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Gulliver's Travels

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No Abstract Available

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This qualitative research locates the narrative as producing meaning through self-reflection. I find myself writing stories in response to my feelings, blurred experiences, and ambiguities (Richardson, 1994). I look to literary models to describe my experiences and like many travelers engaged in an odyssey, become the subject of my research. Some would find this qualitative method settled in a postmodern venue-locating myself as the knower and the teller. I prefer to position this inquiry in a humanist ethnography, a methodology that is a slice of life; I learn about others through learning about myself.

I am interested in solving an unknown factor of art, an unknown factor of life. It can't be divorced as an idea or composition or form. I don't believe art can be based on that...In fact my idea now is to counteract everything I've ever learnt or ever been taught about those things- to find something inevitable that is my life, my thoughts, my feelings. -

Eva Hesse

I barely make it to work before the kids these days. My kitchen light is so soothing and the coffee is so hot. Time is telling me to daydream more and I find it harder and harder to make meaningful decisions. I am up early and am organized, but the days' structures, with their lists, responsibilities and hurried agendas, are relentless. Time seems too fast, and, with the reassurance of the errand done, leaves me worn and inadequate. I want to sit and be distracted by a nagging bird or a low flying-plane.

I am a preschool director, art teacher, and researcher. There is a small preschool surrounded by acres of farmland and a hum of an interstate where I find myself most mornings. There in the center of this little school is an art room, my home away from home, where I take notes, snap digital pictures, and listen to children. Every

morning I feel like I am giving a party for foreigners. For years I have read up on what's fascinating, engaging, and rewarding for children. Early childhood experts have given me tips. I have spent a good many years following little children around and watching, listening, and trying things out. I get seven hours of sleep at night and dress comfortably. I plan ahead and remember everything from the day before, but I am still Gulliver.

As the art teacher, I wear a large red apron smeared with paint with "Bennett Tool and Die" silkscreened on the front. I quickly move from child to child, asking questions and suggesting solutions. Most of my involvement with the children is physical snapping, tying, twisting, crawling, bending, lifting, patting, and wiping. When I am not acting like a teacher, my face is blank. I drink lukewarm coffee from a mug and imagine myself eating pie and reading the newspaper someplace quiet.

For years scholars have laid the groundwork describing art making as a cognitive process (Efland, 2002, Eisner, 2002). The art teacher's role has moved from set designer to director. Instead of a dispenser of supplies, purchaser of easels, arranger of glue, the teacher is now as pertinent to learning as the fulcrum on the teeter-totter (Kindler, 1995). As I Watch preschoolers paint symbols and tell stories, I want to know how children's perceptions are manifested in their painting. I want to know what improvisation, storytelling, and adaptation look like in preschool art making. I want to discover how easel painting encourages stories and metaphor. I want to know what meaningful art does for children so when I refill paint jars, suggest technique, invite critique and casual reflection, I can discover connections between the painting and the meaning. As a teacher I search for the right question to encourage the children to richer learning, richer insights. I want to acknowledge the natural setting and the researcher as influencing the art making.

Two Heads

Within interpretive research, I search for a methodology that considers the researcher a variable, locating her in a "natural setting(s) attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). Denzin and Lincoln describe the researcher in such a site as a "bricoleur" (1992, p.2). To me the bricoleur is a mom-like character who does it all at a moment's notice everything from "inter viewing, observing, interpreting personal and historic documents, to intensive self-reflection and introspection" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). Flexibility seems to be the key. She uses a barrage of methods, or triangulation, to get to the core of the phenomenon. Writing my findings, I find myself doing some sort of experimental representation. It is an intriguing but awkward position locating myself within problems of subjectivity/authority/authorship/ reflexivity (Richardson, 1994, p. 520).

As a teacher/researcher, my position is complicated. For one thing, the children are fickle. If I expect a day of narrative drawing, most will want to spatter the paint or make beaded necklaces. For a week a group of eight or nine will be in my room adoring me and hanging onto my every word, laughing at all my jokes. The next day I am completely overlooked, maybe getting a "hi" from the doorway. Besides the mercurial behavior of the children, I am more connected to the children as the teacher than I would be if I were merely a researcher. I live in this room and, therefore, have an obvious empathy with the situation. Positioning myself as researcher/ teacher, I admit to affecting the course of events. However, when acknowledging what I bring to the site, I redefine objectivity. Narrating through my eyes, revealing what I see, including the description of my role and my own experiences, I disrupt the traditional power imbalance of researcher/ subject.

Truth is presented through the personal.

My notion about an art room for children describes a unique place to try out, glue on, or twist backwards till snapping. I have created a particular art making site which reflects what I find important. There are easy to reach materials to encourage exploration and brainstorming. I find flexibility, adaptation, and ambiguity in rich lessons. When the artist paints, technical proficiency develops through trial and error or the "No, no, no. Yes! Theory." Coupled with a teacher whispering possibilities, and eyeballing a tip or two, the child learns to stack skills at the easel like stones on the Great Wall of China. Learning the versatility of materials, I believe, is an intellectual activity. The child painting with jars of ochre and sky blue learns for her- self what the strengths and weaknesses of the colored pigment and slanted easel are. Like an engineer finding the best insulation for a rocket's fuel tank, or a cellist finding the best sound for the sonata, the child repeatedly tries possibilities to get the desired outcome. Because of my own history with painting, I have built an environment that appreciates doubt, reflexivity, and brainstorming.

Three Heads

I arrive in this miniature studio after experiencing my own long career of oil painting, sculpture, costume, and set design. Images found in my artwork stem from memories of childhood that I wear like a familiar pair of gloves. A hammer and C-clamp, a telephone, a high-heeled shoe, a piano, and a hardworking woman are meaningful images located in memories of my father, mother, and grandmother. These forms float in my unconscious and, like a butterfly crawling from its cocoon, the piano, the hammer, and the C-clamp are no longer objects of iron and ivory but are the feelings I have for the original wearers of those gloves (Dewey, 1934). These images springing from meaningful

experiences act as a connection and a way of self understanding. Nelson Goodman (1984) writes, "What we perceive depends heavily on our state of perceptual readiness. Habit, context, explicit instruction, interests, and suggestions of all kinds can blind or activate our perception, conceal or reveal a mountain or a molehill. Far from merely recording what is before us, perception participates in making what we perceive." (Goodman, p. 25)

I remember as a child finding my father's basement workshop a cool refuge from the sweltering heat of summers. Childhood summers dragged as my mother, an hysteric tortured by her own demons, bellowed loss. From across the room I see her silhouette vacuuming gray sour dust, breaking the backs of sheets as she snaps them onto the beds, and twists tight wet laundry, wringing out the juice from my childhood. The cool basement is a world where I find space and time to have "wonderful ideas" (Duckworth, 1996). I become fascinated with designing and building telephones, joining pie tins, scrap lumber, and string. For years, I have dreamed about scrounging through the dumpster at Illinois Bell. My birthday lists again and again request a telephone with ringer and little numbered holes to stick my finger in and twirl around to zero. Instead of the swooned over chunky bowling ball models with the hefty spiral cords, I am given pastel plastic replicas that hold my attention only briefly. As an artist, I have experienced the art process as reflection, adaptation, and improvisation. Through reflection, memories, process, and inspiration are polished. When the very young child moves from the doing to the making (Zurmuehlen, 1990), there is a magical point of intellectual development that arises from reflection. It is a creative moment where metaphor and stories are often at work. I consider improvisation to be an act of faith harboring the courage to combine the known with the unknown. The whole shebang seems to be linked to context. As

an artist myself, who for years has looked for meaning in a blank canvas, perhaps I can understand the four year old painter who also struggles to bring a treasured symbol to the easel.

Sylvia, age four, is the oldest of three girls. Her youngest sister was born two weeks ago and since then, Sylvia has been carrying new floppy rag dolls daily into the preschool. The day after her sister was born; Sylvia quietly told me she wanted to paint a picture of her two new dolls. Usually a quick painter of patterns, Sylvia spent a long time on the portrait, carefully deciding how to clearly depict the dolls' clothing, asking for white paint for the apron, and pointing out which painted figure was which. By the third day and the third portrait, Sylvia was painting legs, eyes, and hair with greater confidence. I can't help but see this painting as a metaphor for Sylvia's feelings about her new sister. Focusing on the subject matter for days on end, as Sylvia does, implies a level of caring. The dolls and the intent simultaneously arrive with the new baby. The connection between the event of the new baby, the valuing of the new dolls, and the portrait painting seems likely. What seems unclear is how portrait painting has helped Sylvia with the transition from one sister to two.

To understand Sylvia's use of portrait, I look to my own experience. As an oil painter, my own work is physical, built on a series of quick decisions. The large canvases explode with a layered surface of paint and energy. Two years ago one of my daughters experienced a devastating illness. A freely drawn twirling cone no longer represented a thrilling spiral but a frightening slide to a dark netherworld. As my daughter's life continued downward, my subject matter and my interaction with art materials shifted. Instead of painting abstract forms, I began painting fairly realistic portraits of my daughters as babies and young children. Their faces held a haunting, aged quality. The surface of my painting moved from a thick colored antipasto of scraping and modeling to washes of monochromic color. My decisions slowed. In truth, this

transformation did not signal better or worse paintings. Yet the portraits helped me relive the past and soothe my puzzled psyche. I found a comfort in portraying the real.

As I spend long periods of time observing young children, I recognize more readily the frequent appearance of reflection and improvisation. Mary Catherine Bateson in *Peripheral Visions* (1994), writes that modern life doesn't provide many opportunities for improvisation and reflection. Reflection, resulting in adaptation, arises from the need to adjust to the new and different. Bateson sees communities distrusting innovative solutions, fearful of diversity, and believing the safe and the traditional are the optimal course of action. Children are taught to value the right answer, not the investigation (Duckworth, 1996). My experience tells me that improvising may result in a mishap; nevertheless, the traditional response in many cases may be inappropriate and dangerous. Children need challenges requiring improvisation and reflection to better develop flexible systems of problem solving. The elixir of survival, improvisation and adaptation, give the child confidence, pleasure, and strength (Bateson, 1994). Frequent opportunities for improvisation, reflection, and adaptation create learning patterns that commonly draw in new ideas, broadening the child's self-image.

For a time I lived fairly isolated in an old Amish schoolhouse with only a baby for company. On a seasonal visit, my mother, surveying my backyard acre of rich Iowa farmland, showed me how to cut a potato and bury the eyes in a mound of dirt fore- telling that come fall, there would be a spud for each buried eye. Enthusiastically, I soon had chunked enough eyes to heap up a half dozen mounds of swollen earth. My home housed a basement kitchen with windows on level with the horizon line. Over my morning coffee I watched those gestating potato mounds, nursed the baby, and imagined French fries and ketchup. At the end of the summer I dug through the dirt piles trusting, yet still astonished, when I

discovered, as my mother prophesized, a potato for every eye planted. Watching the children paint at the easels, I intuitively know evolving images are the nature of art making but I am still amazed when they are revealed. It is an intimate experience, watching children paint. I believe childhood images are personal history like an inherited notched eyebrow that pops up over and over again in the family album. As children paint, stopping to tell me what they have painted, trusting me to say something reflective and supportive, children improvise, adapt, create metaphor, and tell stories. As I listen to their questions, songs, and stories, I wonder if I am misinterpreting the child's narrative, biased by my own story. From the child's repertoire of experience comes the avalanche of metaphor and adaptation. Wondering what is learned by ambiguity (Bateson, 1994, p.100), as re- searcher, I record observations of children who paint, triangulate my findings, and face feelings of embarrassment and confusion. Reading Bateson (1994) and Behar (1996), I am drawn to the personal narrative intertwined with preschool observations. Surprisingly, while observing the art making of the very young, I collide with memories of my own childhood. Perhaps my position is as Ruth Behar writes in her book, *The Vulnerable Observer*, "(one) who has come to know others by knowing herself and who has come to know herself by knowing others" (1996, p. 33). Sometimes I can feel overwhelmed and cornered. I see my life not as a linear path from start to finish, increasingly successful or increasingly complicated, but as a circular route coming back onto itself. These childhood harbingers represent my personal beliefs of hope, strength, inspiration, loss, and uncertainty; in essence, feelings I connect to all human experience.

It is raining, a welcome relief after a month of drought. I water my garden every three days but the wild ginger growing on my hillside is fainting. Winding down the path to the art library, I feel the rain pound like tiny fingers on my shoulders. The ginger seems to have given up. The rains come too late. I think

about my conversations and observations as I begin searching for studies focusing on the art making of three, four and five year old children. Judith Falkenrath, qualitative researcher and former preschool teacher, has a doctoral dissertation *Speaking of Art Teachers' Conversations with Preschoolers about Their Art* (1995) where she is a non-participant in a study that examines how dialogue between teacher and child can hurt or support further art making. Falkenrath, believing her presence would "alter behavior to some degree," "intention-ally refrains from interacting with the teachers or the children" ..."trying hard to be un-obtrusive" (Falkenrath, 1995, p. 60). She explains at length her efforts to be empathetic while establishing minimal rapport with the teachers and children, not even informing them of the study's focus. Falkenrath does not cross-check her observations with the children, preferring to keep her data to herself for fear of contamination.

I agree that empathy should be an important consideration in qualitative research. However, what concerns me is the possible misinterpretation of observation when Falkenrath chooses not to interview her subjects. For example, Falkenrath interviews the assistant teacher, asking how she knows when children want conversation. It would seem Falkenrath should also interview the children to affirm or disaffirm the assistant's impressions. The conclusions Falkenrath lights upon have no corroboration with the children. Falkenrath puts herself in the position of the all-knowing investigator, leading the reader to conclusions that are unsupported by the participants in the study. Furthermore, Falkenrath juggles data to "make it fit" so "the picture made sense" (p. 64).

Margery Wolf (1992), in her ethnographic account of Taiwanese women, writes of the "admittedly messy stuff of experience" (p. 58), elaborating,

...the individual anthropologist takes responsibility for and essentially promises the public that she will not only tell the truth as she knows it, but will check and recheck what villagers tell her about the way things are in that village. (p. 59)

Extensive reading on the topic with the lack of triangulating with the participant leads me to doubt the validity of Falkenrath's study. If interpreting data is decoding meanings, how can a researcher decode one language for another, an interpretive act, without conversation between the observed and the observer?

I notice the library has a lot of teenagers crowded around the entrance. Taking the elevator to the fifth floor, I see the same style of upholstered chairs here as on the main floor. The fabric is different but the style of chair is identical. I wonder who selected these chairs? What caught their fancy-the comfort or the utility factor? It's difficult to keep focused on my topic. Wading through piles of dissertations, heaped like folded laundry, I feel my little boat drifting from shore. Down shadowed, towering aisles of bound journals, smelling vegetable soup and hearing muffled conversations of two girls in cahoots, their whispered voices rising and falling planning some scheme, then silence, I lift another 20 pound volume and wonder what all these researchers are doing now. Are they at home watching the 10 p.m. news with a TV tray, and a bowl of chips and salsa? Are they using their cell phones with ear-plugs? Have they read about the harmful effects of holding the cell phone directly to your ear? Do they still ponder over standardized tests and formal elements of art making? I look up to see a policeman hurrying down a narrow aisle, thinking he is rescuing a student lost in the rows of books. I decide it's time to check out. Like a run-away semi-truck, I am out of control. The librarian's eyes pop as shuffle towards the checkout desk with a tower of texts. Flying down the on-ramp, I check my side mirror to see a herd of big trucks pounding behind me and each is filled with articles and journals

about art making with young children. I gaze upward at the column of journals I slide to the scanner. What propelled me to think I had an edge on the market?

Last night I was watching one of those movies made before the Event in September where an airplane is taken over by terrorists. The passengers on the plane seem to believe the hijackers are only momentarily irrational from one too many bad breaks, like a bad summer of poison ivy, a leaking dehumidifier, month-long drought, and a sagging chin. When pep talks don't work, the hero abruptly yanks open the emergency door and the deranged Cuban and dozens of magazines get sucked out of the jet. The pilot with one bleeding arm, no functioning instruments, and one less engine miraculously lands the plane. I have always been fascinated with the sucking out part in hijacking movies. My new collection of journals and dissertations suck me out into some unknown void. I forget what I am looking for and become engrossed in everyone else's struggles.

My own project seems ambiguous and sloppy. I look enviously at the studies that zero in on popular topics like individual and developmental learning styles like Martha Taunton's (1982) article "Artistic and Aesthetic Development: Considerations for Early Childhood Educators" and Taunton and Colbert's (1984) "Four-Year-Old Children's Recognition of Expressive Qualities in Painting Reproductions." Also, Elizabeth Rosenblatt and Ellen Winner's article (1988) "The Art of Children's Drawing," that interviewed children about "a broad range of topics" discovering that "reflective skills developed late in adolescence." Or teacher-child dialogue like "Talking With Young Children about Their Art" by Robert Schirrmacher (1986) that surmises the only roadblock to a brilliant student is a disinterested teacher. I find myself identifying with the confused teacher, never knowing if I am on the right track.

Where am I in all of this? Like the painter stepping back to reflect on the composition, I wonder why the painting doesn't work. What keeps the collection of lines and forms from transcending a mere representation to a magical synthesis of feeling and form? What is lacking in all the re- search that prevents the miracle from being seen? Writing as a narrative of the self, I hope to reveal the nature of art making through "characters, unusual phrasings, puns subtexts and allusions" (Richardson, 1994, p. 521). I look to find stories of four and five-year-old children who use metaphor, improvisation, and adaptation to create artwork. I believe locating the study in the natural setting of art making is crucial. The observations are triangulated by interviews with parents and children. I fall in love with my participants.

Class Notes

One morning I am feeling my usual edgy, overwrought self when a pleasant parent enters trailing behind her four-year-old daughter Meg and two-year-old son Walter. Meg always looks thunderstruck. Walter always looks determined. The little girl heads for her labeled art drawer, yanks on the handle, revealing armload of fabric scraps that she piles onto a table. Meg's mother, scanning the art room, tells me, "At home Meg loves drawers. Last night, at 10 P.M., I hear her shout down the stairs, 'Mom, I have to vacuum this drawer out!' I helped her and she refilled it with a plastic pony, stickers, notebooks, and tiny pens. Drawers are important, private places for her notebooks and tiny pens. Drawers are important, private places for her."

"And so Walter won't get into it."

Walter ignores all of this; busily stabbing brushes into paint jars. I am transfixed watching Walter dunking the brushes and swiping blobs of color in arcs across the easel paper. Clumsy, focused, and solid, I can see Walter moving the earth, reshaping tributaries, spearheading federal dam projects.

Audrey barrels into the room and shouts "Hi Vicarooni!" stands at the easel and considers. Mary enters, is quiet, peers around, stands at the

easel adjacent to Audrey, and begins painting. I overhear a conversation across the room between Sally and Harriet. They are talking about how old they are.

"I don't actually know how old I am."

"Well, I think you are three but you can pretend you are four. That's perfectly okay," replies Harriet.

Audrey, with short blonde hair held back with two mismatched plastic barrettes, puts a purple unicorn on a nearby shelf and tells me, "He's kinda new but one of my favorites," and picks up a paint brush. In no time there are two shapes filling her 18" x 24" easel paper mirroring the top joint of two giant fingertips. The shapes resemble Laurel and Hardy. The Laurel one is green with lavender detail. The Hardy is lavender with a green detail. There are plenty of line markings-zigzags, dots, and arches. One painted comedian is the flip side of the other. Between marks Audrey stops and studies what she has painted.

A university practicum student enters the art room and asks Sally how old she is. Sally holds up four fingers and whispers, "But I'm only pretending." I remove Mary's wet painting and clip onto her easel a fresh sheet of paper. Mary, her weight resting on one leg, readjusts a hair ribbon, squints at Audrey's painting, pauses, and begins her second painting. I notice people stand a lot on tip-toes in this room. Audrey waves me over. I ask Audrey what her painting is about.

"Look," she points. There on the wall beyond two little girls with spouting hairstyles, I see an earlier painting. The fingertip form has a fingernail poking out the top. It looks very much like the painting she has just completed. There are similar images. Audrey is organizing, making decisions, and creating meaning. Christine Thompson writes, "They (children) begin very early to notice and remember connections between their actions and the out-comes recorded on the page." (1990, p.85)

A small blonde girl sits at the table and shouts, "How do you spell garbage?"

Olive sighs, drawing, "I miss my old house. I can picture it right in front of my face."

The little blonde girl shouts, "What comes after the g?"

Sally seems to be telling the practicum student that her real name is Ludvig von Coopah. "It's lidvig like the lid of your eye." Harriet is at an easel and has begun painting a house. I ask her about it. "This is a big house and this is a bedroom. This is the kids' bedroom, living room, and hallway. This is somebody knocking on the door. This blue thing is a hallway. The yellow is a door. The dark yellow is the office where the kids work."

Olive continues from the drawing table, "Once we had, I think, two cars in Boston, two green station wagons. One drove very slow. Once Ellie and I looked out the window and we watched a tow-truck pick up the car."

Mary is taking off her smock, peering around, washing her hands, and walking out of the room. I wonder what I can ask Harriet to learn how important this house is for her. I wonder what should I be recording? Mary leaves, I watch Audrey put lotion on her face, and hear, "Lotion on makes it feel like one nostril is bigger than the other." Someone is telling me we are out of paper towels. I ask Harriet, "How many people live in this house?"

"One hundred people live in this house. They are all related and they are all the same. The moms and dads have 60 children. It's so big they have a huge party."

Thunder-McGuire explains, "children... are composers of meaning rather than merely handlers of art materials" (1994, p.51). At this moment, this seems like the world's grossest understatement.

The room is empty of children; everyone is off eating snack. With heaps of projects and delicate scraps tucked away there is still an energy circling the room. Like the studio of Francis Bacon, there are cans of soaking brushes, piles of curled paintings and uneven stacks of sketches; except in this room there are also snips of ribbon,

wads of masking tape, and tiny spiral notebooks. As I survey the surfaces, I wonder, in the end what evidence can I uncover how children use improvisation and adaptation when they make art?

On the table is a 12" x 18" piece of white construction paper with one side fringed with cuts 1/2 inch deep. Someone was careful to make even cuttings, even spacing. The fringe runs down one side of the paper resembling a Daniel Boone sleeve. From the looks of the paper, after fringing the side, the child comes upon the paper punch. Carefully and with concentration, the child punches one hole in the center of each fringe. When the fringe runs out, the child, apparently on a roll, continues punching holes around the edge of the paper. The child's intentions seem so purposeful decisions so clear. Did the child experience any ambiguity in her thinking, in the response to materials or in response to a mark? Who knows what the child is thinking as they cut, then punch, but, some- where in the integration between possibility and decision, is the life of the mind.

I find ambiguity not only in the activity of the child but, moreover, in my own research. Questioning my observations, the meaning behind the children's intent, the usefulness of my questions, I wonder if my uncoverings reveal any truth. I decide if I believe that out of ambiguity comes invention, then my tottering hunches are of importance. It is from my ambiguous observations that I discover clearer questions.

Things in the Landscape

I am struggling to bring this all to a tidy conclusion. Vibrating through the shut window, I hear some inane country western sounds. It is some man singing in a jerky nasal way. He seems to miss the beat of the music by either dragging the notes out or waiting too long to come in. As soon as I get used to one horrible song, a different crooner begins singing and I have to stop and try to make sense of that one. I bought a Christmas Memories

CD once that is a hodgepodge of holiday songs. The recording company distributing the blaring from the nearby parking lot must have caught hold of that idea. A woman yodels next and, behind the digitally mastered twang, I hear a man's voice shouting then laughing like a barking dog. I know about men who bark. A male friend of my daughter's stops on foggy nights at deer crossing signs rolls down his window, and barks. The shouting man begins to whack two sticks together that help drown out the whining music. Suddenly, several doors slam, the music stops, and the car screeches off.

After this incident, it is impossible to think about sweet small children dabbling in paint. My mind keeps fixating on the bloated sheep scene in Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Alan Bates, fallen on hard times, lives in a small hut with two *non compos mentis* border collies and tends sheep. The sheep get into some unripe hay and blow up like a green sea of tiny zeppelins, forcing the swarthy Bates to singly stab each one, releasing hot air. The sheep soon recover and lead happy productive lives unlike an earlier herd that are driven over a cliff by the de- ranged collies. I feel like the sheep, dazed and swollen, ignorant of a fateful future. Facing the LOT FULL sign, Is can the horizon for an opening, and wedge back into thought.

Collecting the World in Small Handfuls

Eleanor Duckworth's (1996) book *The Having of Wonderful Ideas* continually works its way to the top of my desk. Like an umbrella popping open to divert the sudden shower, Duckworth's wonderful ideas spring forth stating "the essence of intellectual development"(Duckworth, 1996, p.1) arrives from a history of risk taking, improvising, connecting, and building onto what has happened before. Uncovering the intellectual process in a child's art making helps accept the unfashionable ideas of the divergent thinker. Good teaching "must seek out, acknowledge, and take advantage of all

the pathways that people might take to their understanding and take those thoughts seriously, and set about helping students to pursue them in greater breadth and depth" (Duckworth, 1996, p. xii). The active interaction between an enlightened teacher, who applauds the child's connections and improvisations means valuing the not-knowing over the knowing.

It is the quick right answer that is thoughtless and carries no risk

And what about the researcher and her position? Can my life full of past experiences ever really understand the mind of a four-year-old? My years color what I see the young child experiencing and affect my response to their work. Is it expecting too much to always know what to ask next? As ideas emerge from the painting so do risks and vulnerability. Painting meaningful images is a personal act exposing sensitive moments in time. As intimate observer of this activity, I expose my own vulnerability through a personal exchange of meaning. Entering into such a conversation with a child, the child and I become personally connected. This connectedness is not unique to art making but it is a medium through which lives can take shape.

Gaps

By all appearances Lara is painting random marks on her easel paper. There are two semi-circles of black paint. Further down the paper there is a small red dot.

Me: "Can you tell me about your painting?"

Lara: "This is a rainbow (pointing to the black arch) and this is a broken rainbow." (pointing to a small curved section of black)

Me: "Is this you?" (pointing to the little red dot at the bottom of the page)

Lara: "No. That's a little red dot."

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Additional Reading

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