informed Consent For Use of Documentation in Narrative Inquiry

January 2017

Study: Stories of Play in a Grades Four and Five Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry

Principal Investigator: Cameron MacKay
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
Phone: [REDACTED]
Email: mackayc5@myumanitoba.ca

Research Supervisor: Dr. Melanie Janzen
Assistant Professor
Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
Phone: 204 474 9015
Email: Melanie.Janzen@umanitoba.ca

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore what classroom play looks like as early-years bridges to middle-years and what significance it might hold for students. What role might play have in terms of student learning, creativity, development, personal growth, identity, relationships, and well-being? Through the analysis of documentation (including student conversations, journalling, and work samples; photographs; videos; and my own observational notes) collected during Explorations (an inquiry-based, cross-curricular period in our classroom that is most conducive to play), I plan to construct a narrative of students' experiences and relationships with play in a classroom setting. My hope is that this narrative inquiry can spark a broader conversation among educators as to the role of play in school.

Procedures: This study will take place within the natural context of classroom life. I am seeking consent and assent to revisit documentation that is already being collected for classroom use during Explorations periods (including student conversations, journalling, and work samples;

photographs; videos; and my own observational notes). No new or artificial classroom engagements will be planned for students for this study. Explorations will take place for ninety-minutes, every second school day. Documentation to be used for the study will come from an eight-week period beginning on January 23, 2017 and end on March 20, 2017.

Recording Devices: Recording devices may include audio recorders and cameras. Both still images and video recordings may be used as documentation. No identifying documentation will appear in the final thesis.

Benefits: A benefit of participation is to support the exploration of play in the classroom and best teaching practices among educators.

Risks: In order to address any perceived bias and to assure families that no positive or negative consequences will arise from their decision to permit or restrict participation, all signed consent forms will be addressed to the school secretary where they will be placed in a sealed envelope. The consent forms will be locked in a cabinet in the school office until the end of the school year, after all student evaluations are completed. Whether or not documentation concerning particular students can be used, will not be known to the Principal Investigator or Research Supervisor until the sealed consent forms are opened at the completion of the school year and reporting period at the end of June 2017. Documentation concerning any student who did not receive consent and give assent will not be used in the writing of the thesis, and will be destroyed. There is minimal risk for participants in this study.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: All documentation will be kept confidential. Physical documentation will be stored in a locked cabinet in the Principal Investigators classroom and/or home. Electronic documentation will be stored under password protection. Identifiable documentation will be stored separately from non-identifiable documentation. Documentation will only be accessible to the Principal Investigator and Research Supervisor. Pseudonyms will be used in the final thesis for any potentially identifying information including students, the school, and the community. No identifying images will appear in the final thesis. This anonymity will be upheld in any subsequent publications or presentations of the study. Documentation concerning students who received consent and gave assent will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis (in or around February, 2018).

Compensation: Individuals will not be compensated or remunerated for their participation in this study.

Withdrawal from the Study: Parental consent and student assent are voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time without consequence. Participants can withdraw their consent or assent by contacting the school secretary, M [REDACTED], in person or by phone ([REDACTED]). The decision to withdraw will not be made known to the Principal Investigator or Research Supervisor until the end of the school year (June, 2017).

Debriefing: There is no debriefing required for the participants of this study.

Research Dissemination: All documentation will be compiled by only the Principal Investigator and Research Supervisor. Findings of the study may be used in subsequent publications and presentations. The anonymity of students, the school, and the community will be upheld in all publications and presentations.

Sharing of the Study: Upon completion of the study (in or around February, 2018), a final thesis will be available for sharing. Families who would like to receive a copy of the thesis can indicate so on the consent form.

Destruction of Documentation: All documentation concerning students who did not receive consent and give assent will be destroyed at the end of June, 2017 and will not be referenced in the final thesis. Documentation concerning students who received consent and gave assent will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis (in or around February, 2018).

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

I give consent to Cameron MacKay to use documentation relating to my child for the purpose of his thesis study in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. This documentation to which I consent may include (please check the boxes of the documentation examples for which you consent):

- Cameron's own written notes about my child
- Conversations (transcribed, by Cameron, from written notes or audio recordings)
- Photographs of my child at work or of his/her completed work (*no identifying images will appear in the final thesis*)
- Video recordings of my child at work or of his/her completed work (*video recordings will not appear in the final thesis*)

Copies of my child's work samples (with all identifying information removed)

I understand that my child *will not be identified* in the final thesis by either name or image. I understand that Cameron's written thesis may contain written out conversations that involve my child, non-identifying photographs, and/or work samples (if I checked off those boxes).

Child's Name: _____

Parent/Guardian's Name: _____

Parent/Guardian's Legal Relationship to Child: _____

Signature of Consent (Parent/Guardian): _____

Date: _____



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Student Assent Form

Please discuss this study with your child. If he/she assents to have Cameron MacKay reference documentation related to him/her in the final thesis then please have them sign the form by printing his/her name on the line below.

My child, _____ provides assent for Cameron MacKay to use documentation relating to him/her in the writing of his thesis for the Faculty of Education, at the University of Manitoba. He/she understands that he/she *will not be identified* in the final thesis by either name or image. He/she understands that Cameron's written thesis may contain written out conversations that involve him/her and/or work samples (if the parent/guardian has checked off those boxes). He/she also understands that no identifying photographs or video recordings will be used in the final thesis.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Student's Printed Name: _____

Date: _____



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Request for a Copy of the Completed Thesis

An electronic, PDF copy of the completed thesis will be available for you upon its completion. The estimated timeline for its completion is February 2018. A copy of the thesis will also be made available at the [REDACTED] office. Please select whether or not you would like to be emailed a copy of the final thesis.

Yes, I would like to receive a copy of the completed thesis

If you have selected this option, please fill out the following:

Name: _____

Email Address: _____

No, thank you. I do not require a copy of the completed thesis



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Possible Ways of Talking to Your Child About Considering His/Her Assent for the Study

There is a lot of information to consider about this study. In addition, due to ENREB's (Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board) requirements, the consent and assent forms are very technical and wordy. In an effort to help you talk with your child about the study, here are some possible ways you may want to word a discussion with him/her. It is important that your child make an informed decision as to his/her potential assent.

- Mr. MacKay is working on a thesis (like a project) for his University program. He is exploring the idea of play in the classroom. He is interested in learning about what play looks like in a grade 4/5 classroom and how play might help your learning and growth as a student.
- For eight weeks after winter break, during Explorations times, Mr. MacKay will be taking notes and photographs, looking at some of the work you're doing, and reading entries from your Explorations log. He may audio record some conversations, or video record some of the activities. These are things that Mr. MacKay already does during Explorations in order to understand your learning and help you move forward. Nothing will change in the classroom.
- At the end of the school year, Mr. MacKay would like to look back at some of this *documentation* (the notes, photos, conversations, and your work) in order to understand the kinds of play that were happening in the classroom and the effect that they may have had on you and your learning.
- He is asking for your *assent* (your agreement) to let him use the documentation to help him write his thesis. Mr. MacKay hopes that this thesis will help him, and possibly other teachers, better understand the role of play in kids' learning .
- Mr. MacKay *will not* use your name or any pictures that would show who you are in his final thesis. If you give assent, he may use some of the things you've said or written about during Explorations. He will replace your name with a *pseudonym* (a made-up name) whenever your name comes up. In the thesis, Mr. MacKay will make sure you will be *anonymous* (nobody will know it is you).
- I (the parent) also have to decide if I will give Mr. MacKay permission. We can say "yes" or "no" without any consequences. To make sure of this, Mr. MacKay won't know our decision until the school year is over. We are going to fill out the forms and leave them at the school office. They won't give them to Mr. MacKay until the school year is over Mr. MacKay is doing this so that we don't feel pressure either way.
- If you choose to give your assent and change your mind later on, that is okay too. You can let me (the parent) know and we can tell the office. Mr. MacKay won't need to know this either.
- If you understand all of this and choose to give Mr. MacKay permission to use the documentation to help him with his thesis, then you can print your name on the Student Assent form.



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Education

November 23, 2016

██████████
Assistant Superintendent, ██████████

██████████
██████████
██████████
██████████

Dear ██████████,

I am a grade four and five teacher at ██████████. I am also enrolled in the Masters of Education program at the University of Manitoba, for which I am presently constructing my thesis. My thesis is a narrative inquiry entitled *Stories of Play in a Grade Four and Five Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry*. In order for my research to take place within the ██████████ ██████████, the University of Manitoba requires that I obtain permission from you and the principal of ██████████, ██████████.

My thesis is a narrative inquiry that will explore the importance of play in a grades four and five classroom. For the purpose of this study, play is understood as an act that is spontaneous and open to possibility; contains aspects of novelty; engages the individual; may appear purposeless though might, in fact, serve a purpose; is potentially subversive; is concerned with rules (both making and breaking); and has an element of joy. Some of the questions I hope to explore include: What does classroom play look like as early years bridges to middle years and what significance might it hold for students? What role does play have in terms of student learning, creativity, development, personal growth, identity, relationships, and well-being?

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach in which the researcher, or narrative inquirer, attempts to construct an understanding of human experience through the stories of the

participants in his or her study. In this case, through the collection and interpretation of classroom documentation, I hope to present a perspective on the relationships between student play and learning, identity, and development. The resulting thesis will contain a narrative of this particular study's experience with play and a discussion of what this may mean for play in school in general.

Narrative inquiry respects the postmodern view that all knowledge must be considered *in context*. Therefore, the richest narrative inquiry that I could pursue would take place in my own classroom. With preexisting relationships, routines, and documentation practices, a narrative inquiry with my own students would be both contextually rich as well as being unobtrusive to regular classroom life and learning.

Data collection for this narrative inquiry would involve practices already taking place in the classroom, including: observational note-taking, student conversations (either written out or recorded), photographs, videos, and student work samples and journal entries. My hope is to revisit this documentation in order to construct my narrative inquiry. Because the research aspect of this study is simply the interpretation of data already being collected, no additional or artificial engagements will be planned for the class for this study. Data collection will take place over an eight-week period beginning in mid-January, 2017. The regular classroom schedule will not be disrupted as I will be collecting data at times when play is revealing itself naturally. My expectation is that this will be during Explorations periods. In short, this narrative inquiry will be constructed in context with the learning engagements that are already occurring within the classroom.

In order to comply with the University of Manitoba ENREB (Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board) requirements, a detailed letter will be sent to families in my classroom including a consent form for parents/guardians and an assent form to be signed by students. Attached, you will find a copy of this letter and permission forms. As you will read, I am making certain that families can make an informed decision both freely and anonymously. Along with receiving the documents, they will be invited to a brief, informational evening at which I will present the plan for the study and answer any questions they may have. After this, families will have the opportunity to select which (if any) forms of documentation they are willing to consent to. This will be completed on a form that will go into a sealed envelope and be mailed or delivered to our school secretary. I will not have access to these forms *until the end of the school*

year, and thus will not know who has given or withheld consent until all classes and assessment have been completed. All children for whom consent and assent has been provided will not be identified in the completed thesis. Pseudonyms will be used where necessary and no photographs, video clips, or audio recordings will be appear. This research has been approved by the University of Manitoba Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB).

If you have any questions about this research project, or would like to discuss it further, you can contact me at [REDACTED] ([REDACTED]) or by email

[REDACTED] You may also reach my thesis advisor, Dr. Melanie Janzen, at (204 474 9015) or Melanie.Janzen@umanitoba.ca, or the Human Ethics Coordinator at the University of Manitoba (204 474 7122, humanethics@umanitoba.ca).

If you are willing to provide permission for this research project, please sign below. Your signature will indicate that you have granted permission for the research to take place in [REDACTED] [REDACTED] as detailed. Please return the signed copy of the consent form to me using the envelope provided. You may keep the duplicate form for your records. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Cameron MacKay



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Informed Consent For Use of Documentation in Narrative Inquiry

November 23, 2016

Study: Stories of Play in a Grades Four and Five Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry

Principal Investigator: Cameron MacKay
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
Phone: [REDACTED]
Email: mackayc5@myumanitoba.ca

Research Supervisor: Dr. Melanie Janzen
Assistant Professor
Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
Phone: 204 474 9015
Email: Melanie.Janzen@umanitoba.ca

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore what classroom play looks like as early-years bridges to middle-years and what significance it might hold for students. What role might play have in terms of student learning, creativity, development, personal growth, identity, relationships, and well-being? Through the analysis of documentation (including student conversations, journalling, and work samples; photographs; videos; and my own observational notes) collected during Explorations (an inquiry-based, cross-curricular period in our classroom that is most conducive to play), I plan to construct a narrative of students' experiences and relationships with play in a classroom setting. My hope is that this narrative inquiry can spark a broader conversation among educators as to the role of play in school.

Procedures: This study will take place within the natural context of classroom life. I am seeking consent and assent to revisit documentation that is already being collected for classroom use during Explorations periods (including student conversations, journalling, and work samples; photographs; videos; and my own observational notes). No new or artificial classroom engagements will be planned for students for this study. Explorations will take place for ninety-

minutes, every second school day. Documentation to be used for the study will come from an eight-week period beginning on January 23, 2017 and end on March 20, 2017.

Recording Devices: Recording devices may include audio recorders and cameras. Both still images and video recordings may be used as documentation. No identifying documentation will appear in the final thesis.

Benefits: A benefit of participation is to support the exploration of play in the classroom and best teaching practices among educators.

Risks: In order to address any perceived bias and to assure families that no positive or negative consequences will arise from their decision to permit or restrict participation, all signed consent forms will be addressed to the school secretary where they will be placed in a sealed envelope. The consent forms will be locked in a cabinet in the school office until the end of the school year, after all student evaluations are completed. Whether or not documentation concerning particular students can be used, will not be known to the Principal Investigator or Research Supervisor until the sealed consent forms are opened at the completion of the school year and reporting period at the end of June 2017. Documentation concerning any student who did not receive consent and give assent be used in the writing of the thesis, and will be destroyed. There is minimal risk to participants in this study.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: All documentation will be kept confidential. Physical documentation will be stored in a locked cabinet in the Principal Investigators classroom and/or home. Electronic documentation will be stored under password protection. Identifiable documentation will be stored separately from non-identifiable documentation. Documentation will only be accessible to the Principal Investigator and Research Supervisor. Pseudonyms will be used in the final thesis for any potentially identifying information including students, the school, and the community. No identifying images will appear in the final thesis. This anonymity will be upheld in any subsequent publications or presentations of the study. Documentation concerning students who received consent and gave assent will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis (in or around February, 2018).

Compensation: Individuals will not be compensated or remunerated for their participation in this study.

Withdrawal from the Study: Parental consent and student assent are voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time without consequence. Participants can withdraw their consent or assent by contacting the school secretary, [REDACTED], in person or by phone ([REDACTED]). The decision to withdraw will not be made known to the Principal Investigator or Research Supervisor until the end of the school year (June, 2017).

Debriefing: There is no debriefing required for the participants of this study.

Research Dissemination: All documentation will be compiled by only the Principal Investigator and Research Supervisor. Findings of the study may be used in subsequent publications and

presentations. The anonymity of students, the school, and the community will be upheld in all publications and presentations.

Sharing of the Study: Upon completion of the study (in or around February, 2018), a final thesis will be available for sharing. Families who would like to receive a copy of the thesis can indicate so on the consent form.

Destruction of Documentation: All documentation concerning students who did not receive consent and give assent will be destroyed at the end of June, 2017 and will not be referenced in the final thesis. Documentation concerning students who received consent and gave assent will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis (in or around February, 2018).

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Superintendent's Name: _____

Superintendent's Signature of Consent: _____

Date: _____

I would like a copy of the thesis upon completion (in or around February, 2018):

Yes, please **No thank you**



UNIVERSITY
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[REDACTED]

Administrator, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED],

As you know, I am currently in the process of developing my thesis for my Master's of Education program at the University of Manitoba. My thesis is a narrative inquiry entitled *Stories of Play in a Grade Four and Five Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry*. In order for my research to take place within the [REDACTED], the University of Manitoba requires that I obtain permission from you and [REDACTED].

My thesis is a narrative inquiry that will explore the potential role of play in a grades four and five classroom. For the purpose of this study, play is understood as an act that is spontaneous and open to possibility; contains aspects of novelty; engages the individual; may appear purposeless though might, in fact, serve a purpose; is potentially subversive; is concerned with rules (both making and breaking); and has an element of joy. Some of the questions I hope to explore include: What does classroom play look like as early years bridges to middle years and what significance might it hold for students? What role might play have in terms of student learning, creativity, development, personal growth, identity, relationships, and well-being?

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach in which the researcher, or narrative inquirer, attempts to construct an understanding of human experience through the stories of the participants in his or her study. In this case, through the collection and interpretation of classroom documentation, I hope to present a perspective on the relationships between student

play and learning, identity, and development. The resulting thesis will contain a narrative of this particular study's experience with play and a discussion of what this may mean for play in school in general.

Narrative inquiry respects the postmodern view that all knowledge must be considered *in context*. Therefore, the richest narrative inquiry that I could pursue would take place in my own classroom. With preexisting relationships, routines, and documentation practices, a narrative inquiry with my own students would be both contextually rich as well as being unobtrusive to regular classroom life and learning.

Data collection for this narrative inquiry would involve practices already taking place in the classroom, including: observational note-taking, student conversations (either written out or recorded), photographs, videos, and student work samples and journal entries. My hope is to revisit this documentation in order to construct my narrative inquiry. Because the research aspect of this study is simply the interpretation of data already being collected, no additional or artificial engagements will be planned for the class for this study. Data collection will take place over an eight-week period beginning in mid-January, 2017. The regular classroom schedule will not be disrupted as I will be collecting data at times when play is revealing itself naturally. My expectation is that this will be during Explorations periods. In short, this narrative inquiry will be constructed in context with the learning engagements that are already occurring within the classroom.

In order to comply with ENREB (Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board) requirements, a detailed letter will be sent to families in my classroom including a consent form for parents/guardians and an assent form to be signed by students. Attached, you will find a copy of this letter and permission forms. As you will read, I am making certain that families can make an informed decision both freely and anonymously. Along with receiving the documents, they will be invited to a brief, informational evening at which I will present the plan for the study and answer any questions they may have. After this, families will have the opportunity to select which (if any) forms of documentation they are willing to consent to. This will be completed on a form that will go into a sealed envelope and be mailed or delivered to our school secretary, [REDACTED]. I will not have access to these forms *until the end of the school year*, and thus will not know who has given or withheld consent until all classes and assessment have been completed. All children for whom consent and assent has been provided will not be identified in

the completed thesis. Pseudonyms will be used where necessary and no photographs, video clips, or audio recordings will be appear. This research has been approved by the University of Manitoba Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB).

If you have any questions about this research project, or would like to discuss it further, you can contact me by email: [REDACTED] or ask to meet with me in person. You may also reach my thesis advisor, Dr. Melanie Janzen (204 474 9015, Melanie.Janzen@umanitoba.ca), or the Human Ethics Coordinator at the University of Manitoba (204 474 7122, humanethics@umanitoba.ca).

If you are willing to provide permission for this research project, please sign below. Your signature will indicate that you have granted permission for the research to take place at [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] as detailed. Please return the signed copy of the consent form to me using the envelope provided. You may keep the duplicate form for your records. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Cameron MacKay



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Education

Informed Consent For Use of Documentation in Narrative Inquiry

November 23, 2016

Study: Stories of Play in a Grades Four and Five Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry

Principal Investigator: Cameron MacKay
Graduate Student
Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
Phone: [REDACTED]
Email: mackayc5@myumanitoba.ca

Research Supervisor: Dr. Melanie Janzen
Assistant Professor
Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
Phone: 204 474 9015
Email: Melanie.Janzen@umanitoba.ca

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore what classroom play looks like as early-years bridges to middle-years and what significance it might hold for students. What role might play have in terms of student learning, creativity, development, personal growth, identity, relationships, and well-being? Through the analysis of documentation (including student conversations, journaling, and work samples; photographs; videos; and my own observational notes) collected during Explorations (an inquiry-based, cross-curricular period in our classroom that is most conducive to play), I plan to construct a narrative of students' experiences and relationships with play in a classroom setting. My hope is that this narrative inquiry can spark a broader conversation among educators as to the role of play in school.

Procedures: This study will take place within the natural context of classroom life. I am seeking consent and assent to revisit documentation that is already being collected for classroom use during Explorations periods (including student conversations, journaling, and work samples;

photographs; videos; and my own observational notes). No new or artificial classroom engagements will be planned for students for this study. Explorations will take place for ninety-minutes, every second school day. Documentation to be used for the study will come from an eight-week period beginning on January 23, 2017 and end on March 20, 2017.

Recording Devices: Recording devices may include audio recorders and cameras. Both still images and video recordings may be used as documentation. No identifying documentation will appear in the final thesis.

Benefits: A benefit of participation is to support the exploration of play in the classroom and best teaching practices among educators.

Risks: In order to address any perceived bias and to assure families that no positive or negative consequences will arise from their decision to permit or restrict participation, all signed consent forms will be addressed to the school secretary where they will be placed in a sealed envelope. The consent forms will be locked in a cabinet in the school office until the end of the school year, after all student evaluations are completed. Whether or not documentation concerning particular students can be used, will not be known to the Principal Investigator or Research Supervisor until the sealed consent forms are opened at the completion of the school year and reporting period at the end of June 2017. Documentation concerning any student who did not receive consent and give assent be used in the writing of the thesis, and will be destroyed. There is minimal risk to participants in this study.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: All documentation will be kept confidential. Physical documentation will be stored in a locked cabinet in the Principal Investigators classroom and/or home. Electronic documentation will be stored under password protection. Identifiable documentation will be stored separately from non-identifiable documentation. Documentation will only be accessible to the Principal Investigator and Research Supervisor. Pseudonyms will be used in the final thesis for any potentially identifying information including students, the school, and the community. No identifying images will appear in the final thesis. This anonymity will be upheld in any subsequent publications or presentations of the study. Documentation concerning students who received consent and gave assent will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis (in or around February, 2018).

Compensation: Individuals will not be compensated or remunerated for their participation in this study.

Withdrawal from the Study: Parental consent and student assent are voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time without consequence. Participants can withdraw their consent or assent by contacting the school secretary, [REDACTED], in person or by phone ([REDACTED]). The decision to withdraw will not be made known to the Principal Investigator or Research Supervisor until the end of the school year (June, 2017).

Debriefing: There is no debriefing required for the participants of this study.

Research Dissemination: All documentation will be compiled by only the Principal Investigator and Research Supervisor. Findings of the study may be used in subsequent publications and presentations. The anonymity of students, the school, and the community will be upheld in all publications and presentations.

Sharing of the Study: Upon completion of the study (in or around February, 2018), a final thesis will be available for sharing. Families who would like to receive a copy of the thesis can indicate so on the consent form.

Destruction of Documentation: All documentation concerning students who did not receive consent and give assent will be destroyed at the end of June, 2017 and will not be referenced in the final thesis. Documentation concerning students who received consent and gave assent will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis (in or around February, 2018).

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Administrator's Name: _____

Administrator's Signature of Consent: _____

Date: _____

I would like a copy of the thesis upon completion (in or around February, 2018):

Yes, please No thank you



Research Ethics and Compliance
Office of the Vice-President (Research and International)

Human Ethics
208-194 Dafoe Road
Winnipeg, MB
Canada R3T 2N2
Phone +204-474-7122
Fax +204-269-7173

APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

November 24, 2016

TO: Cameron M. MacKay (Advisor: Melanie Janzen)
Principal Investigator [REDACTED]

FROM: Zana Lutfiyya, Chair
Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

Re: Protocol #E2016:120 (HS20215)
"Stories of Play in a Grade Four and Five Classroom: A Narrative Inquiry"

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by the **Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board**, which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement (2). **This approval is valid for one year only and will expire on November 24, 2017.**

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the Human Ethics Coordinator in advance of implementation of such changes.

Please note:

- If you have funds pending human ethics approval, please mail/e-mail/fax (261-0325) a copy of this Approval (identifying the related UM Project Number) to the Research Grants Officer in ORS in order to initiate fund setup. (How to find your UM Project Number: <http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/mrt-faq.html#pr0>)
- if you have received multi-year funding for this research, responsibility lies with you to apply for and obtain Renewal Approval at the expiry of the initial one-year approval; otherwise the account will be locked.

The University of Manitoba may request to review research documentation from this project to demonstrate compliance with this approved protocol and the University of Manitoba *Ethics of Research Involving Humans*.

The Research Ethics Board requests a final report for your study (available at: http://umanitoba.ca/research/orec/ethics/human_ethics_REB_forms_guidelines.html) in order to be in compliance with Tri-Council Guidelines.