

Sheila Dorothy Smith

Sandtray Play and Storymaking

A Hands-On Approach to Build
Academic, Social, and Emotional Skills
in Mainstream and Special Education



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Figure 2.2 on p.35 from *Growing Up Again* by Jean Illsey and Connie Dawson, 1998 is reprinted with permission from Hazelden Publishing. Permissions for case studies, photographs, writing and interview comments was kindly granted by the families and guardians of the children featured in this book.

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On the walls of the foyer of Huntsville Public School is a wide-spreading tree. Painted there by a mother in the community, the tree speaks of the welcome and shelter that the school offers to children and also to ideas such as those chronicled here. For the support, participation, and enthusiasm of the parents, teaching staff, and administrators of this school, I am deeply grateful. Special thanks to those teachers who shared the stories from their classrooms – Jane Keevil, Christopher Kemp, and Cheryl Schmid. And, to Andrea Slocombe, who conferred with me in the heady early days often until the sun set and the classroom darkened, my heartfelt gratitude for the ongoing contributions of her wide expertise, generous insight, and kindred understanding.

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PREFACE

This book first began in a special education classroom where 12 students, defiant and disengaged, began to build worlds in the sand and to tell and write the stories of those worlds. I watched as the storymaking that sprang from hands-on imagination sparked the students' engagement in learning the language arts of speaking, listening, and narrative writing. I have here attempted not only to supply you with a map for recreating these techniques in your own contexts, but to theorize some of what I saw happen, drawing on multiple sources in order to better understand what unfolded before my eyes in a way that was initially so seemingly miraculous. The book contains multiple genres: it is a chronicle, a manual, and a work of theory. But at root it is an encounter with children who have breathed into its pages the immediacy and power of their sandworlds and their stories. For their lively, direct, ongoing teaching, I thank them, over and over again.

ROOTS

'It's like we have been looking for treasure our whole lives and what is buried in our mind has come through.'

– Devlin, Grade 6 (age 11)

One afternoon, the second last of the school year, five Grade 6 (age 11) boys knocked at the door of the special education resource room. They had a surprise for me – a movie, filmed as a series of testimonials about sandtray play. The movie is accompanied by the startling visual images of their sandworlds and by the sound of Hedley, a Canadian band, singing about how over and over again, and in no time at all, boys grow up into men. The words of the script are unrehearsed and spontaneous:

You just have what's in your mind out there.

You get to explore places.

Thanks for letting me explore with my imagination.

It is a lot of fun.

We get to make stories with sand creations.

I wouldn't change it.

We create new ideas while we play.

I had better friends.

We get this opportunity to explore our minds.

We get a lot of choice.

Each week we create different worlds. They become the settings for our stories.

I love exploring through my ideas.

All it takes is a good brain and a bucket of sand!

We get to play with ideas with a whole world.

We are really thankful.

You get to spread your imagination so far, just like the planes are going to go really far across the country.

Where we got to go had treasure.

My favourite part is that we get to explain it to the whole group. And after that you get questions and appreciations.

We love hanging out with our friends and exploring our ideas.

It has been a real adventure.

Where you get to explore places.

It's like we have been looking for treasure our whole lives and what is buried in our mind has come through.

We... we just say thank you now.

'Intelligence,' writes Simone Weil, 'functions only in joy. Intelligence is perhaps even the only one of our faculties to which joy is indispensable. The absence of joy asphyxiates it' (1987, p.123). These boys are reporting on joy: 'explore', 'explore through', 'create', 'make', 'spread far', 'have fun', 'have choice', 'play', 'love'. The activities of play are one and the same as the activities of thought and imagination: *You just have what's in your mind out there.*

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

It was mid-November about three and a half years earlier. We were five educators – teacher, special education teacher, administrators, consultant – meeting around a table in the special education resource room. Stark late-autumn sunlight shone through the windows, giving the air a sharp-edged clarity that contrasted with the woolly perplexity that we were feeling. It was two months into the school year, many meetings into the process, and we were stumped. The matter at hand was one cohort of seven- to nine-year-olds.

'There are too many students who are struggling, too few who can act as role models,' the vice-principal eventually offered flatly.

This was a possible definition of the problem. The class lacked the critical mass of students who could act as role models and mentors for those who needed it. There were too many students with severely disruptive behaviours, too few with school-adjusted behaviours. The balance was off. Gavin, huddled inside his sweatshirt hood, rebuke

in his hunched shoulders; Abel, whose ‘This is *stupid*’ punctuated the day, and Darius whose reflexes were finely tuned to react to Abel’s opinions; Darcie whose silence was a fortress; Morty who, unable to use words clearly, spoke in tantrums; Lucy, who, on days when she did come to school, lingered at her coat hook, sobbing: these were some of the citizens of that small world. They traded with each other in the currency of the put-down. Sullenness had seeped in and settled like a grey fog.

This cohort had a history together, a culture that had been formed since kindergarten. Their current classroom teacher – a versatile, compassionate veteran – had doggedly attempted everything in the learning strategies tool kit: individual and class contracts, check marks and stars, individual education plans, privileges withdrawn, privileges awarded, the ‘problem-solving room’, ‘marbles in a jar’, class meetings, class celebrations, behaviour logs, meetings with parents, responsive seating arrangements. All these strategies had been tried. But still something needed to change. The culture of this class – the air they breathed, the soil in which they were rooted – needed to change.

Breathing out

There was something freeing about this November meeting: the freedom that comes out of acknowledgement of failure and a dearth of solutions, born of permission to think outside the box. The day after the meeting, a phrase of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, a teacher of Maori children in the 1950s, nudged my memory: ‘It’s [the child’s] native right to breathe normally’ (1980, p.250).

‘Breathe normally.’ The phrase reminded me of a different class in a different school, years earlier, where I had first encountered Ashton-Warner’s writing. A friend and colleague, Kirsty Williamson, had introduced me to the book *Teacher* (1963), when I confessed to my frustration that, after four years of teaching kindergarten, the work was no longer satisfying, the classroom without vitality. The fact is that I had been taken hostage by my own anxiety about performance: *Would my students be prepared academically for Grade 1 (age six)? Would they reach the letter and sight word recognition targets, print awareness, phonological awareness expectations?* The worry over my students’ end-of-year

achievements had cast a long shadow, reconfiguring the classroom as a struggle. I had at first adopted the stance of cheerleader, a stance that was shifting incrementally towards bossiness. The fact is that neither cheerleader nor drill sergeant are postures conducive to the 'I and thou' of the teacher/learner bond. No wonder the class had lost its spirit, the five-year-olds becoming unruly.

Ashton-Warner understood that attention needed to be paid to the irreducible fact that each child is a whole world of thought and feeling. Each brings daily into the classroom her unique experience, knowledge, and needs. For the teacher, acknowledging that fact and honouring it is the starting point. Children need to express before they can receive; they need to breathe out the inner life – their hopes and fears and the reality in which they live and bring with them to the schoolroom – before they can breathe in the skills and knowledge the schoolroom wishes to impart. Ashton-Warner devised for her classroom a daily rhythm of 'output' and 'intake': student-selected, expressive activity, in which children create, followed by teacher-directed activity in which they receive new information. 'What's so unusual in arranging, in allowing...a child's day into spans of output and intake? It's only breathing. Deep breathing of the mind,' she writes. 'It's [the child's] native right to breathe normally' (1980, p.249). A rhythm like the tides is contained in her words.

Reading *Teacher*, I had the feeling of coming home, of recognizing what I had known all along but had forgotten. I decided to invite the children to 'breathe out' as Ashton-Warner described, in an effort to bring the classroom back from a field of contest to a garden – a '*kinder-garten*'. At the beginning of each day, the children were given time to play in the fundamental substances of clay, sand, and water before they were called to meet for instruction. Group sharing and teacher input waited until the students had individual opportunity to create. The children gave expression to their own reality, their own stories, before they were given new information to absorb.

It worked. The class regained its sense of equilibrium and vitality. And, not surprisingly, the students mastered the required skills for Grade 1 (age six).

Many years later, following the problem-solving team meeting of that November morning, the memory of the shift in that long-ago

kindergarten returned to me as the intimation of a possible solution. Maybe, I thought, the same invitation to 'breathe normally' needs to be issued to this group of students in this late autumn of their school year. The team agreed.

It was decided that for 90 minutes each day I would work with the 12 seven- and eight-year-olds who comprised the younger half of the class, using the rhythm of output followed by input. The children's own stories, discovered through play and expressed during the output segment, would be the material with which they would work in order to develop literacy skills.

THE PLAN IN A NUTSHELL: BUILD, TELL, LISTEN, RECORD

The 'breathing out' would happen through play. The child psychotherapist Garry Landreth observes: 'Toys are used by children like words and play is their language' (1993, p.17). To access their own stories, the students needed to speak the universal language of children. They needed to play. Given that opportunity, they would discover their ideas.

Individual sandtrays and miniature figures that were replicas of everything in the physical and mythical world would be the equipment provided.

In a classroom adaptation of the therapeutic modality of sandplay, the students would build a world in the sand, tell the story of that world, listen to their peers' stories, and record their own in writing. The worlds the children would make in their trays and the stories they told about them would emerge out of the storehouse of their creativity. The sand would engage both hands and imagination. The plan would be the 'light enough touch' that Ashton-Warner describes:

What a dangerous activity teaching is. All this plastering on of foreign stuff. Why plaster on at all when there is so much inside already? So much locked in? If only I could get it out and use it as working material. And not draw it out either. If I had a light enough touch it would just come out under its own volcanic power. (1963, p.14)