

Sponsoring Committee: Dr. Joseph Shosh, Moravian College
Dr. John Dilendik, Moravian College
Dr. Robert Mayer, Moravian College

THE SOCIAL SIDE OF SCHOOL:
A LOOK AT FREE PLAY AND FREE EXPLORATION
IN TWO PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

Susan McGinley
Elizabeth Wolford

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education
Moravian College
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
2003

Copyright © 2003 Susan McGinley and Elizabeth Wolford

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Together we would like to acknowledge the contributions of several key people that have made this research possible. We would not have been able to engage in this study without several professors we met along our journey as action researchers, who now are also a part of our review committee. Bob Mayer guided our design efforts with his delicate and insightful suggestions; Jack Dilendik introduced us to the one teaching tool that, in part, was the foundation of our study; and Joe Shosh was our inspiration for the process of action research, exuding enough energy and enthusiasm for us all.

We would be remiss if we did not mention the contributions of our students, who unknowingly inspire our efforts on a daily basis. Their eagerness to “help us with our homework” shows the love for learning that we can only hope stays with them for a lifetime. We are also grateful to their parents, who gave their consent, support, and interest to this project.

Without the support of our respective principals, this project could have never taken place. We are indebted to them for advocating the process of continual learning.

Personal Notes From Sue

To my colleague, Beth, whom I had the privilege to learn from, work with, and develop creative free play and free exploration experiences. Beth, your

perseverance inspired me, and your dedication to the children and our research has enlightened me. I am proud to have been your collaborative partner through our research. We started the MEDU program as strangers and along the way enhanced our teaching by becoming collaborators, and ultimately, finishing as friends. Thanks for the memorable experience.

I am eternally grateful to my friends and family, especially my Mom and my husband, Bob, who have enabled my vision of action research to become a reality. Thanks for supporting my endeavors, always believing in me, and giving me the confidence that I needed along my journey. Respectfully, I acknowledge my deceased father who has instilled in me an assiduous work ethic and a love of life, teaching me to be the best I can be every day of my life. Thanks, Dad!

Personal Notes From Beth

I would like to recognize the tremendous support from family, friends, and colleagues whose constant support lightened the load at all the right times. My husband, Dennis, and my son, Ryan, with their angelic patience; my sisters, with their shoulders of steel; and my colleagues, Anita and Trish, for endless words of encouragement.

And, naturally, I need to thank Sue for her unwavering efforts in keeping the inquiry going, her insightful perspective of her students and my students alike,

and her devotion to her students and the profession of teaching. Our collaboration has produced a valiant study, and a life-long friendship.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
CHAPTER	
I	THE SCAFFOLDING OF OUR TEACHING BACKGROUNDS
	Sue's Literacy Learning and Teaching Autobiography 1
	Beth's Literacy Learning and Teaching Autobiography 8
	Looking Into the Literature 16
	A First Look at Free Play 28
	A Pilot Study on Free Play 28
	Our Current Methodology 35
	Maintaining Trustworthiness 39
II	FREE PLAY AND FREE EXPLORATION WITH SUE AND HER CLASS
	Getting Acquainted With Sue's Class 41
	Introducing the Class to the Action Research Plan of Free Play and
	Free Exploration 47
	Our First Collaborative Free Exploration Project 47
	Our First Free Play Sociogram 51
	Our First Sociometric Matrix 54
	Bossing During A Math Free Exploration Activity 56
	An Observation of Free Play From Two Perspectives 59
	A Vignette of Ellie 66
	Our Second Collaborative Project 69
	Our Second Sociogram of Free Play 75
	Our Second Sociometric Matrix 79
	A Final Survey on Free Play and Free Exploration 83
	Conclusion 84

III FREE EXPLORATION AND FREE PLAY WITH BETH
AND HER CLASS

Paperwork and Introductions	87
The First Collaborative Project	91
A Second Pair of Eyes to Gather Data	97
A Glimpse at the Social Order of Things	101
Emerging Patterns of a Child in Need	104
A Fresh Perspective	110
Giving Collaborative Projects Another Go Round	111
Another Look at the Social Structure of the Class	114
A Final Survey and Interview	117
Initial Conclusions	120

IV

CO

INCLUDING THIS STUDY AND PREPARING FOR THE NEXT CYCLE

Bringing It All Together	122
Collaboration is Key	127
Questions	131

BIBLIOGRAPHY

134

APPENDICES

A	TIMELINE FOR OUR STUDY	136
B	PRINCIPAL CONSENT FORM	138
C	PARENT CONSENT FORM	139

LIST OF FIGURES

2.1	Geometric Design Rubric	50
2.2	October Sociogram	52
2.3	October Sociometric Matrix	56
2.4	Dalia's Journal	61
2.5	Bobby's Journal	62
2.6	Carl's Journal	64
2.7	Ellie's Journal	66
2.8	December Sociogram	76
2.9	December Sociometric Matrix	80
2.10	Final Surveys	83
3.1	Geometric Design Rubric	95
3.2	Student responses to Geometric Design Project	97
3.3	October Sociometric Matrix	102
3.4	October Sociogram	107
3.5	December Sociometric Matrix	115
3.6	Final Surveys	117

CHAPTER I
THE SCAFFOLDING OF OUR LEARNING AND TEACHING
BACKGROUNDS

When we met three years ago we could not foresee the potential of our friendship and collaboration as teachers and teacher-researchers. We met at a “cocktail party” on the first night of our inaugural class in our Master of Education program. The cocktail party was an icebreaker activity designed to help us create a sense of community among the teacher-researchers enrolled. This sense of community blossomed into friendship and a working relationship that has brought us to the point of collaborating on our thesis study. Although we have different backgrounds, our connection is based upon our common interests and styles of teaching. In the next section, we share our respective histories in order to provide insight into why we have become the teachers we are today.

Sue’s Literacy Learning and Teaching Autobiography

I attended Catholic School from kindergarten through college. No matter what the grade level, every desk was in a straight row, and the floors were so shiny and clean, you could see yourself in them. Perfection was demanded and

expected in our class work, behavior, appearance, attendance, and organization. Nuns comprised most of the faculty, with the exception of four lay teachers who came on board in the intermediate grades. My own first and second grade experiences, which I'll focus upon here since I now teach first and second grade, were quite different from most. We had a single classroom that consisted of 84 students, half of whom were in first grade and the other half in second grade.

I always enjoyed reading class most in school. I can still remember using the small hard back basal readers about Dick and Jane. Reading groups were my favorite part of the day because this was the time that children had the chance to develop a rapport with their teacher. Having the teacher's attention focused on your group was great. Even when another group was at the reading table I would listen to every lesson, over and over again. I just loved to watch my teacher interact with the students and vice-versa.

After our group reading lesson, we proceeded to join the rest of the class in completing our seatwork for the day. The endless dittos that smelled great, the thick phonics book with a different color for each year, the spelling book, and the small brown grammar book with written exercises at the end of each lesson were just some of the assignments that needed to be completed. If we somehow managed to work ahead, we were treated to a table with more dittos. Needless to say, most of us never hurried to complete all of the assigned work. Much to our dismay, incomplete school assignments were to be taken home for completion, in

addition to our regular homework. We learned that completing our class work at school allowed us more free time at home.

On Fridays we had a special reading day. Eighth grade students would come to our classroom and be our "reading helpers", and the bookmobile from the public library arrived, serving as a library on wheels. We also had time in our own school library where a parent volunteer would read to us. A Title 1 teacher would come into our room and do mini-lessons with every reading group. We also had time to work on SRA (Student Reading Assessment) folders on Fridays, independently at a center. The SRA box contained individual stories that were color coded according to reading level. We knew what color and story we needed to read and would proceed on our own. At the end of each story, the SRA story card had comprehension questions. We would write the answers down in our SRA notebook and then hand them into the teacher or a parent helper who would evaluate our work. I just loved SRA because I anticipated each new level with excitement.

Formal writing was completed on Fridays, as well. My teacher would write a topic on the board and our assignment would be to elaborate on the particular subject. We never were exposed to any modeling of the writing process; instead we were told to work independently. I don't ever recall having the opportunity to write creatively about my own interests. Our writing was assessed by the over use of a red pen. Everyone in the class would just cringe when their

writing assignments were returned to them. To this day, I feel a sense of inadequacy, sadness, and emptiness and I still cringe at the thought of writing. I know in my heart that my teacher was overwhelmed with the class size. She didn't have enough time to work independently with 84 students to develop our enthusiasm for writing.

Class rules and discipline policies were strictly enforced. Students needed to work quietly and independently for most of the day. Talking or any social interaction during class would result in immediate parental contact. I can attest to this. When I was in first grade, my friend needed help with reading and I tried to offer assistance. As a result of my talking, the school informed my mother immediately that I was disturbing the teacher and she was instructed to bring me to school the next day with my mouth taped shut. Coming from a strict Catholic family, my mother complied with the teacher's request and escorted me to school with my mouth taped as I cried from embarrassment. From that day on, I never spoke unless my hand was raised and I was asked to participate.

In retrospect, I believe that the Catholic school I attended wanted only the best for each of the students. The faculty would constantly strive to make us work to our potential. The discipline policy and classroom work ethic challenged all of us. Some of their policies were necessary and some archaic by today's standards. Of course, making changes and adapting the curriculum and discipline policies to enhance student success is a necessity for any school to be successful, and when

parents, teachers and students work together to develop these policies, success is more likely.

My dreams of becoming a teacher myself came true twenty-four years ago when I graduated from college. Filled with excitement and the desire to have my own classroom, I thought I was on my way. I sent out resumes, and interviews were going well, but due to declining enrollment, the prospect of getting a full time teaching position seemed to dwindle day by day. Everyone that I spoke with said that it would be virtually impossible to obtain a full time teaching position. Nevertheless, I was persistent and asked to be placed on the substitute list in five different districts.

As the month of September approached, I was filled with disappointment about not having my own class to teach. Every day I would be ready by 5:30 a.m. and wait by the telephone, hoping it would ring. I substituted on a regular basis for the first three months of the school year. It seemed that once the teachers had the opportunity to meet me, my chances of substituting in their building increased. I interviewed for a non-contracted teaching position and was notified that I would start the third week in November. Excited about beginning my career as an educator, I spent the first two weeks of November preparing to take over for a second grade classroom. The remainder of the year was gratifying as my vision of my own classroom became a reality.

My first seven years as an elementary teacher found me in a different role than I could have ever anticipated during my college days. I was always filling in for another teacher who would be out for part of the year, so I never had the opportunity to begin my school year in September. I always started part way through the year. Wanting to make the transition for the children as easy as possible, I would spend as much time as I could with the children and the teacher before I was going to take over the class. Classroom policies and procedures were already established, and I hesitated to make all of the changes that I would have wanted to make had the classroom been my own. I started out slowly by asking the children what their favorite part of the day was and what their least favorite part was, never forgetting to inquire why. My goal was to establish a classroom that excited and motivated each child, every day of the school year. I was determined that I would create an environment that would be filled with positive reinforcement, promote self-esteem, and help children develop a strong self-concept. I focused my energies on each and every child every day, trying to provide a hands-on, child-centered classroom quite unlike the understandably teacher-centered classroom I had attended as a girl.

With this goal in mind, I started the Kinder Kid, Smart Cookie, Beary Bright Bear and the Magical Moment Awards in our classroom. I use these awards to acknowledge a child in my class who takes the time to make a difference in someone else's life. Every award is unique and has a different focus.

The Kinder Kids Award is given to a student who helps someone or goes out of his or her way to demonstrate an act of kindness, which might include saying kind or thoughtful words, helping a classmate in school, at lunch, or on the playground. The Smart Cookie Award is given to students who help another student with classwork or who work well completing their own individual classwork. The Beary Bright Bear Award is given to a student who lifts up another child's spirits and brightens his or her day. The Magical Moment Award is given once a week to a student who demonstrates improvement in any academic, emotional, physical or social areas. I record every award that is given each day in a notebook kept on my desk next to the award certificates. There is ample opportunity for every child to receive any of these awards on any given day.

My philosophy has always been to provide an equal educational opportunity for every student. Over the years my style has changed, and I'm more focused now than I may once have been on what the children learn, and how they learn it, rather than on how much they learn. I always tell my students that I am looking for quality and not quantity. The environment in the classroom is centered on the children's work. I hope to develop a strong rapport with and earn the respect of each student and to support these qualities as students develop relationships with each other. Hopefully this will enable a trust to develop in the classroom and will usher in a team approach to learning. With this trust comes a

sense of security that will allow students to take risks to constantly challenge themselves to work to their abilities and beyond.

My discipline policy is quite different than that of my own first grade teacher. The class plays an active role in deciding on class rules and consequences for breaking those rules. Since they play a key and active role in this process they feel more in control and want to make our classroom work. I often call parents just to let them know that their child is doing a great job. This establishes an initial rapport that is helpful should the need arise to call with a concern later in the school year.

Over the years, I have changed from being a teacher who needed to be in control at all times to becoming more of a facilitator who helps students construct new understanding. At times I still struggle with balancing my approach to teaching, but I realize that the end result is a classroom of independent, productive children who are motivated and happy because they have had a say in creating their own classroom environment.

Beth's Literacy Learning and Teaching Autobiography

It seems that I have been reading, writing, and speaking forever. If you ask my mother, she will certainly substantiate the third part. I am usually found with a book in my hand, or at least in my bag. I have taken pen in hand often to

jot down ideas, start journals and write to friends, but I can't quite remember the start of all of that.

My memories of my own learning are very scattered, jumping from year to year with no apparent order. There was that song from first grade that I call the chipmunk song for which we all yearned to be the one to pick the letter to add to the song. "M" was my favorite: "moo mee moo mah mah..." That particular memory is so strong, that I use the song with my own students today. Then there were those SRA folders to work on. Boy, did I love picking from the folders on top. When I worked my way through the individual stories throughout each level, I worked my way to the top of the display and felt a great sense of accomplishment. In fifth grade I read "Mandy", a story that actually made me cry. Never before had a story moved me in that way. Of course, now I can't seem to find any that don't touch me in some way. Now I can picture my teacher sitting in her chair reading stories to us in Kindergarten. And who can forget the Letter People. Miss A and her "achoo", Mr. D and his donuts, Mr. B and his buttons. My sixth grade teacher loved reading to us at the end of the day. Paul Harvey was the author, I think, that she preferred. They were the stories that had mysterious endings for us to figure out. We even listened to some one day when the lights went out at school. Luckily the teacher had her flashlight.

Some vivid memories I have are only bits and pieces of events without many details of the learning involved. I remember having to dress up as a famous

person and give an oral report. That was in fourth grade, and I picked a male figure, whose name I can't remember, to present. I am not surprised that I don't recall very much about oral presentations. I have never liked to talk in front of a large group of my peers. Thrown in there somewhere were TONS of grammar workbooks; I don't know what we learned, just that we always did them. I'm sure we had our weekly spelling tests throughout elementary school, but I only vaguely remember taking them. These snippets are my only school based memories of my own learning process for literacy development. However, considering how much I love reading and even writing, I am quite taken aback by the fact that I don't really know how I developed this interest.

Hence, I've come to the realization that my interest in reading and writing may have developed at home rather than in school. My parents were always reading, whether it was a newspaper, a magazine, or a novel. I can picture them sitting at the kitchen table, each involved in their own respective reading. We always had bedtime stories, too, though with eight siblings, it was tough to get your pick all of the time. We would all crawl into the same bed to hear the story one of us had picked. My favorite pick was Little Gorilla, even though my brothers and sisters would groan every time I selected it. I had some diaries/journals that I would write in occasionally as well. Mom said she never read them, but I suspect my sisters did, and then told Mom. My oldest sister and I were always playing school with our sister and our brothers. In retrospect, I

suppose it isn't shocking that we are both teachers today.

No matter how hard I try, I can't remember a time when I was not able to read or write. Nor can I really decipher what brought me to the point I am at today. What I can surmise is that there must have been an ongoing underlying process that intrigued this young learner enough to hide books in her desk to read while sitting in junior high classes, where my literacy learning should still have been developing. Speaking of junior high, I wonder what ever happened to those business letters we learned to write?

This brief visitation to my own learning experiences has opened a window for me to look at my development as a teacher of literacy. I hope to make more of a mark on my students than many of my teachers have left on me. I certainly remember the quirks of many of my teachers, just not the learning they imparted to me. There were a few, however, who left some fundamental pieces in place for use in my own classroom. I look to those strengths to guide me and to remind me of what it is I need to accomplish.

Before I had my very own classroom, I worked with a group of twelve toddlers immersed in language acquisition. I watched those kids utter their first words. How did we get them there? We immersed them in a language rich environment as they played and explored the world around them. We were always talking, singing, reading, and listening with them.

When I taught my first kindergarten class, I knew I wanted to create a

literature-based program. I had no basals, no textbooks, no workbooks. I was free to design my own curriculum. I read the students a story and we could expand upon the ideas we had encountered, or make an art project to coincide with the happenings of the story. Early in that first school year, I signed up for a whole language seminar and almost immediately went to work implementing these ideas into my own classroom. I used songs, poems, books, magazines, chants, and anything else with print that I could find to bring literacy alive for my students. I saw immediate progress. Everything was starting to connect, at least as far as reading readiness was concerned. In the final months of that first school year I realized I had still not adequately addressed other facets of literacy, so I promised myself I would do something about it the next year.

The following September came quickly and brought with it a brand new class of kindergartners. I had my work cut out for me. The ability range was incredible. I had two students reading on the end of first grade level, and another student with no concept of what a letter was. As I planned for the year, I tried to incorporate reading, writing, and speaking into my self-designed curriculum. The poems, songs, and books of the previous year returned, and I added in journal writing, rewrites, and play-acting of favorite stories, which I hadn't used the first year thinking it was "playing" and not "learning". I was proud of their efforts, and mine for that matter, but something was still missing.

Another September, another kindergarten class. I again used all of the

“hits” from the previous years, but I knew I needed to delve more deeply into language to develop my students’ speaking skills. I decided that student-designed puppet shows would be a weekly event in our classroom. My shy kids initially balked at the idea, but when I enticed them by inviting an audience of their siblings, they shined. Now they were reading, attempting to write, and speaking constantly in the classroom. I was happy but not content. I began to realize that some children seemed not to have mastered the basic sounds, even though they were developing a decent sight word vocabulary. What was the missing link? That’s right, good old phonics.

So, September came around once again, and I felt I was prepared to give the students the best education I could give them. I added two components to our curriculum that I had loved as a child... the chipmunk song and word wheels. Adding these two elements pulled the whole literacy development in the room together. In my balanced literacy classroom, students directed their own plays, wrote their own stories, and showed signs of reading readiness well beyond my expectations. I was thrilled. I had finally designed my own way of teaching.

That summer my husband and I moved, forcing me to change schools. I was handed an all-encompassing language arts program to use that seemed to be beautifully designed. I abandoned what I had created over the previous four years so that I could adopt the materials and practices of my new placement. In addition, I had two other kindergarten colleagues to work with, when I had

previously been all on my own. I struggled all year to work with the program and to cooperate with teaching styles that were effective and productive, but different than my own. What eased my mind was that the language arts program was new to everyone, since the school district had just adopted the program that summer. My kindergarten colleagues and I worked together, sharing ideas and projects, and attempting to make sense of it all.

I have most recently had the opportunity to teach first grade, and I continue to strive to include ample opportunity for experiential learning and to provide meaningful real-life applications of our work, while allowing the children freedom to make their own choices about learning. Last year, I was inspired as I watched two boys diligently using their indoor recess time to write a book. I was amazed. They ended up working on this for several days. One boy updated me periodically with a total number of pages that he and his partner had completed. “Mrs. Wolford,” he would say, “we are up to 15 pages, but I think it’s going to be 20 pages when we are done!” His partner was too concerned with writing the words and drawing the pictures to really care if I noticed what they were up to. Both boys were intent on the project, and each had his own source of joy. One needed to bring my attention to what he was doing, while the other preferred to work without my intervention. I asked them about the book, and they began to tell me how they came up with the idea. As they were talking, I realized they

were incorporating the writing process we had been discussing into their individual work.

As I watched them, I started wondering how I could possibly take away or shorten this valuable free time. My inclination was to extend recess when we don't need to share the playground, but then I began to feel guilty that I was taking time away for more valuable pursuits like reading, math or science. As I watched the kids play, I could see them all using concepts and ideas from their lives and from what we have talked about in school. Every time I introduced a new math manipulative or used an old one in a new way, the children would beg to "play" with it at recess time. My answer was always, "well, of course". One group of girls particularly liked the pattern blocks we used as we talked about space shapes and plane shapes. They had those blocks out every chance they could get. They were not just making pretty designs, I discovered as I began to watch more closely. They were applying vocabulary and concepts from our math studies to their play. Some were discussing the number of corners and sides the various shapes had, while others were saying that they were attempting to make symmetrical designs. How my heart swelled to hear the students using what I was trying to teach them. Application of knowledge is key. Without it, all we would see is regurgitation of information.

If I had assigned either of these tasks with specific directions, the class would no doubt have been able to perform, but, by allowing the children time to

decide what they wanted to do, they showed me where their interests and abilities lay. I didn't have a formal checklist to fill out, nor had I designed a test to monitor their acquisition of knowledge. All I did was give them time to play. They did the rest of the work.

Each year I try to ask myself, "What shall I do differently this time?" This question is paramount to our profession. Only through self-reflection can we improve our practice and keep the cycle of learning in motion. Every experience, every failure, every success adds a piece to an ever expanding picture. I realize that how I learned is interconnected with how I teach, and how my students play is interconnected with how they learn. The more we can immerse our students in meaningful experiences, the better we prepare them for future learning success, and the better we prepare ourselves, as well. For the evolution to continue, I must keep myself open, and look at my practice through the eyes of my students, which is what has inspired my undertaking of the following research agenda.

Looking Into the Literature

Our combined interest in free exploration and free play grew from our own "free exploration" of ideas when deciding upon a research topic. We brainstormed many ideas and quickly became aware of an overall theme in both of our lists. Part of our responsibility as teachers is to develop the academic skills of our students. We feel that an equally important aspect of our work is

integrating the academic and the social characteristics of our students. We aspired to design a study that would capture this conviction. The literature available on this topic helped to guide our thinking.

For us, free exploration is an opportunity for the children to experiment with, explore, and manipulate materials made available in the classroom. As we watch our students we realize that free exploration encompasses even more. Free exploration differs from traditional instruction as it allows the children to come in with an open mind and explore their individual agendas within the same activity. Whenever we are able to give the students unstructured yet guided activities, they are able to explore ideas that are important to them and make their own meanings of things. This belief is supported by Vygotsky's principle of the "zone of proximal development". Vygotsky (1978) views learning as a social phenomenon, suggesting that students learn best when instruction is presented one step ahead of where they could work comfortably and independently without teacher assistance. Teachers should not expect students to learn something without first making sure that the new learning can be connected to what the child already knows. Scaffolding assures that a child will continue to learn in a natural progression because the teacher helps the child build upon each experience. Hence, we, as teachers, must ensure that we are matching the learning in our classrooms "in some manner with the child's developmental level" (p. 85). Of course, students don't enter our classrooms as blank slates, so we must also be

careful to note that “learning and development are interrelated from the child’s very first day of life” (p. 84). Students arrive in kindergarten and the primary grades filled with many experiences. Hence, we must allow the children to show us how to treat them by allowing them to engage in activities they have chosen, allowing more meaningful learning to occur than when they are asked to absorb and regurgitate facts. In this way, not only are students discovering concepts and ideas that stem from our prescribed curriculum, but they are also using social and personal skills that concurrently need to be developed, whether working individually or in groups.

John Dewey’s (1938) philosophy of education focuses on learning through experiences. These experiences, he explains, must be educative. In traditional and progressive schools alike, students have experiences that all too often are engaging, but do not necessarily lead to future learning. This continuity of experience should guide a teacher’s planning to ensure continuous growth in a positive direction. Dewey, like Vygotsky, believed that learning is social. Children learn through contact and communication. “Experience does not occur in a vacuum,” he writes (p. 40). Until the students engage in experiences that stimulate their own abilities with what Vygotsky would call a more knowledgeable other, they are unable to realize their fullest potential. In Dewey’s words,

There is incumbent upon the educator the duty of instituting a much more intelligent, and consequently more difficult, kind of planning. He must survey the capacities and needs of the particular set of individuals with whom he is dealing and must at the same time arrange the conditions which provide the subject-matter or content for experiences that satisfy these needs and develop these capacities. The planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power. (58)

Of course, allowing the students to freely explore materials does not mean allowing a free-for-all. Through careful guidance with minimal imposition of a teacher's own ideas, we can encourage students to think for themselves and learn through free exploration. There will be much learning that teachers neither plan for, nor necessarily expect, and teachers must be ready and willing to seize these opportunities to lead to new educative experiences. This collateral learning has the potential to lead to some of the more educative experiences that the students may have. Dewey notes just how challenging this can be when he says, "The central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (p. 27). Hence, we teachers must learn to allow experience to open the door to more learning.

Many studies have explored the use of free exploration across the curriculum. In their study, Boram and Marek (1991) explored the link between conceptual understanding, free exploration of hands-on science exhibits, and Piagetian cognitive developmental levels in a qualitative study, using mainly interviews and observation as the data collection tools. The data gathered included selecting four exhibits; two that attempted to convey a concrete concept, while the other two presented a formal concept. The subjects were 45 children between the ages of 5 and 13. Each subject was interviewed and tested using a set of eight Piagetian tasks. The subjects were then divided into three categories: pre-concrete, concrete, and post-concrete. After being given a pretest to determine background knowledge, the subjects were individually given an opportunity to freely explore a hands-on science exhibit. Then they were asked to explain how they thought the exhibit worked. The researchers found that the level of conceptual understanding of the concrete exhibits increased with each developmental group.

Richardson and Ruane (1996) explored the implementation of independent literacy activities promoting free exploration to develop writing readiness with kindergarten students. This project was later developed into a program for improving writing readiness skills. The need for writing readiness skills was documented through writing observation checklists, anecdotal records, writing portfolios, and diagnostic tests. The researchers found indications of increased

writing readiness, improvement in students' interest in writing, and a decrease in apprehension of using the writing process.

In addition to free exploration opportunities, we feel that it is imperative our students have a daily period of free play in which they are applying knowledge they have learned to new areas and incorporating new ways of thinking in an atmosphere of self-guided inquiry and manipulation of the world at hand. Watching during recess, we see that many students incorporate what they are learning in class to their interactions with their peers. Children playing with Barbies and giving directions to each other as they drive the Barbie sports car shows us that they understand our work with a map much better than any test could. As we notice our students attempting to work out conflicts, we like to remind them that we all have to learn how to get along as a life skill. As we tell our students, "we don't all have to be best friends, but we do have to work together nicely."

Vygotsky reminds us that, "It is incorrect to conceive of play as activity without purpose" (p. 103). Free play allows children the opportunity to become creative, use their imaginations, and become their own person. Often free play is viewed as non-educational time, but we see it as a time for a genuine learning to take place. Play can be described as a time to practice freely the ideas and questions we may have about life in general. Balke (1997), when relating art to play, says, "Children clearly express their feelings and thoughts about life when

they are given free reign to paint or play act” (p. 356). Like Vygotsky, Balke believes that children want to try out what they cannot yet master. Going further, play with the future can occur during story writing opportunities, especially when the children reenact what they have written. Stories fill many purposes, one of which is to “rehearse roles and exercise powers that prepare us for the future” (Mayher et al. p. 11). This is just what our primary students are doing as they create stories, written or acted out, while playing.

Dunn and Herwig (1992) examined the relationship of social-cognitive play with convergent and divergent thinking. The researchers were working with the hypothesis that “higher levels of cognitive performance would be seen in children displaying higher levels of cognitive play” (p. 2). This was considered exploratory in nature, therefore generating no specific hypotheses. During free play sessions, the researchers observed 34 children attending full-day preschool for one minute each day. Convergent and divergent thinking were assessed during two separate sessions using standardized tests. The researchers also used an alternate uses task as a measure of divergent thinking. The results pointed to an association between high levels of nonsocial play and lower scores on convergent thinking. This research reported a discrepancy with previous research in the amount of parallel-constructive play the children engaged in. Suggestions for possible influences included the preschool environment and the full-day nature of the program. This examination seems to be looking to establish the same

connection between social development and academic potential in which we are interested. The researchers stated “the potential impact of social development on cognitive performance warrants further consideration”. This document represents our best attempt to give such consideration to the learning of the student within our respective classrooms.

Morrow and Rand (1991) offer many valid ideas on manipulating the physical environment of the classroom in order to promote learning during free play. They look at “how the classroom environment can be changed to encourage play which, in turn, may increase and promote literacy activity among children during their preschool and kindergarten years” (p. 396). The participants in their study were divided into one of four groups: 1) Paper, pencil and books with adult guidance, 2) Thematic materials with adult guidance, 3) Thematic materials without adult guidance, 4) Traditional curriculum control group (made no changes in dramatic play areas). In the groups with guidance, the teachers encouraged the children in the use of the materials and modeled appropriate behaviors.

Preintervention data were collected and compared with the four observations conducted daily during the study. The researchers were looking for reading, writing, and paper-handling skills during play. They found that a dramatic play area that was designed to include appropriate literacy materials engaged the students in literacy behaviors. Also, the researchers noted that the teacher’s role “is extremely important in guiding and modeling literacy behavior which children

can emulate” (p. 400). The children were more likely to voluntarily engage in literacy behaviors during play when teachers offered guidance with the materials available. Morrow and Rand’s findings helped us to determine what material to make available for free play and how to introduce these materials, knowing that we needed to allow for guidance and modeling while the children were engaged with the materials.

Wolfgang, Stannard, and Jones (2001) investigated levels of preschool children’s block play performance and looked for possible correlations to future achievement in mathematics. They found no significant correlations between early block play and elementary level standardized test scores; however, there was a noticeable correlation between preschool block performance math achievement in middle school through high school. The researchers felt that one explanation for this could be that “children attain formal operational thinking at age eleven which enables them to reason in abstract terms and separate from the need to rely as heavily on concrete objects” (p. 178) . They further explained that it was in subjects that require “true higher-order thinking” that effects of early block play can be seen. These findings helped us to see that we were laying the groundwork for future learning and success and that we may not see immediate results, particularly in a study lasting only four months.

Vivian Paley, a kindergarten teacher for over thirty years who engaged in teacher-research and recorded her findings by writing books that shared her

students' stories, offers a unique perspective into the mindset of children as they work and play within the classroom. Through her stories, Paley allows her students to come alive and share their most important issues. Throughout her narrative, Paley's thoughts are interspersed as she observes the children and reflects upon what she saw, prompting herself to ask new questions and observe the children again for the answers. She epitomizes the cyclical nature of action research itself. Paley's description of her classroom offered ideas for techniques and strategies that we could use for our own free play and free exploration opportunities. Her stories remind us of the natural way children go about their own agendas.

In *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, Paley shared her anxiety over instituting a change in classroom procedures, driven by her frustration of the social order of play. Some children were always left out. By imposing a new rule, was she breaking down the sense of community that she had developed with her students? Was the new rule fair? Paley states, "Since play is the subject children care the most about, its precise words and actions – especially the negative ones – are easily available and carry the greatest meaning" (p. 114). In her story, one little girl, Lisa, had difficulty adjusting to the new rule, but through modeling and support she found that this new rule applied to more than just play; she found it applied to the world all around her. "So much of teaching straddles the moral fence: Should I or shouldn't I? Is it right or wrong, fair or unfair, proper or

improper?” (p. 73). Paley was able to use the children as her gauge to see the effectiveness of her new plan.

In her *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter: the Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom*, Paley relates the tale of a student who was isolated from the rest of the class. It was through free exploration of stories that this outsider became a participating member of the class.

Friendship and fantasy form the natural path that leads children into a new world of other voices, other views, and other ways of expressing ideas and feelings they recognize as similar to their own. (p. 34)

A teacher must always keep in mind that children all have their own agendas, and that each is of the utmost importance to that particular child. Paley reminds us that, “We can never fully discover the essential issues for each child or set up the perfectly safe environment. What we do is continually demonstrate the process of searching for solutions. This is the point at which studying becomes teaching” (p. 57). In our research, we are reminded that as we study and teach our students, their individual differences and needs must be addressed, creating a classroom environment in which no one is isolated and everyone feels comfortable with themselves and with their classmates.

In her book, *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, Paley says, “Let’s face it, what school usually does is continually interrupt any attempt on the part of children to recapture the highly focused intensity of play. What we need to do is

help them - and ourselves - get back on the track” (p. 75). Paley’s words helped us to generate our topic, reminding us of the importance of play for our young students.

Paley (1990) used the play of her children to gauge where their interests lay. Then, in a year long ‘teachable moment’, Paley adapted her curriculum around those issues that arose from their play.

It is, after all, unnecessary to concentrate on only one thing at a time. The rhythm of children’s thinking doesn’t work that way. In play [children] dig down and under, circle above and around, changing voices and costumes and even playmates when required (p. 79).

We learned that the students are the best curriculum directors that we could have.

A First Look at Free Play

To prepare to conduct this study of free exploration and play, we each conducted pilot studies in the spring of 2001. At that time, Beth chose to focus on free play and the free choice that this unstructured time should allow, while Sue studied student ownership. We felt that the way we had been running our respective classrooms was not allowing adequate opportunities for these endeavors. Since Beth’s study is closely related to our current research agenda, we will share her thoughts and methods as the pilot study progressed in order to explain the

foundation that has been built, and the starting point from which we began our current research.

A Pilot Study on Free Play

I was curious to see what my students would do with free time, what they would learn, and how they would interact. I was also curious to see how certain children, in particular, would use this time, knowing that in our present classroom routine, they seemed barely able to complete any task without direction from me. My inquiries were fueled by Arhar (2001) when she states:

The stance we take toward our topic is important. If we maintain a sense of wonder and curiosity as opposed to one of judgment, we may be able to view the topic from multiple perspectives, rather than just one perspective. Viewing the topic (question) as a problem or a possibility, an issue or a concern, will influence the design, conduct, and consequences of our study. Maintaining curiosity throughout the research process is almost a guarantee of success. (p. 89)

I set out to design my pilot research project using Arhar's design as a guide. I had it all mapped out. First we would introduce puppet shows, then model role playing, and finish with a student fashion show that I would direct! Excellent plan if I do say so myself! Or was it? I wasn't quite sure. I didn't feel

that my original question of free play (time not structured by the teacher) was truly being looked at. I was concerned with the lack of opportunity my students had for self-directed learning, but I had designed a study that had specific projects and schedules in its makeup! When I discussed my concerns with my professor, he asked one simple question, “What is it you want to know as a result of this study?” I answered, “I want to explore the idea of free exploration time in my kindergarten class.” I had just stated my research question! Was it really that simple, I wondered to myself? As I prepared a new data collection plan, everything began to fall into place.

The next step was to gain parental consent for the children’s participation in my study. I was quite nervous over this, knowing that I was opening myself up to their scrutiny. I needn’t have worried, however, because I had nothing but support from the parents, and even gained a few compliments and words of encouragement. Now I was ready to involve the class.

I introduced the idea by telling my students they would be helping me with my work for “those classes I take after school.” The children were delighted to help, and even more delighted to find out that this meant they would have more time to play in our day. We went over the rules of the classroom as a reminder, and I set them free. I began to survey the room and take in what was happening all around me. Before, I knew it, the 20 minute time slot had vanished and it was time to clean up and go home.

Later that day I sat down to try to record my observations and found it to be quite difficult, certainly more difficult than I had envisioned. I lacked specific details of engagements, remembered very few direct quotes and interactions from the students, and realized I had little to report about one whole group of students. I decided to keep a note pad with me from then on to help me remember the specific events that transpired. Another difficulty I ran into throughout the data collection period was the inconsistency of our schedule. At times, school wide projects and assemblies conflicted with our timing for free play. Mother Nature threw in her own curve ball by delivering a “grand slam” of snow days and delayed openings right in the heart of the data collection stage. Since this was a pilot study, time was limited in the first place, creating more panic than comfort with this aspect of my research.

I also found that I was often distracted from data gathering while attending to the day-to-day duties of a teacher. First and foremost, I am a teacher with responsibilities, like all other teachers. I will have to admit that, at first, I was overwhelmed with balancing my usual duties and this additional project. Once I ‘fell into the groove’, so to say, I found that my observations almost became second nature and that I needed fewer and fewer notes to capture what was occurring in the room. These notes, observations, and all future data were collected into a field log, never certain which pieces will be of value to the research. Maintaining the log was crucial to keeping the research agenda on track.

Large margins on the pages allowed room for additional notes to be added later; line numbers and page numbers helped to keep everything organized.

As we were collecting data, my fellow graduate students and I were asked to form support groups that would aide each other with our individual research agendas. We were encouraged to form our own groups, using our own criteria. I chose to join with a group of fellow primary teachers. While they helped me to determine what data to collect next, I feel they were often not critical enough. We would have done better to include in our group someone who would offer a different perspective of our agenda.

The particulars of this study found me using various methods of data collection. The most powerful data collection tool was the participant observation, in which we engaged to different degrees with the children we were observing (Arhar, p. 137). This worked particularly well for my study because my research question revolved around student behavior. I also found shadow logs helpful when I needed to focus my attention on one student or a small group of students. A shadow study is used to focus observations, which helped us to view free exploration and play from the student's perspective. Sociograms helped me to organize and map out what it was I was seeing as far as student interactions and patterns in groupings. "A sociogram is a technique for studying peer networks and relationships to determine a student's position within the social structure of the class" (Arhar p. 156).

The data collection tool that I struggled with the most was the interview. In preparing the class for the interview, I had students complete journal entries about free play. Then, finding the time to pull each student to chat individually was challenging, but worthwhile. The interview with one student in particular, Jerry, offered much more information than I ever would have gleaned from the journal alone. Orally Jerry was able to express what he enjoyed most about free play and how he would miss that time when he moved on the following year. I think my lack of experience and my nervous desire to conduct the perfect interview also made the interview more difficult than it really needed to be.

Once we all had had an opportunity to collect some data, it was time to begin to analyze what we had discovered. Arhar explains that, "As we describe our observations and record hunches, these may in turn shape the focus of new observations" (p.139). The nature of action research is a cycle of observation, reflection, and action. As I began to look at my participant observations, with the help of my support group, I began to notice patterns of behavior of certain students, as well as a hole in my data that needed to be filled. I had totally overlooked one group of students. This reflection on my data enabled me to be more focused in my observations and plan further data collection.

The first tool we used to analyze our data was coding. As Ely et al. explains, "In actual practice, we read and reread a portion of data and provide labels - usually notes in the margins - that identify a meaning unit" (p. 162). I

gave names to the patterns in my data that I was discovering. Was I doing it right? I wasn't sure at first, but I came to realize that these labels are not fixed. They changed as my data demanded it. According to Atkinson, "The ethnographer will also be aware that field notes are not hard and fast "data" because their meaning and significance are never fixed" (p. 21). Then it was time to put these codes into "bins" and determine "themes" from their organization. The emerging themes were: 1.) The students thoroughly enjoyed this time, 2.) The children grouped themselves according to friends, first, then activity, 3.) Free play is a time for social interactions, 4.) Free play allows a child to apply all types of skills: academic, creative, and social. While I ended up with four bins and corresponding theme statements, I really only needed two, because some of the themes listed above held overlapping data that supported one metatheme. It was only through the process of coding, binning and developing themes, and having my professor read my memo describing them all, that I discovered this, however.

After analyzing the data and organizing it into understandable pieces, it was time to write the information in various ways in order to share what I learned. No one is going to want to leaf through my voluminous field log to extract my findings, as only the key elements of my findings hold the importance that I wish to share. Some of what is in there is not relevant to my findings. One type of writing I used to share data was a vignette. Ely et al. (1997) defines vignette as, "narrative investigations that carry within them an interpretation of the person,

experience, or situation that the writer describes and captures in a brief portrayal, what has been learned over a period of time” (p. 70). I chose to write about the one boy who had shown in the interviews his concern about being able to talk to me after kindergarten is done. Using the vignette, I attempted to give a short story of his point of view over the course of my study. Then, I wrote a portrait of another boy who generally played on the fringes of the group, but who on one occasion interacted after receiving support of his idea from me. These types of writings “help to tell the stories of our research” (Ely et al. p. 65). Another type of writing I explored was a Patai poem, which is made up of the words of a participant taken from an interview without the interviewer’s words. I realized I had a rich piece of my research story there, after it was written. The final write up from my study was a pastiche, which takes “separate pieces that the reader must stitch together from the separate parts into a more meaningful whole” (Ely et al. p. 96).

The positive attitude that the children always displayed when I would mention free play told me that this time was highly regarded in their eyes. Interacting with Jerry as he navigated free play allowed me to help him become more independent with decision-making. For three students in my class, it didn’t seem to matter what they played with, as long as they were doing it together, indicating to me that friendship is an important factor in helping us decide who we are and what we want to do. I ended my study realizing the importance of

kindergarten as a safe place for children to experiment and learn about social issues such as friendship. This realization reminds me of a statement I heard at a conference I attended last year, “Childhood should be a journey, not a race.”

By beginning to learn the process of action research through our pilot studies, Sue and I have come to value our role as a researcher in our respective classrooms. Working out our “hitches in practice” and looking at our teaching from new perspectives can only help our teaching. As a result of continued engagement with this process, we will make ourselves better teachers, which will benefit our schools, the community, and most importantly, our students.

Our Current Methodology

Of course, our pilot studies were only the beginning of our formal teacher action research agendas. We utilized many of the same techniques for data collection, but the many insights we gained from conducting the pilot studies prevented us from having the same hang-ups and frustrations. Our new topic builds upon our previous questions, reflecting the endless cycle of action research. As we uncover and record more information about a topic, we are inclined to ponder what we have learned and ask more questions. Our collaborative study was designed to answer some of those ever-surfacing questions.

Participant observations (Arhar, 2001; Ely et al., 1997; Bogdan and Biklen, 1998) of our own classrooms took place on a daily basis during periods of

free exploration and free play. We started with an open perspective and let our data guide our subsequent observations. We focused our observations on themes that emerged. We wrote observer comments, or our own feelings, hunches, questions, and thoughts on what we observed, in parentheses in our field log to provide our personal viewpoint on the information we were gathering. We made additional observations as needed. In addition, on a monthly basis, we made participant observations of each other's classroom. These observations were the most unique design element of our study as it highlights the collaboration we shared. This also helped to provide an "outsider's" perspective and added an additional layer of trustworthiness and credibility, to the data collection process.

We also completed shadow studies (Arhar p. 141) of children from each classroom as needed. We used these later in the study as we pinpointed students who required more observation as determined by how they stood out from other participants.

The affective nature of our study required assessment strategies that quantify what we observe. The matrix for sociometric analysis (Schmuck, 1971) provided the tool for documenting the students' choices of classmates they would choose to work with. By plotting the students' peer nominations when asked who they would like to sit near when we changed our desk arrangement, we were able to analyze the rank orders our students held at various intervals during the study. This tool is useful in identifying children who stand out in some way. We

completed this matrix twice during the study to attempt to gather data of social groupings in the beginning and at the end of our study.

Sociograms, completed twice in each classroom, also provided an opportunity to literally draw a picture of the relationships and interactions of our students. Students were observed during free play and their movements and grouping were recorded in a diagram. We also wrote our participant observations and observer comments in our log to accompany these diagrams.

We designed collaborative projects based on mutual curriculum for mid-September and mid-December. These projects showed another dimension of how the students work together given an open task. We capitalized on the fact that learning is social, that students will learn as they work together. The projects were designed to have an element of free-exploration, with boundaries and guidance, but no set way to complete the tasks. To develop our first collaborative project, we used ideas from the guide by Gonsalves and Kopp (1995), in which they presented activities designed for elementary age students, and intended to provide hands-on, integrated learning experiences while teaching math.

We had planned to administer surveys after each collaborative project to gain the students' perspective on how their groups worked on the projects. After using the survey with our geometric design collaborative project, we felt we could obtain more insight with an open-ended type of survey. We had the children draw

a picture and write words to accompany it. A copy of our survey can be found in the write up of our individual research stories.

We conducted informal interviews (Arhar, 2001; Seideman, 1998) as a follow-up to the surveys to clarify and personalize the data collected. We interviewed students from our classrooms whose survey answers warranted clarification. We determined questions by student responses on the surveys. We asked for explanations and more information of their given answers. Whole group interviews allowed for the students to springboard off of their classmates' responses. These proved to be quite insightful, showing the children's thinking and position on free exploration and free play.

We gave writing prompts on a monthly basis to gain further insight on the students' perspective on their own social development as well as their feelings about free exploration opportunities. This projective technique (Arhar, 2001) also provided more insight into the attitudes and feelings of the children by using open-ended questions and/or incomplete sentences for the children to finish. The topics were pre-determined in order to help us to gain insight on the children's perspectives about free play and free exploration.

We created analytic memos (Arhar, 2001) periodically throughout the study, as needed. These memos were created after several days or weeks of data collection to help us reflect on what had already been collected and to learn what we needed to do next. We were able to begin to see emerging patterns, words and

key ideas to help focus our study. Ongoing analysis of the data was an integral part of the study.

We documented and compiled all of these items into our field log. We created a timeline that we relied upon to keep us organized. (See Appendix A.) We deviated from the timeline when necessary, staying flexible enough to let the emerging data guide our study.

Maintaining Trustworthiness

Throughout our data collection process, we worked to maintain trustworthiness as action researchers. As we embark upon this study, we realize that our hope to view the benefit of free exploration and free play may cloud our impartiality. We can compensate for this with the various perspectives we will gain from viewing each other's classrooms, as well as including student opinion surveys and interviews. Being aware of our potential bias will also assist us in keeping our minds open as we collect and analyze our data. The multiple sources of data allow us to triangulate our findings. What we think we see on a sociometric matrix, for example, can either be supported or negated with what is observed and with what the students report themselves with writing prompts, interviews, and surveys. We also have a unique element in that another teacher researcher is able to come in to the classroom as another observer adding an outsider's perspective. We also worked closely with our teacher inquiry support

groups who were essential in helping us see our data from multiple points of view.

With our proposed methodology completed, our next step was to seek the necessary approvals. Moravian College's Human Subjects Internal Review board gave their consent to proceed at the beginning of the school year. We then asked our respective principals to sign for their consent, acknowledging that we were conducting a classroom-based study with our classes this year. (See Appendix B.) We then needed to obtain consent from our students and their parents to begin our study. (See Appendix C.)

CHAPTER II

FREE PLAY AND FREE EXPLORATION WITH SUE AND HER CLASS

Getting Acquainted With Sue's Class

I am currently teaching second grade with a total of twenty students, or thirteen boys and seven girls in the class. My classroom typically contains students with average to below average ability. This year I am teaching in an inclusion program, which puts several special education students in the room for daily instruction. While families that attend her school are generally middle to upper-middle class with both parents being well educated and employed in professional careers, there is a cluster of students in my class whose families are currently unemployed due to the recent economic downturn.

Most of the students were in my classroom for first grade as part of a looping program. At the end of first grade, parents and students had the option to end their involvement with the looping program and be placed with another teacher for second grade. All of the children in my class stayed together and started second grade in September with the exception of two of the students whose families moved over the summer. I am the first to admit that the looping program should continue into the second year only if the program is working well for the individual child. I firmly believe that the child's learning interests and needs must determine the appropriate placement. Every child's educational needs

are unique and therefore a looping program may not lead to the best educable experiences for all students.

In fact, one of the children who moved from Sue's class over the summer misses her classmates, so she still comes to visit whenever she has a day off from her new school. Working together with this student to coordinate a day that she could join her friends proved to be a challenge but it was worth the effort to see everyone come together, interact and play. Before she leaves the other children always ask when she will be returning. It's great to see these friendships blossom.

I believe that this type of connection is one of the most beneficial aspects of the program. The looping program is designed to include the social side of school instead of focusing exclusively on the academics. This is my favorite part of the program. I believe as educators we need to take the time to know our students. It takes me a while to really get to know how a child learns and thinks, and the rapport that I develop during the first year is just the beginning of this process. The looping program has been a rewarding experience for me and has proved to be beneficial during the eight years that I have been involved in this program.

September found the children smiling and laughing as they walked down the hall and recalled some of their fondest memories of the summer and of their first grade experience. I remember many of the children feeling nervous and anxious and being very shy on the first day of first grade. When the children loop

to second grade with me, I can celebrate the first day of the second year because they are already excited and happy to return to our little family unit in school. This September was notably special for me because some of the children brought in pictures of the picnic that the class had shared in August.

Let's take a walk into my classroom during the first week of school and see how the children interact and connect with each other. The students will be introduced using pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. New faces this year belong to Paul, Alana and Mike. The sound of a tractor is heard and seems to be coming from one of the children. Everyone stops and looks at Paul, who is using his arms as if he were steering the tractor and his voice is loud and shrieking as he says, "I'm Paul and I am cutting all of the hay down in the field. Move out of my way. I gotta get this job done today!" Although Paul doesn't know the names of his classmates he focuses on the job at hand, which is to continue to cut down the hay while saying hi in a friendly way to all whom he passes during his adventure in the field. The other children in the class seem a bit perplexed by what he is doing, their faces puzzled as to why Paul is acting like a tractor. Two girls, Karissa and Ellie, ask him what he is doing. Ellie tells him he is stupid. Ellie continues to taunt him, telling him that he's strange and that the kids in this class don't act like tractors. Paul tells her to shut up, and Ellie responds with the same advice. She says, "You shut up, or I'll tell the teacher on you!"

Ellie replies, “I don’t like you and I wish you weren’t in this class”! She then stomps off with her eyes up in the air in disgust, an arm folded, and struts to her seat. Once there she puts her head down and starts to sulk. Several other children in the class try to make Paul feel better, telling him that Ellie is bossy and that she can even be a bully. They reassure Paul that Ellie can be like that with everyone. They tell him that the teacher will give Ellie time out if she needs it and that she will be coming over to apologize for what Mrs. McGinley calls “inappropriate behavior.” They say that’s what the teacher calls it when you do something wrong. The children tell Paul that Ellie doesn’t like time out, so she’ll be nice for a long, long time. She doesn’t like to miss recess. Paul’s feelings are still hurt and tears emerge, as he tells another child, “I don’t like Ellie and I miss my other class!” I intervened at this point, explaining the importance of being a “Kinder Kid.” Ellie and Paul shook hands and seemed as if they were ready to put the tractor ride behind them when all of a sudden the tractor started its motor and began to cut down more hay, and Ellie began to laugh again. Paul responded with more tears, and Ellie lost her recess on this first day of second grade.

Conflict resolution intervention strategies popped into my mind and were among the first things I knew I would attempt with Ellie. On one hand I felt I must not have made a strong enough impact on inappropriate behavior last year or this would not have happened on the first day of second grade. On the other, I knew I must start where Ellie was now, not where she left off at the end of first grade.

The classroom was completely quiet after the Ellie incident when all of a sudden Alana walked into the classroom with her head down, making no eye contact with the other students or with me. She heard her name as I walked up to her and said, “Good morning, Alana,” but she didn’t look up and didn’t respond. I repeated, “Good morning, Alana, and welcome to our classroom. I am so excited to have you in our class. Did you get the postcard that I sent you in the mail?” Alana still didn’t respond. “I wrote a note to invite you to a picnic that our class had in August and was sad when you weren’t able to come. I missed you and wished you could have been there. I gave all of the children a treat bag at the picnic filled with goodies, and I have one here for you. Would you like it?” Alana looked up, smiled, and offered her thanks. Alana said that she wanted to come to the picnic but that she couldn’t because her family was busy. I reassured her that it was ok and that she would get to meet all of the other children today, at which point they proceeded to introduce themselves to Alana. Bobby said hi to Alana and told her she would like being in this class, especially when we do the fun projects. Brando sat next to Alana and described the chapter books he was reading, adding that he loves to read and has been reading chapter books all summer. Mitchell asked if he could help Alana when the class went to lunch and out for recess. Mitchell told Alana that he would help her during the day, and he began to help her learn the other children’s names. Whenever Alana would become quiet Bobby, Brando, or Mitchell would ask her if she was ok. Most of

the time, she would nod and say, “I’m ok”, but then would point to a child in the class and say, “I can’t remember her or his name.” The three of these boys became Alana’s friends instantly as they guided her through the first few days of school.

Mike’s first experience in our class was different from Alana’s, in that Mike attended our school last year. Mike was in a looping class, but did not choose to continue into the second year with that class. Mike is outgoing and introduced himself to everyone, saying, “Hi, I’m Mike. What’s your name?” He proceeded through the entire class this way, smiling as he asked the children if they had a nice summer. He told them that he had a wonderful summer with his family and that his Dad made great meals over the summer. Dalia asked him if his Dad really cooks. Mike replied, “Yes, my Dad is a great cook; he is like a chef.” Carl and David asked Mike if he had liked his other first grade class. Mike’s response was, “Yes, I just like change. I get bored with everything and I like to try different things.”

One benefit of the looping program is that I can start the second year with a firm knowledge of my class and the students who comprise it. The new additions, however, change the classroom community. This study has helped me to observe more closely the interactions of this new mix of children.

Introducing the Class to the Action Research Plan of Free Play and Free Exploration

The first part of the action research process this school year was to obtain permission from all of the children's parents to begin the study of free exploration and free-play. I was pleased to receive consent forms from all of the participant's parents within one week. Some of the parents even thanked me for continuing my education and, more importantly, involving their children in this research. My class was equally supportive and excited. As I explained that our class would be engaging in more free exploration activities than in the previous year, and working on additional collaborative projects, Mitchell shot his hand up into the air to ask, "When do we start?" David and Billy wanted to know if we would have more time to finish those "fun projects," referring to the rushed nature of some of last year's collaborative projects. The parents' words of encouragement and the children's eager attitudes eased my mind as I began the study.

Our First Collaborative Free Exploration Project

As we began this project, I explained three objectives to the children. I told them, "We are going to focus on working collaboratively, with everyone sharing in the work as a team. We also need to be creative as we explore these shapes. All designs should be different. The third thing we are going to work on with this project is explaining your designs as a group to the rest of the class." When the children asked for more information, I added, "There are

many shapes available here. You can use any color or size you would like. When you get into your groups please talk with each other about the different ideas you have for your design. When you are all settled on a design, you may come up and pick your shapes.” I then showed my students the materials they would be using. I had made patterns out of oaktag, supplied various colors of construction paper, and provided fancy edged scissors.

Then I split the children into groups for this free exploration activity. My history with these students and my analysis of data from my pilot study gave me a good starting point. The design of the groups was done based on the rapport that the children had established with each other last year. I chose children that I felt would work well together and could motivate and assist one another. I encouraged the children to work and collaborate in their small groups to create original designs with the construction paper shapes that they were given. The following dialogue comes from a conversation that I recorded in my field log. It shows the interactions of one group, comprised of Ellie, Sean, Jennifer, and Mitchell, as they worked on the project.

Ellie: You put your shapes away! I am going to tell you what shapes to get when I need them.

Jennifer: [returns her shapes to the pile in silence]

Mitchell: [follows Jennifer’s lead and returns his shapes with a frown]

Sean: I am not listening to you. I am not putting my things back. [keeps his hands tightly around the big triangle]

Teacher: [approaches the group after noticing the disruption] Ellie, please tell me what just happened in this group.

Ellie: Nothing!

Teacher: Now Ellie, I think I saw inappropriate behavior. Please tell me what happened. Remember this is a collaborative project and we need to work together. This is not just Ellie's project – we are a team.

Sean: I'll tell you what happened. Ellie told us to put all of the patterns back and the construction paper and said we couldn't do anything. She said she was going to do everything herself and that we had to watch and said that we couldn't do anything at all! And she told us that if we went to the teacher she would tell on us!

Ellie: [places fingers in her ears] La – la – la- la!

Teacher: Ellie, you have a choice. Either you work as a team, or you'll have to go back to your seat. I hope you'll make the right choice and work as a team!

Ellie: [rises, returns to her own seat and pouts until deciding to return to the group] I'm sorry!

Jennifer: [to Ellie as she returns to the group]: We can work together. That's what friends do. I'll be your friend; we will all be your friends.

The children needed to have me intervene during this project. From my previous experience I suspect that without any intervention, Ellie would have dominated the project eliciting no input from the other children. As a result of my intervention, the students used various shapes to create cars, boats, robots, houses and even a picture of the United States. I had each group present its project to the other children, and we all enjoyed seeing the fruits of our collaborative labor.

I asked students to complete a “kid-friendly” rubric (Figure 2.1) to evaluate themselves on the project.

Geometric Design Rubric

Name _____ Date _____

Did the group work as a team?		
Did the group explore various designs?		
Did you use more than one shape?		
Did everybody make decisions together?		
Did you explain your design to the class?		

Figure 2.1

All of the children except for Sean scored the rubric with a smile face in all of the categories. When Sean responded to the question: Did everybody make decisions together, he chose a sad face. That prompted me to have a conference with Sean so I could ask him about his response. He said that he felt sad the entire time working with Ellie and that he had almost started to cry when she became so bossy. Sean thanked me and said that he felt better when I came over to their group. He said that they had fun after Ellie let them work together.

Our First Free Play Sociogram

In October, I completed a sociogram (Figure 2.2) of free-play and noticed that the children were largely deciding whom they wanted to play with instead of what they wanted to play with. Bobby and Sean joked with each other while playing, attempting to put together a puzzle of a dinosaur. They discussed placement of pieces together the entire time and were smiling as they progressed with their puzzle.

Brando, Sherell, Carl, and Dalia played with building blocks, each constructing their own creature. They were smiling, laughing, and talking. Sherell said to the group, “Look what I made. It’s a snake!”

Brando said, “Hey, I made an animal, too! Do you like my dog?”

“Let’s build cages for our animals and make a zoo!” suggested Dalia.

Carl joined in saying, “I will make the lion’s cage.”

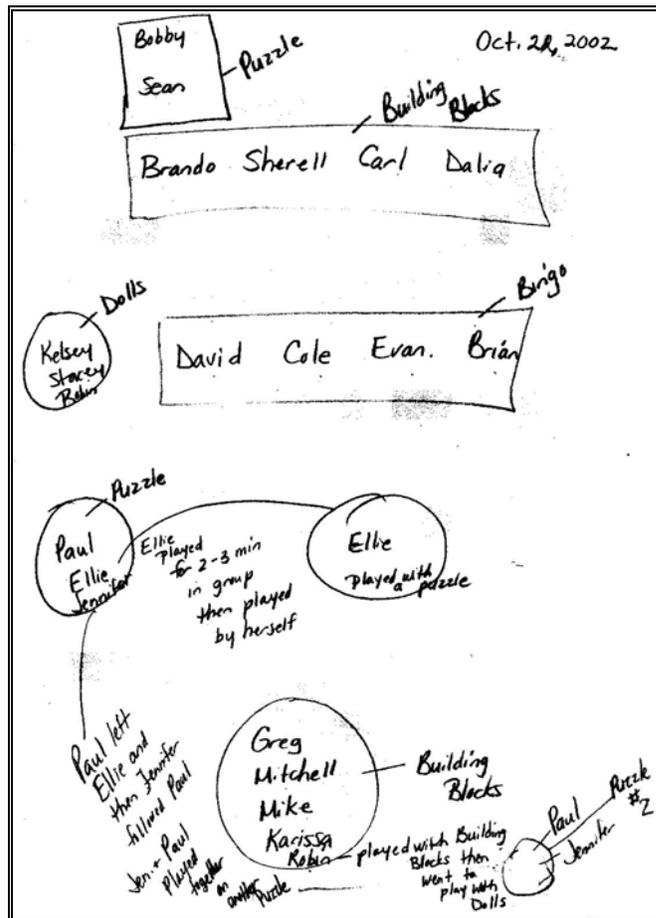


Figure 2.2

Across the room Greg, Mitchell, Mike, Karissa, and Robin were also playing with building blocks, making tall buildings. As I continued to observe, I realized that they were creating New York City. Then they reenacted the falling of the World Trade Center buildings. Robin didn't stay long in this area; she said she wanted to play with Kelsey and Stacey because she missed them, so she went to the doll area.

Kelsey, Stacey, and Robin played with dolls and sang the entire time. Kelsey was pretending she was the mom and Stacey was the baby. When Robin joined the group, she was the dad. The voice tones that they were using were similar to that of the characters they were playing. Mom was telling the child what she should not do, and Dad was asking what was for supper. I thought to myself that their play family reflected their own real lives.

Paul, Ellie, and Jennifer sat at a table while working on a zebra puzzle. They were discussing the colors that they thought each should be looking for to complete the next part of the puzzle and pointing as they began to make progress. This puzzle was definitely a challenge for all three of the children. I was proud they were using their free time to work on something so difficult. Ellie began to dominate the group once again by telling the other two children what they should do and how they should be doing it. Ellie said, "I don't want you to touch any of the pieces. You can look, but not touch." At first, Paul and Jennifer accepted Ellie's commands. Eventually, though, they said to her that they didn't want to play with her because she was bullying them. Ellie said, "La, La, La", and went off on her own to play with a different puzzle by herself. Paul and Jennifer also left to work on a new puzzle, just the two of them.

David, Cole, Evan, and Brian were played Bingo with plenty of smiles and laughter, saying that they liked this game, which comes with a real wire wheel.

They took turns flipping the letters all around inside it and calling out the letters. I was pleased with how well this group shared and played together.

I was disappointed because I had been working with Ellie on bullying. This free play episode made me realize that I needed to do more to help her overcome the problems that she was having while interacting with her classmates. I made a mental note to discuss this with our guidance counselor, who had also been working with Ellie.

My overall feeling of this free-play experience was that while most of the class was able to engage in activities without conflict, Ellie needed to have some help with her constant bullying. To do this, I would need to focus my attention on Ellie during free-play opportunities to see how best to guide her social interactions with her peers.

Our First Sociometric Matrix

I completed a sociometric matrix of my class twice, the first in October and a second in December. This matrix gives the students a rank order in the classroom according to their peers. This information offers input on the social structure of the class through the students' eyes. It also offers a new perspective on what takes place in the classroom, confirming or challenging the teacher's perception of group interactions.

I collected my data by informing the children that we would be changing our desk arrangement on the first Friday of every month. I then called the children over one at a time during recess to ask them to name the three friends they would want to sit near. I plotted their answers on the matrix, recording a 1 for the first name said, 2 for the second name said, and 3 for the third name given. After all of the children made their selections, I assigned a numeric value of 3 to all the 1's, a 2 for the 2's, and 1 point for the 3's. I added up these values for each child. The child with the highest value would be the child picked most often, or most importantly, more often in the first slot. This child was ostensibly the social leader of the group, the one whom the children as a group looked for most often when they were free to choose playmates. Figure 2.3 contains the matrix that depicts the students' selections.

The children whom I had assumed were the leaders in our class turned out to be ranked differently than I thought. Carl came out first, Sherell came out second, and Jennifer came out third. I was surprised by the fact that Ellie's peers rated her 11.5, just slightly below midpoint in the scale. I was happy that the children perceived Ellie more positively than I thought they would have done. I asked myself what the children might be seeing in Ellie's progress that I was missing. Was my expectation of Ellie unrealistic? To answer this, I focused my subsequent participant observations on Ellie in an attempt to understand her interactions more clearly.

Oct. 2002

SOCIOMETRIC MATRIX																										
Name	#	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
Bobby	1		1														3			2						
Brando	2			1 2																	3					
Carl	3	1	2																		3					
David	4		1 2					3																		
Evan	5						3		1										2							
Greg	6		3							2							1									
Mitchell	7		3	1						2																
Mike	8			1 2																	3					
Paul	9							3 2											1							
Ellie	10												1				2				3					
Jennifer	11												2	3							1					
Kelsey	12										1			3							2					
Starkey	13										1			3							2					
Rubin	14										1		2								3					
Karissa	15											2			3						1					
Brian	16		3	1 2																						
Cole	17			1 2					3																	
Dalla	18												2	3							1					
Sherell	19												3	2						1						
Sean	20	1	2																		3					
Alana	21	→ moved																								
	22																									
	23																									
	24																									
	25																									
Weighted Score		6.8	2.8	8.0	2.2	2.1	4.4	4.4	11.8	2.7	4.2	6.3	15.4													
Rank in Group		8.5	5.1	5.2	16.5	17.1	11.5	11.5	3.5	1.5	17.1	11.5	6.5	1.5	11.5	6.5	8.5	1.4	2.1	11.5						

Figure 2.3

Bossing During A Math Free Exploration Activity

I observed a free exploration activity during math in our classroom. I asked each student to create a pictorial representation of a fact family by diagramming the related number sentences that went along with the numbers that had been chosen. Although this was an individual assignment, the children sat together in five clusters to share manipulatives and offer support as it was needed.

I showed the students the vast supply of materials and assured them that there would be enough for each child to complete his or her own project.

Before beginning, I asked each child to share the three numbers that comprised the fact family that he or she would be working with. Ellie decided to use the numbers 5, 2, and 7, giving the number sentence of $5+2=7$ as her starting point. As always, I asked the group if there were any questions before setting them free to do their work. Ellie repeatedly asked if she would have enough items to complete her project. "Will there be 10 of each item?" I calmly, but firmly answered that I had already answered that question in the original directions, restating what I had previously said. Then, I had Ellie come to the front of the classroom with another child and we did a sample activity again.

Confirming that the directions were understood, I told the class that they could begin working, but that time was crucial. "Class, it is important that you focus and begin to work, remembering we only have 30 minutes to complete this activity. Then we'll wrap up and share what we've done with the group." I also told the class that I would let them know when half of their time was up.

Ellie sat with Dalia, Kelsey and Robin. Ellie chose to use toothpicks to show her fact family. She laid out the toothpicks and wrote $5 + 2 = 7$. She continued, reversing the problem to make $2+5=7$ and deciding to use the toothpicks again. When Ellie began the subtraction section she told Dalia, Kelsey and Robin that they couldn't use any of the manipulatives until she was finished.

She said that she wanted to make sure that there were enough pieces for her to finish. Then Ellie said she liked things to look pretty and that they should help her finish her project first. Ellie told the girls, “If you don’t listen to me and help me with my project, I will tell the teacher.”

Dalia, Kelsey and Robin helped Ellie without beginning their own projects. At this time, I announced to the children that half of their time was up and that they should have at least half of their projects completed, emphasizing that most of the children did, while praising them for a job well done. The girls in Ellie’s group looked at Ellie with sad faces, one even with tears in her eyes, another saying, “We better get busy. We need to start getting our work done and we can’t keep helping Ellie, or else our work isn’t going to get done!” Dalia, Kelsey and Robin asked each other to pass some of the manipulatives, and Ellie started to cry. She begged the girls to help her finish and she promised that in return, she would help them get their projects done.

Despite their previous intentions, Dalia, Kelsey and Robin helped Ellie add a subtraction sentence to her paper, but were unable to finish the last problem as I announced to the class that time available for the project had come to an end. The children in Ellie’s group looked at me and at themselves and started to raise their hands to say, “But we aren’t finished.” I knew they weren’t finished; I knew they hadn’t even begun, but I wanted them to think about what had happened. I

told them I could give them another minute to finish if would help, knowing that a minute wouldn't make a difference. When they admitted that they hadn't even begun, I confessed that I had been watching and that we would have a discussion at recess about other choices they could make in the future during work time.

Dalia, Kelsey and Robin worked outside during recess for the next two days to complete their math projects with the help of Ellie. As they were working outside they mumbled to each other that they had made a bad choice by helping Ellie and forgetting their own work. After a discussion with all of the girls, Ellie said she was sorry and that she didn't mean to get the kids into trouble.

An Observation of Free Play From Two Perspectives

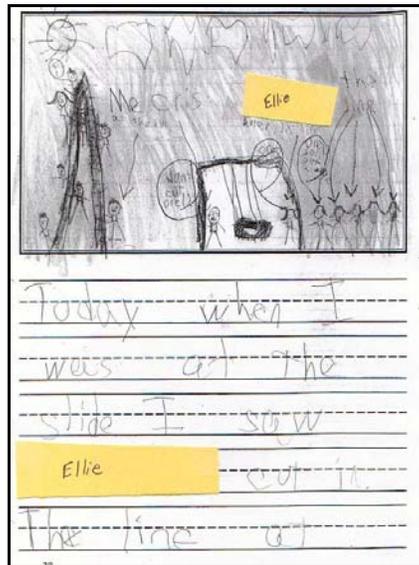
I had hoped that when Beth made this visit to my classroom that I would be writing about all of the learning the children did during the day while working on the various free exploration centers that I had planned. Instead, Beth's observations helped to shed light on a problem the children had on the school playground that they hadn't been able to resolve. So as you might expect, I needed to abandon my plans for the day and work on issues that presented themselves during the children's actual playtime. I always try my best to address any issues or concerns immediately and to take advantage of teachable moments whenever and wherever they occur.

On the playground that day, Ellie demanded that all of the children who wanted to ride on the tire swing stand in line while she decided, who, if anyone could ride next. Interestingly, the children were in line waiting their turn for at least part of their recess when Ellie told the children that no one else could ride today. Ellie told the other children that if they said anything to any of the teachers, she would get them in trouble. The children stood and watched as Ellie maintained control over the tire swing. When the children came inside after recess, many were crying and upset that this had happened to them. I called a class meeting to determine what had happened.

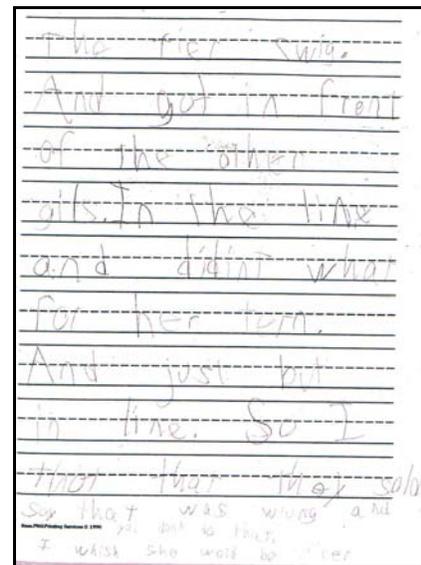
The children explained the story to me as I have told it here. Once all of the facts were on the table, so to speak, I asked the children to write about their feelings in their journal. When they were finished writing I asked the children if anyone wanted to share their writing with the class. All except for two of the children decided to share. The two that elected not to share with the class later shared their entries with me.

Dalia volunteered to share first. She read quietly at first. Then I whispered in her ear and asked her if she could read her journal a little louder, and boy did she read it louder! A strong and loud voice emanated from her. She started out by saying that she was scared and that she wishes she could be more like Cole because he told Ellie to stop treating the other kids nasty. Dalia said she is tired of getting bossed around and she and her

Bobby opted to share next, telling the class that he doesn't like it when Ellie bosses him around. He said that he asked Ellie to stop but that she just went on bossing him around. "Ellie was bullying me and the other children," he said, "and it wasn't nice. It wasn't nice that she went in front of the line for the tire swing and didn't let the other children swing. People have to take turns and share and be friends not bullies! Because of Ellie the teachers had to close down the tire swing! And when the teachers closed down the tire swing, no one in the entire second grade class could ride on it. She caused the entire school to not have a turn on the tire swing. She's a bully and that is not nice! She should be nicer!" Here is Bobby's journal (Figure 2.5):

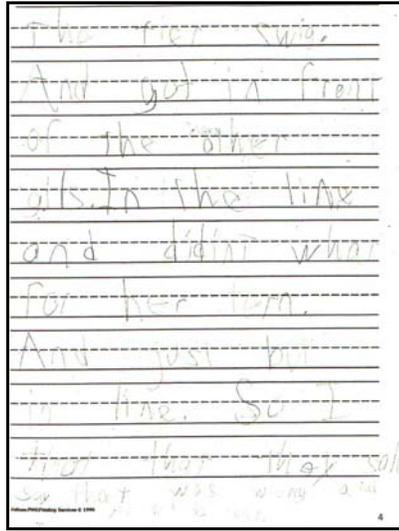


page 1



page2

Figure 2.5



Bobby's journal, page 3

Figure 2.5 (continued)

Carl read from his journal to me but asked not to read his entry to the class. He shook and seemed very nervous as he read. I asked him if he would read it to me so that I could try to help him. Carl nodded his head and said, "Yea, ok. I'll read it! I have a problem and someone is bullying me. I told him to stop bullying me but he didn't stop. I tried to solve the problem myself but he just wouldn't listen to me. So I would tell the teacher!" The entire time Carl read his journal he referred to the bully with a masculine rather than a feminine pronoun, so I asked him later if the person who was bullying him was a boy in our class or in another class. Carl responded and said, "No it's not a boy. It's Ellie, but I was afraid to say it was her." We

discussed this, and he said it helped him to write in his journal and to listen to the other children as they read their journals. Carl said that prior to today, he thought he was the only child who had a problem with Ellie. I have included his journal next (Figure 2.6).

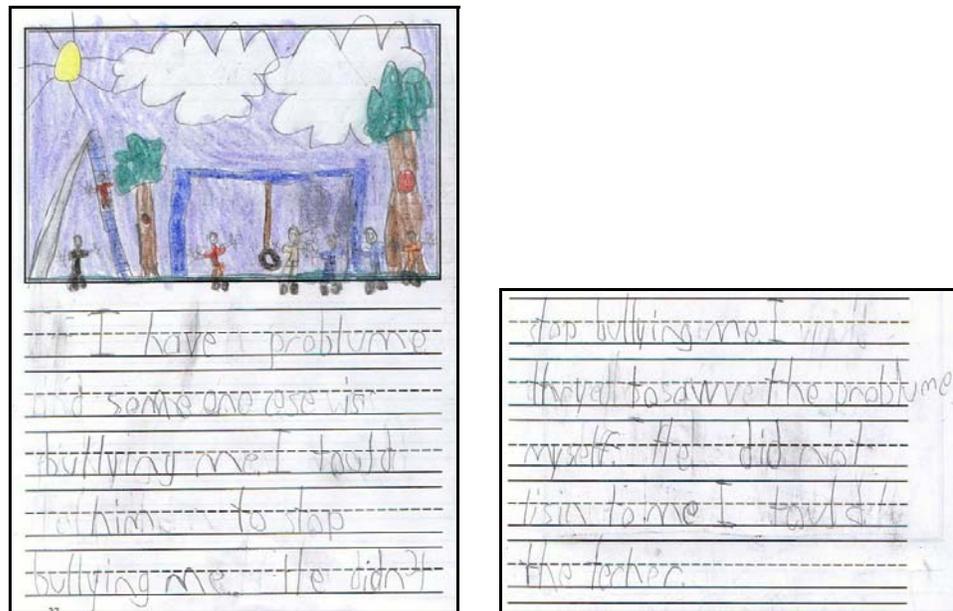


Figure 2.6

Well obviously this writing topic was not the lesson that I had planned for Beth's visit to my class, but educators must be flexible and use those learning moments as "valuable teachable moments." Of course, I questioned myself all day as to how this could have occurred in the first place. I thought I had taught the children the importance of treating others with respect by role-playing and discussing our feelings. I had incorporated kindness as a

theme in our classroom last year and incorporated it this year. I also frequently ask students to write in their journals about being kinder kids, and I really thought everything was going smoothly. This incident suggests I was wrong. As an educator it makes me feel as though I have failed when I have a student who consistently acts out. On previous occasions, I have spoken to Ellie's parents about the importance of treating others with respect. Her mother is very supportive and feels that it would be in Ellie's best interest to work with the guidance counselor and me to work through her social conflicts. I agree with her mother that Ellie needs to have a place to express her concerns and release her feelings; we all need to have an outlet. My goal is to ensure that Ellie finds a way to cope with the feelings that are causing her to have social conflicts with her peers.

Ellie also shared her response that day. In her own writing, she appeared to be aware of the hurt she had caused. Ellie admitted that she went immediately to the front of the line of children who were waiting for most of their recess to ride on the tire swing. Ellie said that she was wrong and that she should say that she was sorry. This was such an accomplishment for Ellie; she was taking ownership for her actions. While she was reading, Ellie's classmates were completely silent. Ellie, herself, was serious and looked quite intense. She also appeared to be affected by the children's writings, bowing her head and refraining from making eye contact as they

shared their journals. When the first entry was read, Ellie's face changed from a happy smiley face to a very serious intense looking stare. Perhaps the children's perspective could offer the impact that I seem not to have been able to achieve. Her journal follows (Figure 2.7). You can see that she spent her time writing instead of drawing a picture.

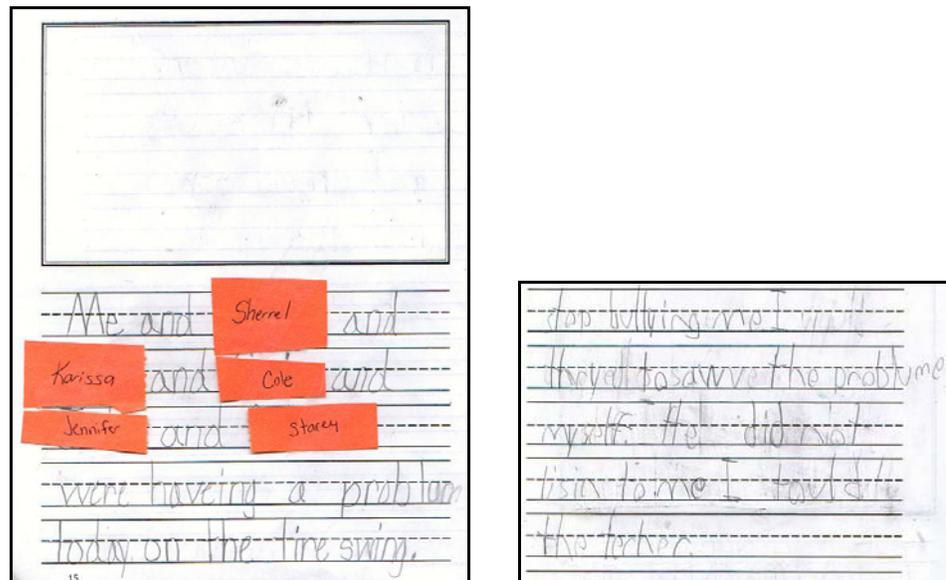


Figure 2.7

A Vignette of Ellie

The following is a vignette (Ely et al., 1997) of Ellie composed from various participant observations I made of her interactions with the class during both free play and free exploration experiences. The vignette is a composite that

creates a compact sketch of Ellie, summarizing what I have come to know about her.

I am a Second Grade student in Mrs. M's room. The children in our class are the same as last year. We looped from First Grade to Second Grade with Mrs. M. The kids are nice and I like my teacher. We do a lot of fun things everyday in our classroom. Mrs. M encourages us to work together. The kids in my class really enjoy working with each other! They think it's fun! When I work with other students I sometimes feel sad. And, I also feel sad that I can't have a turn everyday doing the things that I like to do. I get really mad. I remember one day when I raised my hand for a turn to be on the calendar team and my teacher told me that I had a turn yesterday. She said that I would have to wait until all of the children had a chance before I could be on the team again. I get very upset and mad when I always have to wait for all of the kids to have their turn. I don't understand why I have to wait all of the time for everything! And then, when Mrs. M has us work together it drives me crazy! I know that I am a smart kid and when I have to listen to other kids' ideas it makes me wild! Mrs. M had us working with our writing

partners. Our assignment was to predict the weather for the next day. She told us to be creative and to do the best that we could on this assignment. You'll never believe the prediction that my writing partner came up with. She thought that the weather would be 92 degrees on the next day! I said, "Come on, we have to come up with something better than this. The kids will make fun of us!" My writing partner told me that I didn't have to be so mean! I have a hard time working with other kids. I think that I have the best ideas and I don't mean to be mean I just like to do my work by myself. I always say that I am sorry, but sometimes what I say hurts the kids. I really do try to work with my classmates, but at times I can be very impatient. I think I work best by myself. I seem to say and do things that always hurt my classmates. And then, I am sorry that I have said them. I even have problems when we have free time. One time I told the kids that were waiting to ride on the tire swing that they couldn't have a turn and to go and play on something else. When one of my classmates told me that they were going to tell the teacher I ignored them, covered my ears and said, "La, la, la." I always bullied the kids before I learned how to control myself. Now I have learned to take turns even on the tire swing. I will try to work better with my classmates during the rest of the year. I want to have friends, so I

know that in order to have friends I need to be a friend first. So I will continue to work on my friendship skills because it's nice to have friends to talk to, laugh with, and play with. Friends are special and I want to be a special friend to someone.

I have learned that as a teacher I need to be flexible and not be so focused on just teaching the curriculum, but to incorporate social skills, free exploration and free play opportunities within our daily classroom routine, especially when situations like this arise. I know that I will constantly struggle with this issue of teaching curriculum lessons and social skills lessons, but I have learned that when our classroom has unaddressed social skill issues, the learning is not occurring at the same rate or in the same depth. The event at the tire swing, for example, brought our daily writing to life. The children were able to express themselves on an issue that was motivating enough to compel them to write volumes more than they had ever written before. They concisely explained their feelings, reflecting the correct sequence of events a story should follow. Without this free play confrontation, these writing objectives may not have mattered for these children as they did on this day when they had the need to tell their own version of events.

The next day the children worked wonderfully. They cooperated with each other in the classroom and also during free exploration and play. I suppose we all need a little reminder or nudge once in a while. I felt good about the learning and kindness I saw on this occasion, and I need to realize it's ok as an educator to keep giving the children opportunities to learn the importance of kindness, caring, respect, just as long as we all keep learning from our mistakes.

Our Second Collaborative Project

In November we completed a new free exploration activity that we called the Nutritious Thanksgiving Meal Project. I gave the children three objectives to complete this assignment. The first objective stated that the students needed to work collaboratively. The second objective was designed to have the students explore the various food groups while creating a balanced meal. And the third stated that each team of students would explain their design to the class. They needed to be prepared to discuss the elements of a balanced meal and apply their understanding in planning a Thanksgiving Feast. The students designed a Thanksgiving place setting depicting their food choices by drawing them on a paper plate, which they glued onto an 8x12 piece of construction paper that would serve as their placement. The students completed this place setting with the use of plastic utensils.

I assigned the children to work in the same small groups they had used in our first collaborative project in September to see how their social interaction would be different. Would I need to intervene during this collaborative project? Would the children use the skills that I had taught them to overcome some of the issues that they were struggling with in September and work collaboratively? I condensed my field log entry, and composed it into a brief drama that will allow you to visit the children as they were engaged in the activity.

Mrs. McGinley: There are many samples of a well-balanced meal available here. You can browse through any of the samples that I have made or books that I have gathered. Enjoy yourself and have fun compiling a list of the items that you will use to create your meal. When you have decided what food items your meal will consist of you will then start to draw your creations. When you get into your groups please talk with each other about the different ideas you have for your design.

[Ellie, Sean, Jennifer, and Mitchell discuss their choices for the meal]

Ellie: You don't have any good ideas, Jennifer! Put your things away! I am going to tell you what food we will use!

Jennifer: [silence as she puts her list away]

Mitchell: [his eyes follow Jennifer with a frown on his face and hands crossed]

Sean: I am not listening to you. I am not putting my things back. [He keeps his hands tightly around the paper with his list of the items that he has planned for the Thanksgiving Day Feast.] Listen, Ellie, you are not the boss around here and we are not going to listen to you! We want to work together and have fun doing this project, and we can't work with a bossy person! Can't you just take turns writing one item on your list instead of listing your entire foodstuff? We have a lot of things listed, too, but we are taking turns. That is what friends do. They take turns, and that is what we want to do.

Mrs. McGinley: [noticing the disruption, I walk over to the group] Please tell me what just happened in this group.

Ellie: Nothing!

Mrs. McGinley: I think I saw inappropriate behavior. Please tell me what really happened. Remember this is a collaborative project, and we need to work together. This is not Ellie's project. This is a team effort. Ellie, you know what the rules are in this classroom.

Sean: I'll tell you what happened. Ellie told us that we couldn't list any of the items for the Thanksgiving Feast. She said we couldn't do anything. She said she was going to do everything herself and that we had to watch, and she kept saying that we couldn't do anything at all! And she

told us that if we went to the teacher, she would tell on us! She is so bossy!

Ellie: [with her fingers in her ears] La – la – la- la!

Mrs. McGinley: Ellie, you have a choice. Either you work as a team, or you go back to your seat and you don't get to do the project with the team. We have had this conversation before, and the choices remain the same. I hope that you make the right choice and work as a team! I know that you can do this project and be very successful. My suggestion to you is to please think before you speak. I really want you to concentrate on the words you are choosing to say to the children that are in your group. Kind words should be spoken and used in this classroom. You know that if you don't have something nice to say then you shouldn't say it at all! Ellie, I know that you have the ability to work together as a group and I am counting on you to work as a team.

Ellie: [walks to her seat and pouts. Then she returns to group.] I'm sorry!

Jennifer: [to Ellie] We can work together. That's what friends do. I'll be your friend; we will all be your friends. Ellie, we want to be your friend. We want to have fun and work together on this project. We just don't want you to be so bossy. Friends share and take turns and enjoy doing these fun projects. We all want our group's work to be quality work and that takes time. So lets get started working on this Feast!

From this point forward, all of the children in each group worked diligently to create their menu of the items for the Thanksgiving Day Feast. The giggles of some and the serious voices of others made this lesson such a unique and enjoyable experience for all. I couldn't help but notice the excitement in the eyes of the children as they presented their projects to the other groups.

I would preferred not to have intervened during this project. I hoped that by walking around the classroom and making eye contact with all of the groups that I could prevent unkind behavior, especially in Ellie's group. I knew, though, from previous experiences that without any intervention the outcome would most likely not have benefited the children. When I don't give Ellie the attention that she seems to crave, the situation deteriorates. I don't believe in giving negative attention, but I must do what is in the best interest of all involved, including but not limited to Ellie. I would have been lax if I had ignored the group's concern with Ellie. Believe it or not, just before beginning the project our class reviewed the rules of working in a collaborative group effort. Ellie articulated most of the rules without prompting.

The guidance counselor, Ellie's mother and I continue to work with her. We have made some progress, but we still have a long stretch of road to cover. I feel so happy on the days when I see her taking ownership for her work and her

actions, but on days like this I just shake my head, fearing that I obviously haven't done enough to help her find the way on her own.

My desire to help her grow socially as well as academically can at times, become frustrating and overwhelming but when I reflect on the journal writing that I have done since I have had Ellie in my class, I can see the progress that she has made. I've noticed that many of these problems occur in the middle of the week, so I decided to speak to Ellie and ask her what she does on Tuesdays and Wednesdays after school. Ellie explained that she likes the weekends because that is when she is able to visit her father, adding that she enjoys staying overnight at her father's house and likes the gifts from him that she receives on the weekends. Ellie also stated that she loves her mom but misses her father during the week. Ellie says that she has a good relationship with her stepfather, and she speaks highly of him. Next, I asked her what she likes most about Tuesdays and Wednesdays. She stared blankly and after about 40 seconds, she replied, "nothing." Ellie asked me what I liked about Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and I said, "Everything! I have the opportunity to be here and teach all of you great kids!" She just looked at me and said that she was glad I was her teacher and that was what she liked about Tuesdays and Wednesdays too. I suspect that Ellie might not even know why the middle of the week becomes so difficult for her, so I must help her to continue to deal with her emotions in a positive way.

Our Second Sociogram of Free Play

When I began the observation that I would use to create another sociogram (Figure 2.8), Ellie was playing with Kelsey, Jennifer, Stacey, and Karissa. They laughed and smiled throughout an entire game of Bingo. Following the Bingo game, they decided together that they wanted to work on a puzzle, which by chance, happened to be the same zebra puzzle that Ellie had been working on in October. I became a little nervous, fearful that when they started work on the puzzle that they would begin arguing, but, happily, I was wrong. I even extended the children's free-play time because they were working so well together. For example, Kelsey asked Ellie if she'd like to try to pick the next piece of the puzzle that she thinks would fit. Ellie responded, "Yes, thanks for sharing. I think it might be this piece of the puzzle but I'm not sure."

Kelsey replied, "Take your time. This is a hard puzzle. We won't rush you!"

The rest of the group chimed in, telling Ellie that she's being nice and kind. Positive encouragement and reinforcement along with the guidance counselor and parental support seem to have made a world of difference for Ellie.

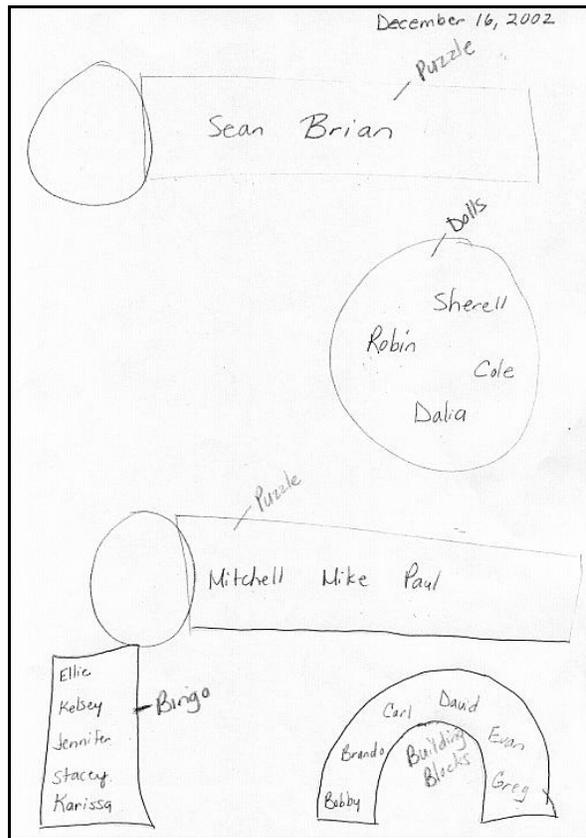


Figure 2.8

Seeing all of the children actively engaged in free-play activities was enlightening. I could hear them laughing, and I tried to watch them from a distance to see if everything was going well, and all seemed fine. I can usually tell by their facial expressions if anything isn't going well. One of the most important points of interest was that the children were no longer in cliques and they no longer seemed to play with only certain friends. This in

itself was a wonderful observation and accomplishment on their part. Children seemed to be playing with the activities that they wanted to play with regardless of who was playing. Their focus changed from worrying about whom they would play with to what they wanted to play with.

The sociogram depicted the following children in the diagram. Sean and Brian were in one group playing with a puzzle. Robin, Sherell, Cole, and Dalia were in another group playing with dolls. Mitchell, Mike and Paul worked together constructing a puzzle. Ellie, Kelsey, Jennifer, Stacey, and Karissa played bingo together. Bobby, Brando, Carl, David, Evan, and Greg played with building blocks.

The changes that occurred from the first sociogram to the second sociogram were mainly focused on Ellie's improved interaction skills. This recent sociogram shows that she no longer felt the need to dominate and control the group during free play experiences as she had done in the past. The commands and instructions she had formerly given to the other children had certainly diminished. The support that Ellie receives from the children may have helped her to mellow a bit. The class likes to work and play with her, and as a result of this, I believe, Ellie's self-esteem has increased. This most recent free play experience was wonderful as I watched all of the children laughing, smiling and engaged with their free play.

While creating this sociogram, I observed Ellie closely after her group played bingo, listening for the words that she shared with her classmates. Ellie was pretending that she was the teacher and she was standing in front of several students, Jennifer, Kelsey, Stacey, and Karissa, who were sitting on the carpet. Ellie looked at the children as if they were the students in her class, her hands on her hips and her eyes focused on each and every one of the children as she began to speak:

Well class, I know what a Kinder Kid shouldn't do, and now I am working on what a Kinder Kid should do all of the time. First, you should always say kind things to each other. Second, you should always be kind to everyone, not just your friends. Third, you should always help each other. Fourth, you should always play with everyone. Fifth, take the time to say thank you to your teacher for being a Kinder Teacher everyday! And the last thing you should do, is be Kind to yourself for being a Kinder Kid.

Jennifer, Stacey, Karissa and Kelsey's eyes were glued to Ellie while she was expressing her point of view of a Kinder Kid. When Ellie was finished they looked at each other while sitting on the carpet and smiled from ear to ear. Jennifer even put her eyebrows up in the air and nodded with approval.

Our Second Sociometric Matrix

I also decided to complete a second sociometric matrix (Figure 2.9) near the end of our study. Once again, I collected my data by again informing the children that we would be changing our desk arrangement on the first Friday of every month. I then called the children over one at a time (during recess) to ask them to name the three friends they would want to sit near. I plotted their answers on the matrix, recording a 1 for the first name said, 2 for the second name said, and 3 for the third name given. After all of the children made their selections, I assigned a numeric value of 3 to all the 1's, a 2 for the 2's, and 1 point for the 3's. I added up these values for each child. The child with the highest value would be the child picked most often, or most importantly, more often in the first slot. This would be the social leader of the group, the one that all the children looked for when they were free to choose groups. Once again, my choices were not entirely accurate.

My pick for the "leader" of the boys was Brando, who was actually the third ranked boy. Carl came in first. These two boys are very social, but Carl and Brando can also be very shy at times. As for the girls, I totally flopped. I had selected Jennifer as the leader for the girls, and she was ranked 9th. One girl whom I had not even considered in my original thought processes ranked number one for the girls, as well as for the overall class. This was Ellie. Wow, I knew

she had made a lot of progress with her social interactions, but I would never have imagined that the class would pick her and rank her in the number one place.

12-13-82

SOCIONETRIC MATRIX																												
Name	#	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25		
Bobby	1		2															3										
Brando	2		2	1																							3	
Carl	3	1	2																								3	
David	4		1	2					3																			
Evon	5							2	1									3										
Greg	6				1						2	3																
Mitchell	7				3	2								1														
Mike	8									3							1				2							
Paul	9							1					2				3											
Ellie	10	3		2																1								
Jennifer	11								3	2	1																	
Kelsey	12										1			2	3													
Stacey	13			1				2			3																	
Robin	14								2	1																	3	
Kerissa	15		3		1								2															
Brian	16			1					2				3															
Cele	17		1			2																					3	
Dalia	18				3					2				1														
Shorell	19		1			3					2																	
Sean	20				1					2	3																	
Alana - missed	21																											
	22																											
	23																											
	24																											
	25																											
Weighted Score		7	9	12	7	7	5	5	8	5	14	6	5	1	8	3	2	1	3	4	5							
Rank in Group		7	3	2	7	7	12	12	5	12	1	9	12	14	14	5	18	15	15	15	15	12						

Figure 2.9

As I looked over the data I had collected, it came to my attention that there were no students in the class who had not been picked at all, which in itself made me feel good about the social progress the children were making. Ellie, in particular seemed to have made major progress. She had been ranked number 11.5 on the first matrix, and topped out as number 1 this time. Brando's rank had

changed from 5 in October to number 3. Carl stayed at the top of the order, falling back one slot due to Ellie's jump in status. These findings are comparable to the data I gleaned from the last sociogram in that I noticed the children really thinking about who they wanted to be with when given the opportunity to choose.

I decided to follow up with a quick informal interview to find out what motivated several of the students to make their choices. I also asked them how their free exploration and free play group work was going. The following dialogue combines several of the children's actual words about free play from the large group discussion into one statement.

Jennifer: Our free play and free exploration work is getting better. We had problems before but I think we are working and talking things out. We are trying to solve things together. Ellie is trying to be kind and wants to be friends. She is nicer to me now than she was before. Ellie even sits with me on the bus in the morning and when we go home. Before she would sit with me sometimes in the morning, but she never sat with me on the way home. Instead she would put her hands in her ears and say, "La, La, La." She even wants to play with me after school. I felt sad around her before but now we play with our dolls during free play and the dolls are even friends. All of the kids think she is getting nicer. I like being friends.

Sean: Ellie was bossy in our group for a long, long time! I think I helped her by telling her that we didn't want to work with kids that weren't team players. She got sad when we wouldn't play with her until she played nice. I told her if you don't quit being so bossy you aren't going to have anybody to play or work with or to do anything with! I don't think she wanted to work or play by herself, so she shaped up and played and worked nice and she's not bossy anymore. No one likes a bossy person. All of the kids told her at lunch that they like her when she wasn't so bossy. We all told her that we wanted to be friends with her but that she couldn't be bossy anymore. She must like us because she is listening to us!

Sherrel: Working in groups and doing the free play and free exploration things are more fun now that Ellie isn't as bossy. I didn't want to play with her because she made me sad and I wanted to cry when she was so mean to everyone. Sean helped Ellie to be kinder to us kids. He told her what you always tell us; if you want to have friends then you need to be a friend first and if you don't have anything nice to say then don't say anything at all!

A Final Survey on Free Play and Free Exploration

The following are writing excerpts from surveys that the children completed at the end of this action research journey. The children were asked to draw and write about their feelings on free play and free exploration in separate pictures as anticipated by our research design. My class completed a third survey to give their thoughts on bullying after attending a school-wide assembly arranged by the guidance counselor and sparked, in part, by Ellie's actions. Ellie's actual pictures and writings are inserted here (Figure 2.10.)



Figure 2.10

When I looked through all of the students' surveys to select the ones that I felt would represent the consensus of the group, the above three pictures stood out. The words concisely expressed the children's feelings on these experiences. The pictures also reflected key moments in our journey together over the last several

months. Ellie's surveys were the proof I needed to know that free play and free exploration have been effective means to promote student growth.

Conclusion

The children in my class have given me valuable insight into my teaching practices. When I gave them continual opportunities for free play and free exploration, the unwritten curriculum of social development was enhanced. Observations of their free play and free exploration helped me to see how the children evolved throughout the study. My thoughts are that this was due in part to their sense of choice and control over their own learning.

In the beginning of the year most of the children in our class worked nicely together, but Ellie had great difficulty. Perplexed by this, I continued to observe Ellie's interactions with her classmates during free play and free exploration activities. Whenever Ellie had any type of social interaction with her peers, it seemed that I needed to intervene and redirect her quite frequently; Ellie just seemed to dominate no matter what the venue was.

The turning point for me and for the children was the swing incident during a free play experience in October. After Ellie shared her feelings with the class you could sense that the weight had been lifted off her shoulders. It seemed as though she was taking ownership for her actions. The class and I have learned

that writing down our feelings and then sharing them with one another can be a learning tool for all of us.

There was a sense of unity within our class from that day on. At that point Ellie knew that the children cared about her and wanted to be her friends. We are more sensitive and respectful of one another's needs. When we have a concern or problem, we take the time to address the situation and discuss our feelings. I have learned that even in social situations we can learn from each other's experiences when we take the time to share our learning with one another. The learning in our classroom has been influenced by our emotions, feelings, and attitudes.

As Ellie's social interactions progressed there was a tangible sense of unity within our classroom. Periodically, Ellie still needed a nudge to stay on track with her social endeavors, as she continued to learn how to handle herself in more socially appropriate ways. Ellie and our class has achieved our ultimate goal of using one another's input to address each other's needs.

Jennifer in particular has helped to guide Ellie through the bumps on the road. Jennifer so eloquently stated to Ellie during the second collaborative project, "We can work together. That's what friends do. I'll be your friend; we will all be your friends. Ellie, we want to be your friend."

Not only are the children my students, but also, more importantly, they are my best teachers. My students have made an enormous impact on my teaching. Their insight has proven to be an invaluable tool to our class' everyday success.

They captured a method of our daily practice, namely peer tutoring, that heretofore had been done on only an academic level and transferred this learning into a communication device that has allowed us to help others with social concerns. I would not have learned this if I had not taken the time to observe the children on a daily basis. The observations I made impacted and guided my daily teaching practices and altered my study. For example, during our first collaborative free exploration project Ellie, Jennifer, Mitchell, and Sean's experience proved to be a disappointment to Sean, who felt sad that Ellie dominated this collaborative project. He said that he and the other team members didn't have the opportunity to work together. I spoke to Ellie and the other children in the group and helped to guide their learning in the first project.

As a result of this intervention, I decided that the next collaborative project I had planned would use the same groupings of children and extend for an additional ten minutes. I wanted to observe their every move, hoping that they would work as a team. This time Ellie only needed a brief redirection from me to be successful with the team and the project. By providing the children with an increased allotment of time during free play and free exploration activities, the children had ample time to learn. They learned to work better in partnership and in a joint venture; they no longer learned in isolation.

CHAPTER III
FREE EXPLORATION AND FREE PLAY WITH
BETH AND HER CLASS

Paperwork and Introductions

Along with the usual reams of handouts, forms, and materials to distribute to the students at the start of school, this year I included an additional and very important document. It was the consent form, which would garner permission for the students to be a part of our classroom-based study. As typical, I explained the importance of the paper to my class. I could feel my excitement written on my face as I discussed the project at hand. One little boy, Karl, asked, “But you are already a teacher. Why are you going to school?” Later I shared this story with Sue, who admitted that her children were also inquiring as to why a teacher still needs to go to school. We unknowingly answered our respective classes with the same answer. We both clarified that it is important for everyone to continue learning, and that by doing so we will become better teachers. As only primary students will so openly state, several of my students said in chorus, “But you already are a good teacher! And you’re smart!”

I responded by explaining that while they might think I am smart, there is always more to learn. I said, “In fact, for my class I need to do a project that lets me watch how you work together and play together. In order to do this,” I

continued, “I need your help.” At this, the children all sat up straight with their eyes focused on me, as if they couldn’t believe that *they* would actually be able to help the *teacher*. Several students shouted out in unison, “How can we help you?” I told them that I simply need them to try to work and play together to the best of their abilities, and that I would be working with them to make it work.

The consent forms came back and I was pleased to know that I was going to have one hundred percent participation in our study. This left me with a boost of confidence and a feeling of support from the parents of the children in my classroom. Several parents even took the time to write a note or offer words of encouragement for this endeavor. At Open House, when the students bring their parents back to school at night to meet the teacher, I had a few inquiries about the progress of the study, and a few more words of encouragement. When I asked the assembled parents at Open House if there were any questions or comments about the study, a parent just stated that she also thinks it is important that teachers work on the social interactions of young students along with their academic skills. The parents were supportive, and my students were excited at the prospect of “helping their teacher with her homework.”

There are currently 11 boys and 9 girls in our classroom. One of the girls, Aria, started with us in early November, while one of my original boys, Mo, moved away in the middle of November. Later in the year, in early January, our total went back to twenty when another boy, Frank, joined us, and his parents also

gave consent for him to participate in the study. Six of my students speak a language other than English at home. While most of them are fairly proficient with English, from time to time cultural and language barriers appear. As a whole, this is a very young class in terms of social and academic maturity.

As usual, I was exhausted after the first week of school with my new class of first graders, and I don't remember having been this tired in previous years. The rumor made its way to my ears that other school personnel described my class as "a challenging bunch" this year. Even over the summer on the day we received our class lists the kindergarten teachers perused my class list and wished me good luck. I comforted myself by recalling that this was my tenth year of teaching and my second in first grade. While I certainly listened with interest to the tips and suggestions of the other teachers, I also made up my mind to attempt to acquaint myself with each one of my students, as I always do, and to let each student have a fresh start. I firmly believe that we all bring different perspectives, talents, and faults to each situation. As a classroom teacher I must remember that each class has its own merits and downfalls.

During the first week of school, social situations were regularly problematic. Bertha always wanted to boss everyone around. During recess, she would dictate to the other girls who could and could not play with the jump ropes. Morris would just let everyone else make decisions for him. While working with a partner, he would silently do his work and let the partner tell him what to do

next. Olivia would cry if anyone even looked at her the wrong way, including me, or asked her to do something unfamiliar. Computers were especially unsettling. At the mere mention of computer time, the other children would cheer and clap. Not Olivia. She would immediately begin to cry. When I asked why she was crying, she would cry even harder. I eventually got a response in which she whimpered, "I don't know how to do it! I can't log on by myself! I don't remember how!" I reassured her that we are here together to learn how to do all of these new things and that she shouldn't already know how or else I wouldn't have a job. I never even heard Kelly's voice that first week of school.

And then there was Matthew, an ELL student who is with our class in the morning and then goes to a kindergarten class for the afternoon, where he is pulled out for various special services on a regular basis. Matthew developed a set routine for his arrival each morning. As he walked in the classroom he would hold up his lunch box and say, "This is for Mrs. Wolford's class." Knowing that the lunch box contained his food for his afternoon snack in his other class, I asked him what lunch choice he wanted and walked him over to the lunch selection chart in our room. By the end of that first week, Matthew was so adamant about not eating anything other than pizza that he would cry if I mentioned his lunch choice. I talked to his Mom, stopped pressing the issue, and simply let him make his own lunch choice when he was so inclined.

Sam had trouble with just about everything for the first week of school. Adjusting to the schedule proved difficult since Sam was still used to the half day kindergarten schedule. “When are we going home,” Sam would ask right after lunch and recess. Transitions from one activity to another were especially rough for Sam when he had not completed the task he was working on. Following classroom rules and working with a group also proved challenging for Sam. Every day that first week found Sam at his desk chanting, “That’s not fair! That’s not fair!” when other children were asked to have a turn at the board or answer a question for the group. By the end of that first week, some of the other students modeled their own behavior on Sam’s.

And so began our year. I decided this was going to be a wonderful class to observe during free play and free exploration, and I knew we had plenty of room for improvement. Thanks to the emergent nature of action research design, I knew that I would be able to work things out along the way.

The First Collaborative Project

Our first collaborative project was a geometric design activity Sue and I had planned to be developmentally appropriate for both of our classes. I assigned the children to work in small groups to complete this free exploration of shapes and geometry. I organized the groups in an attempt to put together children I thought would collaborate well.

The shapes were pre-cut in different sizes and colors of construction paper to allow the project to focus on collaborative design, rather than on cutting skills. The following dialogue is taken from the participant observations I made of my class as they worked on the project. My only regret is that I was not able to focus in on every group as they worked, but I knew this would be all right because I had obtained rich data from the groups I was able to observe, and that I had future observations planned with which I could capture the interactions of the children I had missed.

Group 1: (George, David, Boris, Liz, Leslie)

Mrs. Wolford: That's looking really pretty! Tell me about it!

George: [pointing to the face] I picked it!

David: It's a clown boy.

Leslie: [frowning] I wanted a girl!

George: [shrugging his shoulders] Maybe next time!

Liz: [picking up an oval] This could be another face.

George: Leslie wanted a girl, so we can make this one a girl for Leslie.

Liz: [picking up 2 triangles] Look, she can be Chinese! Oh, we have a funny man.

Boris: Let's use these hexagons for earrings.

At this point, I asked the children to begin adding the final touches to their projects, including choosing a title for their design. I told the boys and girls that it was time to begin our clean up of the project, reminding them to glue the last pieces they had chosen. Then I asked them to work together to think of a title that tells about the main idea of their picture. As I finished my directions and the children returned to their work, elevated voices coming from one group caught my attention.

Group 2: (Karl, Bertha, Morris, Charles)

Teacher: [in an attempt to redirect the group] Have you thought of your title?

Charles: The House of All Colors.

Morris: I don't like it!

Bertha: Then what do you think!

Teacher: Everyone must decide together.

Morris: [to no one in particular in a very low voice] I have an idea.

Karl: [throwing his hands up in the air] We can't do anything!

Teacher: Look at your picture. What does it have? Tell me about it!

Charles: How about A Big Summer House.

Morris: [Shaking his head] Uh uh!

Bertha: [with her hands on her hips] Well if you don't pick it, we'll pick it for you!

Morris: I give up!

Karl: He liked Bertha's old idea!

Morris: One of you can make the decision!

Karl: [standing up as if to take control] Who likes Doggie Beach House?

Bertha: Yeah, I guess that's good!

Morris: Fine with me.

My observations made me realize, that although the groups worked fairly well together on the first collaborative project, the children need to learn how to work cohesively to avoid disagreements and hurt feelings. I also knew I needed to support those children who had wonderful ideas but were unable to share them with the group. I began to make assumptions about the level and amount of peer interaction my students had experienced before coming to our classroom. While Charles appeared to be quite the diplomat, Morris seemed as though he rarely had the opportunity to make decisions for himself. This first collaborative project was a benchmark for me, showing where the students were, and where they needed to go in terms of social interaction.

In order to attempt to capture the children's perspective of the project, I asked each to complete a survey that used smiley faces and frown faces as the symbols for how they felt their group worked as a team. Figure 3.1 shows the rubric we used and the tally of the students' responses.

Geometric Design Rubric

Name Tallies for all responses Date _____

Did the group work as a team?	 16	 3
Did the group explore various designs?	 19	 0
Did you use more than one shape?	 19	 0
Did everybody make decisions together?	 14	 5
Did you explain your design to the class?	 19	 0

Figure 3.1

I found that most of the children thought they worked well together, and my own observations support this. Three children, however, indicated that their respective groups did not work as a team. Leslie from group one, Charles from group two and Geoffrey, who was part of another group said that their groups did not work as a team. This frustrated me since I was not able to capture the dialogue from

Geoffrey's group to help determine what difficulties they had. I also noticed from the surveys that five students mentioned that their groups did not make decisions together. Leslie and Boris from group one, Bertha and Karl from group two, and Harriet, part of another group, indicated that their groups had trouble making decisions together.

These surveys supported my own observations. Leslie honestly reported the disagreements I had observed in her group. She was the one who did not have all of her suggestions come to fruition. Bertha and Karl reported the lack of collaboration in their group that I had witnessed myself. Bertha appeared quite frustrated with Morris' lack of decisiveness, while Karl tried to be the negotiator to mediate between the two. Using my findings, I hoped to be able to guide them through the necessary steps for collaborative work and successful social interactions by incorporating additional collaborative and social opportunities, and adding classroom discussions that allowed the children to share their needs and frustrations, as well as their successful interactions.

The next day, I asked my students to write in their math journals to express their feelings about the project and working with the group. Many of the children expressed their excitement of working in a group. The following journals (Figure 3.2) are samples of the typical responses the children gave.

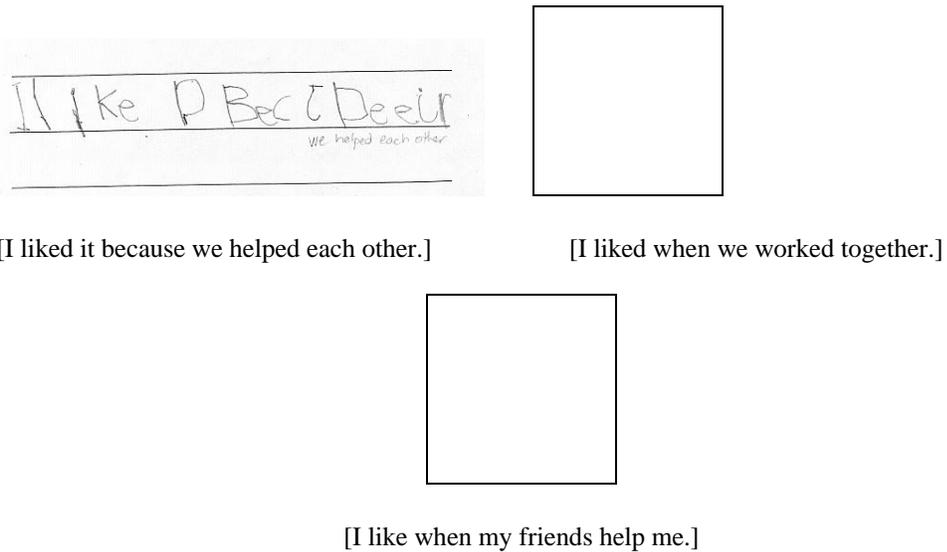


Figure 3.2

The journals showed me that the children really are social learners, and they truly enjoy being with friends. When I compare the journals and the surveys, however, I noticed that the children did not mention any problems they had encountered the previous day. Did they forget the incidents, or just put them aside, forgetting that they actually had taken place? Or maybe their lack of journaling experience hindered authentic voices to be heard. Nonetheless, I had several sources of data telling me that my students still required ample practice with collaborative efforts to ensure that everyone involved is active and learning.

A Second Pair of Eyes to Gather Data

By the time Sue's first observation of my class came around, I was not very optimistic about any progress I had made with my class in the few short weeks we had been together. In fact, I warned Sue that things were likely to be crazy. I introduced Sue to my class, and their smiles seemed to offer a warm welcome. As part of our daily routine, the children were working in language arts centers for the morning. I had broken the children into three groups, making sure I separated the personalities that conflicted, relying upon my previous observations to guide my decisions. I thought I assembled groupings in which the children might work well together. One of the centers was a writing activity that encouraged the children to read signs and labels around the room to answer fill in the blank questions. Since this was the guided reading lesson for the day, I worked with this activity as the children rotated through. The English as a Second Language teacher was also in the room at the time, and she worked with all of the children as they completed an "All About Me" booklet to share with their parents for Open House that night. Sue was able to observe the whole class, but more specifically watch the groups as they rotated through our third center of the day - a letter free exploration activity. In this center I had laid out rubber letter stamps of the entire alphabet, both upper and lower case, along with stamp pads, paper, letter stencils, letter tiles, and felt letters to go with the flannel board. The only instructions I gave the class were, "See what you can do with the letters!" I then asked the children if they had any ideas for what to do when they

went to the letter center. Bertha called out, "I can make my name." Geoffrey raised his hand and suggested, "Maybe we should put them together and make words." When I called on Liz, she suggested, "How about we line up the letters like the alphabet!" I brought the discussion to a close by suggesting that the children look over the material that I had laid out and then decide what to do with it.

During our center rotations most of the children quickly engaged themselves in an activity with the letters. Some children worked independently. Harriet, for example, worked along humming to herself as she used the rubber stamps to spell her name. David got right to work with stamping out his name and became quite possessive of the letter stamps. He had difficulty sharing until Mrs. McGinley intervened by encouraging him to let others use the ones he was not using. Charles went right to the flannel board and proceeded to try to spell words. He put a *p* on the board, and then another *p* while leaving a big space in the middle. He was thinking and searching for other letters before he placed two *o*'s in between the *p*'s. He smiled, looked at me and proudly declared, "Mrs. Wolford, I spelled 'popcorn'!" Not wanting to deflate his enthusiasm, I said, "I see you wrote the sounds that you hear in the word!" meanwhile making a mental note to focus on ending sounds of words for an upcoming lesson. I may not have been able to ascertain so quickly that this student, and others, required a

minilesson geared to address this topic if they had not been engaged in this free exploration of letters, and if Sue had not been there to capture it.

Other children immediately began working together. Leslie and Olivia looked at each other and kept asking, “What should we do?” They were brought in by Bertha who said, “C’mon and make your name wit’ me!” After Charles had talked with me about his work, other children, Karl and Kelly, asked Charles if they could join him. Charles eagerly shared the felt letters and the three of them tried to spell various words together.

I did notice one child who had difficulty with the “freedom” and lack of explicit directions for the activity. Sam appeared frustrated by the task at hand. He did not know where to start and constantly appealed to Mrs. McGinley for help. When she did assist him, he would not let other children work with the same materials at the same time. At one point he began crying and screaming, “I don’t want to. I’m using these. I don’t know what to do.” He continued to repeat the same phrases repeatedly. At the time, I speculated that he was just not used to having the freedom of choice in his work. Perhaps he had always been told exactly what to do and did not have enough confidence in his own abilities to be able to produce something in the absence of step-by-step directions.

This free exploration of letters allowed me to assess the abilities of my students while encouraging them to think for themselves and to work with their classmates. Sue was able to capture the children’s interactions that I would have

missed with my attention focused on my guided reading group. It was invaluable to have another pair of eyes to observe and another person with whom to reflect upon those observations. The observations I was able to make, along with what Sue shared with me allowed me to better understand the needs of my students. For instance, Sue offered her impression of Sam's frustration, indicating that perhaps at this early point in the year he is seeking the attention of his new teacher, getting it any way he could. Her insight helped to show me that Sam responded better when I focused on the positive and acceptable behaviors he demonstrates, while ignoring the frequent outbursts. Sue also noted that Sam appeared to be a loner, with little interaction between himself and the other students on that particular day she was in our classroom. I decided that I needed to take a closer look at the social order developing in the classroom.

A Glimpse at the Social Order of Things

When we were designing our study, Sue and I knew that the sociometric matrix would be an invaluable tool for helping us see the social structure developing in our classrooms. As long as we could convince the children to provide us with their honest answers, and not the ones they thought their friends might have wanted them to utilize, then we would have a fairly accurate snapshot of the children's peer relations at that point in time. Using the same method to plot the student's responses on the chart as Sue indicated, I proceeded with my

inquiry. The students were eager to come up to my desk as I called them alphabetically to share their responses as to whom they would like sit near for our new desk arrangement. As one child would leave my desk, a hush would fall upon the room, allowing me to easily be heard above the usual din that is our free play time to announce the name of the next student from whom I needed to hear. Figure 3.3 shows the matrix that resulted.

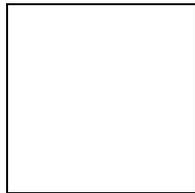


Figure 3.3

My pick for the “leader” of the boys was Charles. He actually was the second ranked boy, but only 3 in the overall rank of the class. The top ranked boy was the shyest, softest-spoken boy in the class, Morris. I told myself that I had better pay closer attention to this little boy. He obviously had more to offer than his teacher had been able to pick up on! I completely misjudged the girls. I had selected Bertha as the leader for the girls. She was ranked 15.5, the median value for the 4-way tie at ranks 13-17. One girl that I had not even considered in my original thought processes ranked number one for the girls, as well as for the

overall class. This was Olivia. To me she appeared to be a happy-go-lucky follower, content to just do whatever the others wanted.

As I looked over the matrix data I had collected, it came to my attention that there was one student in my class, Sam, who had not been picked at all. I was not surprised, unfortunately, because Sam is prone to outbursts of emotion and anti-social behavior. He often attempts to kiss the other children, cries when he doesn't get his way, talks to his classmates while they are trying to work, and whines for help on seemingly simple tasks. During collaborative projects and center work he often prefers to work alone. Sometimes he will sit with the group, but he rarely interacts to accomplish the task at hand. I erroneously assumed that the other children just overlooked these behaviors.

Emerging Patterns of a Child in Need

I began to see quite a pattern emerging from my data, and knew that I had to be flexible to accommodate the needs of this one particular student and to take a closer look to determine those needs. It was at this point that I decided to focus my participant observations on Sam, beginning with a shadow log to focus on his interactions and behaviors throughout the day. I composed the following vignette from this shadow log and several subsequent observations. Here I attempted to

walk through a portion of the day in Sam's shoes. My ongoing observations and daily interactions with him allow me to try to speak in his voice.

Good morning Mrs., Wolford, good morning, GOOD MORNING, MRS. WOLFORD! Oh why does she have to be talking to him anyway? It's not fair! It's not fair! I want to say hello! Wait, now she is looking at me – good morning, Mrs. Wolford. Now I can put away my backpack and unpack my lunch!

Oh, it's center time again. Yes! My group is going to computers first – hey! That's where I was going to sit! Mrs. Wooollllforrrd! I don't know what to do! Whah! Good he moved! Now it's time to work on Instant Reader. Tent 2B that's what Mrs. Wolford said.

Here we are at the art center. I wish they would move over. Hey I don't have any room, whaaaa. I can't do this! Uh oh, Mrs. Wolford just pointed to my desk, now I have to sit there! WHAAAAA! Sniffle – sigh! Okay I'm ready to work with my group. But I don't have a glue stick, I don't have a glue stick, I don't have a glue stick! MINE'S BROKEN!!! So I threw it out! Thanks for the new glue stick Mrs. Wolford. Yes, I'll tell you next time I have a problem.

Okay, I am done with my writing. No, Mrs. Wolford, I said I am done. I don't want to fix it. Whaaaa! She said I need to fix this. I can't

do this! Whaaa! I don't want to rewrite it. I don't know what to do!

Whaaa! What, do you mean I don't have to rewrite it? Okay, what do I need to fix?

RECESS! I love recess. Time to get the cars and the car mat! No one else can use them. Please don't come over here. George, I wanted to play by myself. I wanted to use that car. What Mrs. WOLFORD? Okay, I'll share! Here, George, you can be the red one.

I'm done playing here – someone help me fold this mat. Someone help me fold this MAT. SOMEONE HELP ME! Fine, I'll do it! But it's not fair!! It's not fair!

By speaking in Sam's voice, I can begin to feel the frustration and tension he must feel throughout much of the day. I can get a glimpse at our classroom from his point of view and begin to make adjustments to our daily routine to assist Sam's efforts of being a member of our classroom. Noticing that he repeatedly has trouble working in close quarters with the other children, I have started offering Sam the opportunity to complete his center work at his own seat. He often chooses to do this, without any intervention or suggestion from me. I also can sense that he wants to be a part of the class, but in a way that is safe and comfortable for him.

During free play opportunities during our recess portion of the day, Sam chose to engage in his own activity. Occasionally, he would join a group, but he would soon be wailing that someone took his turn if he wanted another turn on the zip line, or that someone grabbed the ball from him if they were playing football, or that another child wouldn't let him on the swing when he had just arrived at the swings with others waiting. Sam was missing out on the necessary opportunities for social interaction that allow children to work together and practice their interpersonal skills. He often started his attempts to play in a group of students with a clash that would ultimately leave him on his own. While solitary time is not problematic, the lack of social skills that allow one to interact with others can be.

On indoor recess days Sam without fail took out the car mat and cars. Figure 3.4, a sociogram, depicts the students' choices for whom they played with and what they worked on during one recess time early in the study. Sam seemed most content to play by himself as he recited various lines from TV shows and movies and incorporated these lines into his play. Sam tried to claim exclusive rights to the cars early in the study, wailing to anyone who came by. "I was here first. I am playing with these." When I would intervene, Sam reluctantly let others play. This became less of a problem when I brought in new cars I had purchased. A problem would arise when someone took the cars that Sam

typically called his own. He rarely initiated social play, but would accept others as playmates if they played on his terms.

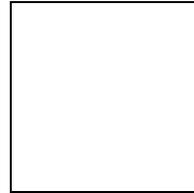


Figure 3.4

I needed to help Sam become a full member of our class. On one hand, the other children in the class didn't seem to be bothered by Sam's outbursts to the extent that I was. They seemed to have settled into the frame of mind of, "That's Sam," so they would give him what he wanted which would immediately make him stop crying. On the other hand, the children ranked Sam as their least favorite partner on our earlier sociometric matrix, indicating that they would not choose to be around him. Matthew was the only child who expressed concern regularly when Sam appeared to get upset. Matthew would come to me as soon as Sam's frustration became vocal, while the rest of the class looked up momentarily from what they were doing, only to quickly resume their work when they saw the source of the disturbance. Only Matthew persisted to verbalize to me that, "Mrs. Wolford, Sam is crying. Sam is sad. What's wrong with Sam?" I often took that opportunity to explain to Matthew, loudly enough for Sam to hear,

that Sam is crying because he is upset with something. I would add that once Sam calms himself down, we'll be able to help him feel better.

On one occasion I decided to have a talk with the whole class. I asked them if a child who cries should get whatever he or she wants. The children were quiet at first. No one spoke. Then George said, "No, it's not fair."

Bertha chimed in with, "Yeah, they distract people when they're trying to play!"

I asked the others to tell me more about their feelings. Karl spoke up and said, "It's no fair!"

Liz politely raised her hand to offer, "It makes me feel sad...or bad. Because they're making noise when you're trying to work."

Olivia simply said, "Just tell the teacher!"

During this whole discussion, I watched Sam closely to see how he interpreted this question. He seemed to be oblivious, playing with the strands in the rug and picking at his shoes. When I asked him how he felt about someone crying until he got what he wanted, Sam replied, "It's not fair!"

From this point forward, Sam's outbursts seemed to be shorter and less frequent as the children paid them less attention. When an outburst would occur, Sam only needed a glance from me to let him know that when he calmed down, I would be able to help him get what he wanted and needed. Perhaps he was beginning to learn from his classmates' behavior and my praise of the times he

successfully worked out a difference of opinion or peacefully allowed a classmate to join in his chosen activity. Sam even was able to work in centers without a constant struggle. He was making progress! When Bertha was inadvertently standing on the car mat Sam wanted to fold, he waited patiently for a moment, while Bertha finished asking me her question and moved away. At the art center, Sam was instructed to use his crayons to add color to his project. As he reached for his crayon box, the crayons all tumbled out the bottom, spilling all over the floor. He looked up to George, who was standing nearby, and asked, “Could you help me with my crayons. They ran away!” This statement mimicked my words that I often use to make light of a time when another student or I, myself, drop something.

A Fresh Perspective

During Sue’s third visit to our classroom, she exclaimed, “They are working so nicely!” This was music to my ears. After two months of working together, I was happy to hear that our efforts were showing. Center time on the day of this visit found the children engaged in a writing activity in which they had to finish a story that I had started with an incomplete thought, working on the computer with a literacy program, reading with their guiding reading books, and designing a fall scene at the art center. In the art center I had placed various materials for the children to use: construction paper, glue, paint. I instructed

students to make a fall scene using what was laid out, but with a catch. No scissors and no paintbrushes could be used!

At first the children were perplexed. Karl shouted out, “But how are we going to paint without paint brushes?” To this I answered, “You tell me!” When Morris asked, “How are we going to cut the paper if we can’t use our scissors?” I again repeated, “You tell me!” The smiles on their faces and the gleam in their eyes told me that they were catching on! Bertha said, “You’re not telling, are you?” My smile was the only answer the children needed. They were finally getting used to the idea that I was not going to give them explicit steps to follow to tell them exactly how to complete every project.

Most of the children worked quite well with one another in their center groups. Even though I had not presented this as a collaborative project, I was happy to note that the children were using the social skills that I had stressed throughout the year. Sam worked quietly on his own, becoming upset when he tried to rip the paper one way and it decided to rip another. He started to cry but almost immediately calmed himself down, returned to his work, and asked Kelly for her assistance. I was so proud of Sam. In two short months, he was beginning to ask for help. Sue commented that even though her goal was to focus on Sam to help me gain more insight on his behavior, she found that his interactions barely warranted a second glance. He seemed as though he was becoming a full member of our class.

Giving Collaborative Projects Another Go Round

Around Thanksgiving, the children worked collaboratively on a free exploration project that was a culmination to our unit on nutrition. Like Sue and her students, my students and I would work together to design a healthy meal for Thanksgiving. Students would draw their selections on a paper plate and then the plate would be mounted on construction paper with an appropriate table setting. For this project, I let the children choose their own groups. I started by choosing five girls (Liz, Harriet, Bertha, Leslie, Olivia) who I knew were fairly strong socially and asked them to pick the next person for their group, specifying that it had to be a boy. The boys then chose a girl for the next member of the group, and so on. Aria (our new student), David, and Seth were the last children picked, but didn't appear to mind as they happily joined their groups. Student choice usually seems to aid in collaboration. Two months had passed since our initial collaborative project. I was eager to see how the children would interact this time around.

After the children chose their groups, I explained the project and asked them to decide upon the color of the placemat to start. When that was decided, the group needed to discuss what to draw on the plate to make their healthy meals. With that said, I stopped giving directions and set the children free to work in their groups. I listened in on as many as I could, remembering my frustration

from our previous collaborative project. In group five, George took control right away asking, "Who votes for brown?" Similarly in group 4, David began asking his group members to raise their hands if they wanted certain colors. He had them repeat it several times, in what I perceived as an attempt to have the vote turn out in his favor!

My attention was drawn back to group 5 when I noticed Sam crawling all over the rug area where his group was working and discussing the project. As I approached, Sam looked right at me and then attempted to get himself involved, without a word coming from my mouth. George reached over and picked up a crayon and Sam immediately exploded with, "Hey, THAT'S MINE!" George just gave the crayon back and chose another, while Sam looked at me with lowered eyes. He went back to work when he noticed that I seemed to be spreading my attention around the room and not solely focusing on him. Morris said, "I'll glue the napkin". Sam chimed in, "Hurry, before the glue dries!" As they continued to work, Sam was bothered by other children from another group who were looking at his group's work. He nicely told them, "Stop copying us". When I noticed that the group, and Sam in particular, was working well together, I walked away to let them work on their own.

I later had each group present their work, and then tell the class how they went about completing the project together. Group five had nothing but good news to report. As they explained their meal, their comments were:

We worked together.

We had fun!

We took turns.

We voted.

We all agreed on what to make.

We all worked to glue.

We voted and it worked!

Despite the rocky start Sam had with his group, he managed to pull himself together and contribute to the class project. I knew he had worked hard to get to this point. I was quite proud of him that day – and when I told him, his smile seemed to say that he was proud of himself, too!

Our class, as a whole, worked without conflict as they completed this collaborative project. When differences arose, a member of each group stepped up to act as a negotiator until the problem was solved. The majority of the class relied upon voting to make choices when there seemed to be disagreement. I did note, however, that there were still a few students who would quickly conform to the group's ideas, rather than attempting to pursue their own ideas. This is one aspect of social interaction that I will focus on for the remainder of the year as we continue to engage in our collaborative projects.

Another Look at the Social Structure of the Class

As the study drew to a close, I completed another sociometric matrix. I wanted to see how students' selections may have changed over the course of our study, specifically to see if Sam's progress and changes in our class roster impacted the social structure that had existed in our classroom at the time of the first matrix. Figure 3.5 shows the final matrix.

Since I had administered the first sociometric matrix, there was a shift in the leaders in the class, and Sam moved up in the rankings to number 11 out of a class of twenty. Unfortunately, another little girl, Karen, received no votes at all. I started to question what it was that had brought about the change. It could be that this time I asked the children who they would like to work with at centers, rather than who they wanted to sit by as I had done the first time. Were I to complete this type of study again, I would be sure to ask the same question each time to eliminate any doubt in my mind. Still, I believe that the students have grown socially in the few short months we have been together.

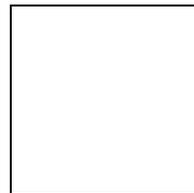


Figure 3.5

Completing the matrix twice allowed me to see two quick snapshots of the social order within our classroom at the time the matrix was constructed,

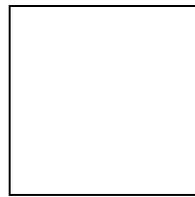
highlighting the students who stand out in some way. I am equally interested in the top picks and those who were overlooked by their peers. This forces me to look at the characteristics of each of those children to determine what personality traits and personal strengths/weaknesses may contribute to the overall ranking they received from their peers. The traits I most often observed in the top picks, in this case, Liz, Olivia, Stephen, and Boris, were happy, hard working, and eager to help. While reading a story entitled *Making Friends, Keeping Friends*, I incorporated a discussion of characteristics that might make a good friend. The traits I associated with the top picks from the matrix, were among those first suggested by the group.

In contrast, as I examined the characteristics of the students who placed at the lower end of the ranking system, the most common traits I uncovered were quiet and shy. Remember Kelly from the beginning of the year? In my eyes she has grown tremendously, volunteering in class, offering her ideas, and even joining in with groups of children already engaged in an activity. She shared the second to lowest rank with our new girl from November, Aria.

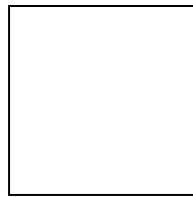
A Final Survey and Interview

Our final surveys took a different form than what we had first planned. Previous surveys had allowed only yes/no answers due to the limitations of

primary writing skills. We decided to have the children draw pictures of their thoughts on free exploration and free play, and then add words, as they were able. This variation to our data collection plan proved most informative. The students were able to express themselves in the pictures much better than they were able to with the closed surveys. The common element in all of the picture surveys was the appearance of pairs or groups of children playing together. Figure 3.6 shows the drawings mentioned here.



Sam's Journal



Karen's Journal

Figure 3.6

The one exception was Karen's picture, which showed her playing with the blocks by herself, a common occurrence during free play. Karen is a soft-spoken member of our class who often follows her own agenda. She seems less affected by peers than her classmates, as seen when she chooses to play alongside the other students, rather than join their group. For example, when Karen was playing with the blocks by herself, Olivia came over to ask if Karen would like to join in with the group at the board playing school. Karen smiled as she looked up and said, "I'm fine playing by myself." This survey, coupled with the final

sociometric matrix in which Karen was not chosen at all, reminded me that in addition to being able to get along with others, we must first be comfortable being by ourselves.

Even Sam showed himself with two others sitting next to the car mat in his survey, indicating that he likes being with his friends. This shows me that he is a social being like the rest of us, but that at times, he just doesn't make the best choices when he is with friends. I wasn't surprised at all to see that he had drawn the car mat, as this is where I find him at the beginning of most free play opportunities. Lately, however, this has been diminishing, as he develops friends who invite him to play. Karl was playing with the Lincoln Logs, for example, and he approached Sam, who was just returning to the classroom. Karl said, "Hey Sam, wanna play?" to which Sam answered, "Well, sure. What are ya doin?" I was pleased to see that although he did not initiate the collaborative play, Sam wasn't afraid to join in.

From these open ended surveys, I was able to gain insight into the children's own stance on free play, but I wanted to follow up on some of the ideas the children had expressed. I met the children on our "sharing rug" and simply asked the group to tell me their thoughts about free play. They began to sing out their ideas, one following another, adding to what had been said before. As I listened to their voices, a picture was forming in my head of the children as they

played. I created the following poem from the students' actual words in an attempt to share this picture with my readers.

Part of the Team

A poem on free play

Playing with my friends.

There's someone to push us.

At first I have nobody – it happens all the time.

I ask Olivia & that's the good part!

I ask to play and they say, "Yes!"

I like to be part of the team.

I also asked the children why they liked free exploration activities and what they thought was the best part of those activities. Again the children's words wove together to produce vivid pictures of students working and learning together. Using their words, I could more clearly see that they did capture the essence of what I feel free exploration is all about. I created another poem using the students' words to help express their thoughts.

Our Own Ideas

A poem on free exploration

Anything you want.

Some of us make our own ideas.

Don't have to do things by yourself.

You use your own ideas.

So they come out perfect!

Initial Conclusions

Our classroom has become more of a community than I could have pictured after our first week together. The children are generally kind, caring and compassionate with each other. They are respectful to each other and to all of the adults that enter our room. On occasion there are disagreements, fits for attention, and unkind words spoken in haste. I can't expect perfection – after all, they are only first graders! My hopes are that the children are learning valuable life-long social and academic skills that they will carry with them and build upon through the years.

Sam has made his own progress. I can't compare him, or anyone else for that matter, to the rest of the class. I must take his successes as they come. We celebrate the days when he is able to work cooperatively with his group. We revisit old lessons when things seem to fall apart. I like to think that we are working within Sam's zone of proximal development, where according to

Vygotsky he is more likely to understand what is being presented to him. We take each day as it comes and let the needs of that day guide us. This is not to say that we just float from one activity to the other. As Dewey suggests, we must plan to have educative experiences that promote future learning. This social side of school certainly plays a part in present and future classroom endeavors.

CHAPTER IV
CONCLUDING THIS STUDY AND PREPARING
FOR THE NEXT CYCLE

Bringing It all Together

As mentioned in our review of our pilot studies, action research is a cyclical process in which we continuously gather data, analyze what we have collected and then use this analysis to guide our future data collection measures. Therefore, throughout our study, we went back to our field log to reread and code our data, making it easier to search through to find specific bits and pieces of data. Organizing our codes into bins helped us to uncover holes in our data. We noticed that our initial efforts had focused primarily on the free exploration opportunities in our respective classrooms, collecting pages of rich data that would later prove useful, but barely mentioned descriptions of the free play in which the children engaged on a daily basis. We were able to rectify this as we continued our data collection. As the data collection period of our study drew to a close, we looked at the bins into which we had organized the information we had gathered, and created theme statements to describe the type of data reflected in this grouping, which ultimately evolved into the findings we now share.

With both of our classes we found that, like all teaching styles, free exploration is not a one size fits all method of instruction. Each of us had a

student for whom free exploration and play opportunities proved difficult. When these two children were engaged in independent teacher directed activities in their respective classrooms, they were able to efficiently complete the task at hand without problems. During the more open, yet guided times of exploration and play, in which Sam from Beth's class and Ellie from Sue's class were expected to interact with classmates, they struggled to complete even the most simple projects. While the academic goals of the activity may have been developmentally appropriate for these two youngsters, Vygotsky might suggest that the social expectations were beyond their individual zones of proximal development. Taking this into consideration, Sue added more opportunities for modeling and practice with conflict resolution. As a result, Ellie and the rest of the class learned to talk to each other, discussing the problem and often solving them without teacher intervention. Beth altered the classroom routine, allowing Sam to choose whether he wanted to complete the center activities with his group, or individually at his desk.

When given opportunities for making decisions about classroom projects, the students become part of the process of learning in the classroom. Student centered activities lead to student ownership and promote engaged learning. We aspired to engage our students in activities that addressed the academic curriculum, but more importantly, the social development of the whole child. In hooks' words, "... our work is not merely to share information but to share in the

intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p.13). Our study focuses on an aspect of school that is often forgotten – the social side. We both value the importance of developing the whole child. Predominately our job is to address our students’ academic needs. We both feel that we would be negligent if we were to stop there. We know that we cannot teach effectively without addressing the social and emotional needs of our students. Both Ellie and Sam are strong students, generally quick to understand new academic concepts and yet, these two children were perplexed by complicated aspects of social interaction.

Through continual practice, students were better able to guide their own learning in activities that allowed them to freely explore materials with their peers, as opposed to activities directed by the teacher with a prescribed way of doing things. In the initial observations of our classrooms, only a few children were able to focus and direct their own learning without asking for guidance from the teacher. In Beth’s room, Charles went right to work spelling out words on the flannel board during one free exploration of letters, while many of his classmates relied upon the direction of other students and the teacher to get them started. As the students learn to monitor their own learning, they are opening the door to future learning.

We have learned tremendously from our students, as we observed, conferenced, and reflected upon the children and their daily interactions with one another, and with us. In essence, our roles have reversed. Freire (1970) stated this role reversal beautifully, saying, “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 80). Sue learned that involving her students in attempts to solve classroom disagreements, works even more effectively than just her directions and modeling alone. When the children in her classroom personally expressed to Ellie their point of view on the tire swing incident, it made much more of an impact than the previous attempts Sue had made to show Ellie that her actions hurt others.

Our study suggests that student leaders quickly emerge when children work collaboratively and play together. Some children are understated leaders, while others are just plain bullies. In Beth’s classroom, Olivia stood out as a leader on the sociometric matrices; however Beth’s initial observations of Olivia, completed prior to the first matrix, portrayed her as a quiet and agreeable follower. Sparked by the matrix data, subsequent observations found that Olivia, in a soft-spoken, yet confident voice, was directing activities, initiating play, and looked upon for guidance. Conversely, in Sue’s room, Ellie bullied the other children in the beginning, and as she learned to communicate and associate with the children

in a more relaxed manner, she became a sought after playmate rather than a bully to be feared.

Through play, the children make sense of the world around them. As we have watched our children play over the last few months, various themes, subjects and ideas wove themselves into the children's interactions. Whether they re-enact a math lesson, pretend to be a family starting their day, or simply draw together, the children have become adept at using play to make sense of their world.

According to Leontiev, play is the leading activity of young children, and learning is the leading activity of elementary school children (Dixon-Kraus 1996). Play seems to offer an opportunity for children to explore through activity. Integrating the play and the learning seems natural.

In *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, Paley noted that many of life's lessons are worked out and understood through play. She herself struggled with the imposition of adult consequences such as the "time-out chair." She explains that, "The classroom was becoming for me a far more interesting world as I discovered that the child's path to reasonable behavior often was best approached in the form of make-believe. Dramatic necessity and friendship offered better reasons to behave agreeably than some obscure adult purpose in the shape of a chair" (p. 90). We learned that it was the free play opportunities that offered the children the time they needed to practice whatever they so desired. Through play, Ellie and Sam have unconsciously been able to practice their social skills while

consciously deciding who and what to play with. This collateral learning often tends to lead to more of Dewey's educative experiences than our best planned lessons.

Collaboration is Key

In addition to our individual classroom specific findings, there was one other overarching theme that transcended both classrooms. It was the collaboration that we shared. When we were planning our study, we knew that we would enjoy the support of a colleague and friend to guide us through the study. What we did not realize, however, was exactly how much we had to offer one another. Our classrooms and children have benefited immensely from our partnership through idea swapping and the sharing of insights. We have also each grown on a personal level as a direct result of our interaction – much in line with how we hoped our children would learn from each other.

Teacher collaboration is highly beneficial to creating an environment that supports student learning. Working in isolation is not an efficient use of one's time, when there are opportunities for sharing. Fullen (1993a) states, "There is a ceiling effect on how much we can learn if we keep to ourselves. The ability to collaborate – on both a small and large scale – is becoming one of the core requisites of post modern society. People need one another to learn and to accomplish things" (Brown and Moffett p. 91). Why re-invent the wheel, so to speak?

In reviewing our autobiographies, we uncovered similarities that would otherwise have remained unmentioned. Memories overlapped even though they were separated by time and geography. We both fondly remembered reaching the top levels of the color-coded SRA reading folders. We both strived to get there, but what did we learn about the enjoyment of reading? The only real-life application that we realized is that we are both programmed to strive for the top. This lack of connection to the world outside of school from our own pasts keeps us cognizant of designing lessons and activities that are authentic, educative, and student driven.

We also gained from the professional knowledge we each hold. During the study there were several instances in which we directly shared activities that we had observed in the other's classroom. When Beth went to Sue's classroom and observed a rhythm stick activity that integrated both science and language arts as they applied to the current units of study, Beth was inspired to use the idea in her classroom. A month later, when Beth's class was studying sound, she used the rhythm stick idea and explained to her class the origin of the idea. Not only was the class excited about the activity, but they were thrilled to know that Mrs. McGinley had given it to Mrs. Wolford. Our cooperative efforts provided additional modeling of the significance of working together, within a real-world application.

On a visit to Beth's room, Sue was enthused by the excitement of a phonics review song Beth was using with her students. Sue relished in how motivated they were as they worked with their sounds. At the end of the day, Sue asked the children, "Could you please sing that song again, you know the chipmunk song, so I can write it down to share with my class." Everyone was delighted to share the song several times until Sue had every last word written down, seemingly inspired by the fact that their work was going to be used to help another group of students. Even on the way home that day, Sue was humming the tune to herself – oo, ee, oo, aah, aah, ing, ang, ollie, ollie, ing, ang, oo, ee, oo, aah, aah, ing, ang, ollie, ollie, ing, ang – as she planned to use it with her class. When she implemented the song, Sue knew that it was a new approach to reach her students.

Another idea Sue borrowed from her visits into Beth's classroom was a word wheel activity. She adapted the concept of the activity to reinforce the language arts skills on which her class was currently working. The children were excited and involved every time the word wheels come out. Sue fed the children's enthusiasm for this activity by later integrating the wheel into the math curriculum. Sherrel was so excited to see the wheel on the board that she ran to Mrs. McGinley and said, "Are we doing word wheels today?" Sue replied, "We are going to do Math Wheels, but there won't be any words. We'll be using numbers this time."

Not only were we able to borrow ideas from one another, but we were able to use each other as a sounding board and as another pair of eyes. The new perspective provided a more critical standpoint than we could have taken ourselves being so directly involved with our own students, and thereby helping us to see our own classroom through another's eyes. When Sue became frustrated with Ellie's apparent regression, she had Beth who offered ideas, support and suggestions on the situation. As Beth ran out of tricks to try to engage Sam, Sue was able to pull from her own experience and help Beth regain some steam.

Our children not only engaged in free play and free exploration within our classrooms, but they also observed their teachers exchanging ideas with another teacher. Our students knew we were going to our class when we picked up our school bags and walked out with them at dismissal. They picked up on the notion that in "real life" people work together, too! Actions speak louder than words!

Throughout the study we were hoping that the modeling we provided, along with positive interactions with classmates, would allow for social development of all of our students. An added gift was the impact we made on each others' social skills. With our collaborative efforts starting two years ago for projects in our Teacher as Evaluator course, we have had ample time to adopt social behaviors from each other. Beth has learned patience and perseverance as she has watched Sue on a day to day basis. Sue has become more laid back and

relaxed as she has allowed herself to “go with the flow.” These personality traits have helped us to become better people, and in turn, better teachers.

Questions

Now that our study is completed, we have taken the opportunity to go back and reflect upon what could have been done differently and what we still would like to know about free play and free exploration. Since Beth had previously explored free play and the use of free exploration in her classroom and Sue had looked into student ownership for her pilot study, we felt fairly confident with our methodology and implementation of the study as it progressed. Our analogous results strengthen our belief in the importance of using free play and free exploration in our classrooms, while watching for any student who struggles social interaction.

We did find a few areas that we felt could have made our study even stronger. We both were pleased with the monthly visits to each other’s classrooms but could have benefited from more opportunities to get to know the children and the workings of the other classroom. Further observations may have allowed for richer data to emerge, in that we would be better able to focus our observations with the experience we have gained. We also thought about the possibility of a wider look at how free play and free exploration take different forms with various age groups. In addition, inspired by Sue’s looping program,

we thought a longitudinal study would uncover much more; perhaps even just extending the study for the full year could accomplish this. Finally, we both feel that it would be a chance of a lifetime to meet and/or have a classroom visit by Vivian Paley. She has motivated much of our work to this point, and inspired us to truly engage our students through play and social interaction.

Some questions stem from our reflection. Will there be lasting effects once the children move from our classroom, especially Sue's group who have been together for two years? What will next year's class do with free exploration/free play time? How do our findings compare with intermediate and secondary levels? What do the children think are good qualities in a leader? What are good qualities of a friend?

While we suspect that our next cycle of action research will be used to answer the questions above, we know that we must keep in mind the needs and interests of our next class. They will be able to guide us in determining the course that we will follow.

We hope that this brief snapshot into our classrooms has inspired you to make your own investigation into a topic that you hold near and dear. Your teaching and learning can only benefit from engaging in the cycle of reflection and action. Our findings on free exploration and free play may not be generalizable to every classroom, but it was effective for our classes this year.

Also, seize any opportunity for collaboration that you encounter. Two minds are better than one!

We also encourage all teachers to provide time for free exploration and free play opportunities that many students crave, always mindful of the fact that not all students are comfortable with these less structured times and may require much guidance in their initial attempts of working within these parameters.

While you as the teacher may need to offer more guidance in the beginning, the growth and independence the children will most likely exhibit are well worth the effort.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arhar, J., Holly, M.L., & Kasten, W. (2001). *Action research for teachers: Traveling the yellow brick road*. New Jersey: Prentice - Hall, Inc.
- Atkinson, P. (1992). *Understanding ethnographic texts*. London: Sage.
- Balke, E. (1997, International Focus Issue). Play and the arts: The importance of the 'unimportant'. *Childhood Education*, 73, 355.
- Bogden, R., & Biklen, S. (1998). *Qualitative research for education*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Boram, R., & Marek, E. (1991). *The effects of free exploration from hands-on-science center exhibits*. *Eric Digest* [online]. Available: ERIC ED337354 [1, April 1991].
- Brown, J., & Moffett, C. (1999). *The hero's journey: How educators can transform schools and improve learning*. Virginia: ASCD.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Touchstone.
- Dixon-Krauss, L. (1996). *Vygotsky in the classroom: Mediated literacy instruction and assessment*. White Plains: Longman.
- Dunn, L. & Herwig, J. (1992). Play Behaviors and Convergent and Divergent Thinking Skills of Young Children Attending Full-day Preschool. *Child Study Journal*, 22, 1, 23.
- Ely, M., Vinz, R., Downing, M., & Anzul, M. (1997). *On writing qualitative research: Living by words*. London: Falmer Press.
- Freire, P. (2002). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

- Gonsalves, P., & Kopp, J. (1995). *Build it! Festival*. Eric Digest [online]. Available: ERIC ED416120 [1 January 1995].
- Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Mathews, J. (2001, January 9). Education's different drummer. *The Washington Post*, p. A10.
- Mayher, J.S., Lester, N., & Pradl, G.M. (1983). *Learning to write/writing to learn*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, Heinemann.
- Morrow, L.M. & Rand, M. (1991, February). Promoting literacy during play by designing early childhood classroom environments. *Reading Teacher*, 44, 6, 396.
- Paley, V. (1990). *The boy who would be a helicopter: The uses of storytelling in the classroom*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Paley, V. (1992). *You can't say you can't play*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Paley, V. (1997). *The girl with the brown crayon*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Richardson, S., & Ruane, D. (1996). *Improving student writing readiness skills in the kindergarten classroom*. Eric Digest [online]. Available: ERIC ED398594 [30 April 1996].
- Schmuck, R., & Schmuck, P. (1971). *Group processes in the classroom*. Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Publishers.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Wolfgang, C., Stannard, L., & Jones, I. (2001). Block Play Performance Among Preschoolers As a Predictor of Later School Achievement in Mathematics. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 15, 2, 173.

Summer 2002:

Literature review

Discuss study with building principals.

Submit for review after completing Human Subjects Internal Review

Board Proposal forms.

September 2002:

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3 permission slips sent home	4 Reminders of slips due back	5 Reminders of slips due back	6 permission slips due back	7
8	9	10 participant observation	11 collaborative project	12 writing prompt	13 sociograms	14
15	16	17 participant observation	18 Sue to Beth's classroom	19	20 Shadow logs	21
22 29	23 30	24 participant observation	25 Beth to Sue's classroom	26	27 Survey & interviews	28

October 2002:

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
		1 participant observation	2	3	4	5
6	7	8 participant observation	9 writing prompt	10	11 early dismissal	12
13	14 teacher inservice	15 participant observation	16 Sue to Beth's classroom	17	18 Shadow logs	19
20	21	22 participant observation	23 Beth to Sue's classroom	24	25	26
27	28	29 participant observation	30 sociograms	31		

November 2002:

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1	2
3	4 early dismissal	5 participant observation	6 Sue to Beth's classroom	7	8	9
10	11	12 participant observation	13 writing prompt	14	15 Shadow logs	16
17	18	19 participant observation	20	21 Shadow logs	22 Survey & interviews	23
24	25	26 participant observation	27 Beth to Sue's classroom	28 Thanksgiving holiday	29 Thanksgiving holiday	30

December 2002:

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2 Thanksgiving holiday	3 participant observation	4 writing prompt	5 sociogram	6	7
8	9	10 participant observation	11 Sue to Beth's classroom	12 collaborative project	13 Shadow logs	14
15	16	17 participant observation	18 Beth to Sue's classroom	19	20	21
22	23 Winter break	24 Winter break	25 Winter break	26 Winter break	27 Winter break	28
29	30 Winter break	31 Winter break				

Elementary School
Second Grade
Mrs. McGinley

September 3, 2002

Dear Principal:

As you may know, I am currently working on my Master's degree at Moravian College through a partnership with Our School District. Through my course work I hope to gain more insight into the best practices in teaching and translate them into continued learning for the children in my classroom.

One of the requirements of my Masters program is that I conduct a study of my own teaching practices. To this end I will be collaborating with another elementary school teacher within the district. The focus of our research will be free exploration and free play and the effects they may or may not have on the social and academic growth of each student.

Free exploration allows a child to interact with his/her environment with an open imagination. This expands the potential for individual learning through discovery and inquiry. Creative and independent thinking are important building blocks of future learning. They can be developed through ample practice.

Participation in this study does not require anything above and beyond the normal routine of the classroom. Participants and non-participants will receive the same instruction. All interviews and surveys used will be administered as a class project and all students will participate regardless of involvement with the study. By implementing this study, we hope to provide a richer learning environment that caters to social and academic needs of individual students in their own "zone of proximal development" according to Vygotsky. Parents and students need only to contact the classroom teacher to express their intent to withdraw from the study. The student will continue to participate in the classroom curriculum should he/she decide to discontinue in the study. However, his/her data will not be used in the research project.

If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class project, I can be reached by email. You may also contact my Moravian Faculty Advisor with any questions. If you have no reservations about my implementation of this project,

please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter by Friday, September 6.
Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,
Mrs. Susan McGinley

I understand that Mrs. Susan McGinley will be implementing a classroom based
research study during school hours. I have no objections to this project.

Principal's signature _____ Date _____

Elementary School
First Grade
Mrs. Wolford

September 3, 2002

Dear Parents:

As some of you may know, I am currently working on my Master's degree at Moravian College through a partnership with the Our School District. Through my course work I hope to gain more insight into the best practices in teaching and translate them into continued learning for your children.

One of the requirements of my Masters program is that I conduct a study of my own teaching practices. To this end I will be collaborating with another elementary school teacher within the district. The focus of our research will be free exploration and free play and the effects they may or may not have on the social and academic growth of each student.

Free exploration allows a child to interact with his/her environment with an open imagination. This expands the potential for individual learning through discovery and inquiry. Creative and independent thinking are important building blocks of future learning. They can be developed through ample practice.

Participation in this study does not require anything above and beyond the normal routine of the classroom. Participants and non-participants will receive the same instruction. All interviews and surveys used will be administered as a class project and all students will participate regardless of involvement with the study. By implementing this study, we hope to provide a richer learning environment that caters to social and academic needs of individual students in their own "zone of proximal development" according to Vygotsky. Your consent to participate in the research project can be terminated at any time without consequence. Parents and students need only to contact the classroom teacher to express this intent, and the student's data will not be used in the study. Should withdrawal occur, the student will continue to participate in the normal classroom curriculum.

If you have any questions or concerns about my in-class project, I can be reached at school. You may also contact my Moravian Faculty Advisor with any

questions. If you have no reservations about your child's participation in my project, please sign and return the bottom portion of this letter by Friday, September 6. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Beth Wolford
Teacher

Mr. X
Principal

I understand that my son/daughter _____ will be involved in a classroom based study. All information gathered will maintain the privacy of each student when presented in completion of Mrs. Beth Wolford's coursework. I have no objections to my child's participation.

Parent's signature _____