Boys' fort constructed using fallen branches, thatch, and leaves in a stand of Sumac trees.

Building Forts and Drawing on Walls:
Fostering Student-Initiated Creativity Inside and Outside the Elementary Classroom

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Over the years my classroom has developed into a site where students are afforded agency by self-governance. They are co-creators of the curriculum and make choices in how they go about their learning and investigations.

Arts-Based Learning Contexts

The arts embody "one of the oldest forms of knowledge and knowing" and "action research provides opportunities to experiment with art as an integral part of the creation and dissemination of knowledge" (Brydon-Miller, 2009, p. 125).

From my 16 years' experience as an elementary classroom teacher, I have found that young children are drawn to an arts-based approach of inquiry, one that is "grounded in arts practices" (Rolling, 2010, p. 104). In my classroom there have been many instances of students using methods to enhance their learning experiences that were similar to those found in arts-based learning and arts-based educational research settings. Arts-based educational research has been described as a context in which researchers use "artistic process and practice in their inquiries" (O'Donoghue, 2009, p. 352). Likewise, in arts-based learning contexts, students become aesthetically situated researchers as their classrooms transform into "places of discovery" (Prager, 2006, p. 37), using the arts "as a primary area of inquiry" (Gasden, 2008, p. 33). For instance, arts-based learning encourages students "to take artistic risks and create personally and socially meaningful work" (James, 2004, p. 359), making "learning fun and exciting" (Mason, Steedly, & Thormann, 2008, p. 45). Because of the intrinsically communicative nature of the arts, creative discoveries are frequently shared through performances, displays, and other social interactions (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999). Additionally, studies have found "causal links between the arts and academic achievement" (Mason, Steedly, & Thormann 2008, p. 36).

Over the years my classroom has developed into a site where students are afforded agency by self-governance. They are co-creators of the curriculum and make choices in how they go about their learning and investigations.

The following is the story of how the formation of a child-centered classroom led to the inspired and innovative development of my students' self-initiated, creative explorations.

The Forts

December 12, 2009

I crouched upon a thick cushion of thatch and, looking up, saw one of my 4th-grade students carefully weaving twigs into a network of branches that made up the roof structure of his fort. A few minutes earlier, the unremitting winds had combined with frigid temperatures to make my ears and cheeks go numb. I asked permission to enter the fort and the students enthusiastically invited me in, at which point I had to duck my head and bend my knees as they offered to help me navigate my way through an elongated, U-shaped branch, which served as a doorway. They had even carved a series of miniature step-like terraces out of the steep hillside so that the entrance was less precipitous. At first I was hesitant, as I pictured myself slipping on the hardened mud entrance, sliding across the earthen floor, crashing through the back wall and careening down the rocky hillside to the soccer field below.
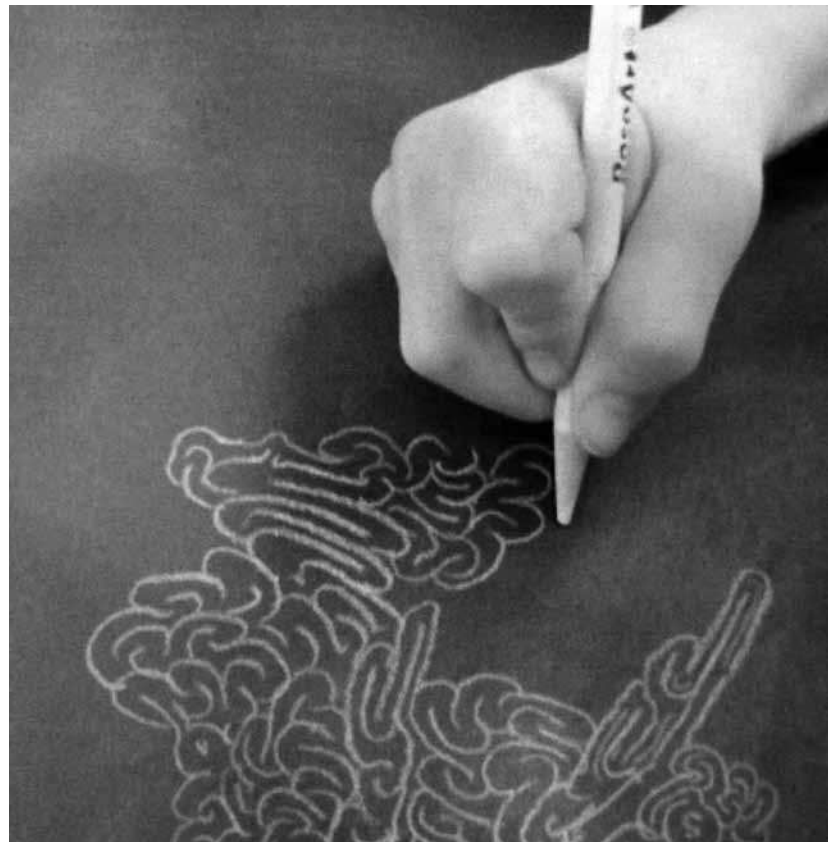
However, I was surprised to find that entering the fort was relatively easy. Created in the center of a small stand of Sumac trees, the fort's ceiling and walls were constructed from a network of branches, twigs, and dead brush stuffed with thatch and grasses gathered from a nearby hillside. Inside it provided protection from the wind and a soft light emanated through the weave of the walls, creating a serene enclosure like a sanctuary or retreat. This fort, along with two others, was constructed by groups of students—unaided, undirected, and uninhibited by teachers.

The Mazes

December 12, 2009

Squatting on the classroom floor with knees brought up tight under his chin, a student with his face mere inches from the wall used a variety of colored permanent markers to draw a complex network of tight parallel swirls, loops, and geometric shapes that made up his most recent maze drawing. I was conflicted about this activity; as a teacher, I worried what parents, administrators, and other faculty members might think when they saw some of our students drawing directly on the classroom walls with permanent markers. As an artist, I was excited to witness students exploring alternative modalities of self-initiated creativity that shared much of the same visual punch as Sol LeWitt's massive wall drawings. LeWitt was an American artist whose minimalist style artwork from the mid-1960s "bridged the gap between formal abstraction and Conceptualism" (Marzona, 2004, p. 66) and it was in LeWitt's own words that I found comfort: "Successful art changes our understanding of the conventions by altering our perceptions" (LeWitt, 1969, as cited in Stiles & Selz, 1996, p. 826). Conventions were indeed changing and perceptions were being altered, all by a group of 4th-grade students.

Student creating a maze during math class using white colored pencil on a sheet of black paper.

I desired to have a classroom that was "dedicated to deep inquiry-based learning" (Fine, Jaffe-Walter, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007, p. 90), so an action research approach combined with a philosophy steeped in a critical pedagogy seemed best suited for this purpose.

The Beginning
June 9, 2009

The school year had just ended, which traditionally signaled a time for teachers to pack up their rooms and get ready to take an extended break from school. However, my teaching partner Greg and I were focusing on the following September. Greg and I team-teach a 4th-grade classroom of 30 students at an independent day school in upstate New York and we were exploring alternative ways of approaching the school day as we desired to move beyond what we considered to be perfunctory classroom customs and procedures. We had become increasingly aware that classroom life is made up of ritual performances, which shape how students understand "school culture" (McLaren, 1999, p. 3). We viewed many of these performances as habitual practices devoid of meaningful learning and we knew how easy it was "to fall into familiar routines" (Eisner, 2002, p. 56). We didn't want to continue practices that were not relevant to our particular classroom situation or institute methodologies solely based upon established mores and conventions. We felt it important to allow our students to become active participants in their own learning (Simpson, 1996). As we read books and articles containing innovative educational discourses, we began to "treat teaching as a form of personal research" (Eisner, 2002, p. 56) and to think of ourselves as practitioners of teacher research in hopes of creating an environment where "teachers and children together constructed knowledge and curriculum to their ongoing classroom interactions" (Cochran-Smith, 1994, p. 155) and where both teachers and students worked together as a community of learners (Grube, 2009).

During this investigation I decided to assume the role of an action researcher so that I could be "at once both researcher and practitioner" and make a difference in my "own setting" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 2). It especially made sense to use this type of approach in a child-centered classroom wherein students were allowed agency since "action research is inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders to an organization or community, but never *to* or *on* them" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 3, italics in original). This created an environment that resisted traditional hierarchical classroom "structures of control" where the "extraordinary disruption of familiar order empowers students" (Shor, 1987, p. 96). I desired to have a classroom that was "dedicated to deep inquiry-based learning" (Fine, Jaffe-Walter, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007, p. 90), so an action research approach combined with a philosophy steeped in a critical pedagogy seemed best suited for this purpose.

Back to School: A Child-Centered Classroom
September 2009

During the fall term, as we continued our research, we began to wonder where our investigations would eventually lead. How far could one take a student-centered curriculum and how far *should* one take it? Being well aware that the "dominant climate of the early grades of schooling is one of highly rule-governed tasks and standardized expectations" and therefore, "what schools seem to teach best is rule following" (Eisner, 2002, p. 44), I realized that adopting a practice of engaging with the student— or what I referred to as *reciprocal engagement*—would have to become an everyday practice in our classroom.

There has been much discussion on the topic of student engagement within the classroom, which has focused on strategies designed to get students to attend more closely to teacher-directed lessons (Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, & Vincent, 2003; Baker, Clark, Maier, & Viger, 2008; Morrell, 2008; Annetta, Mangrum, Holmes, Collazo, & Cheng, 2009). However, as I observed how Greg went about his daily interactions with the students, I realized much of my teaching was unidirectional as I attempted to get the students to engage with a lesson or activity. Greg, on the other hand, could often be found speaking *with* children instead of only talking *to* them. I see Reciprocal Engagement as a bidirectional approach where teachers engage *with* students to better ascertain how learning might take place. By allowing "students' thinking to drive lessons" and having a willingness to "shift content and instructional strategies based on student responses" (Greg Sommer, personal communication, September 7, 2009), a floodgate was opened for student-initiated creativity that led to the building of the forts and the creation of wall drawings in the form of mazes.

The Story of the Forts

During one recess in October, I noticed Greg with a small group of students on a hillside adjacent to our playground area. A three-foot high chain link fence separated the hillside from the playground, with the hillside being off limits to students. Noticing my surprise, Greg informed me that a few of the students had shown interest in exploring a narrow trail that ran across the top of the hill. The construction of the forts began humbly enough, but what started out as the propping up of a few downed branches soon transformed into a full-blown project that integrated elements of environmental consciousness, teamwork, and architectural design. Before long, the first fort became overcrowded, which prompted the creation of two additional forts.

By late fall, the fort projects had become so popular that at any given recess up to 25 4th-graders could be found working on them. Greg and I served as monitors and advisors; continually walking between forts and offering to help students resolve any difficulties or issues that arose. Watching the process unfold, I felt as though I were witnessing the rise of a civilization in fast motion. The students began to organize and administer tasks based on ability level and skill sets. Some were gatherers who worked at pulling ground cover from a nearby hillside and piling them into large balls of thatch that measured up to six feet in diameter. Others were responsible for transporting the thatch to

Girls' fort constructed using fallen branches, thatch, and leaves in a stand of Maple saplings.

the forts, working in tandem in order to traverse the slippery and often muddy trail. Then there were those whose sole responsibility was to work on the interiors of the forts. Some constructed the armature of branches and twigs that made up the walls and roof while others concentrated on weaving and stuffing the thatch into the framework that provided insulation against the cold winds that buffeted the hillside. Still others gathered armloads of branches found in a nearby wooded area. Many of these students revealed their ingenuity by developing tools from sticks and branches that had useful characteristics such as small hooked ends which worked well for pulling thatch, forked ends to help prop up roofing structures, sharp ends that

served as rudimentary scythes, and angled ends that acted as grappling hooks for grabbing onto tree trunks when traversing the steep hillside. As their numbers grew, so did the need for additional trails. The original trail had become congested and in response the students began to create new trails. By early December, the supply of thatch had thinned considerably, compelling the gatherers to trek further in order to fulfill the high demand. With the coming winter, there was a palpable sense of urgency as the forts were reinforced to withstand the heavy snowfalls of February and March. The students swarmed the hillside appearing as the fabled ants, wasting no time in busily preparing for the frigid months ahead.

Maze drawn directly on a classroom wall section located under the white board in front of room.

My eyes could not have been opened to the value of the forts or the wall drawings until I changed my attitude concerning student agency and acknowledged the power structures inherent in my 4th-grade classroom.

The Story of the Mazes

Greg and I were allowed to create our 4th-grade general classroom curriculum as we saw fit with the exception of a math program that had been adopted by the whole Lower School. The math program included workbooks, and many students enjoyed doodling in the margins. Traditionally, I would only allow students to draw in the margins as a long as there was evidence that they understood the material. I was uncomfortable, however, with the fact that this meant students who did well in math class had the freedom to draw in the margins while the students who did not do well were required to use their workbooks only for predetermined mathematical purposes. I also began to wonder if drawing in the margins was a way in which some students processed information and if certain students were able to better concentrate while "physically moving or doodling" (Wheatley, 1999, p. 76). Math class was one of the few times when our students were required to focus on the directives of their teachers. Andrew Kear (2007) writes: "doodling is a way in which students, consciously or not, stake a claim of personal agency and challenge some [of] the values inherent in the education system" (p. 89). Perhaps this is why our math class was where the maze drawings first became evident.

I initially recall seeing the maze drawings in early October. At first, I didn't take much of an interest, but within a few weeks I began to notice how a few square inches of looping, spiraling, twisting parallel lines were slowly transformed into pulsating labyrinths that eventually covered whole pages. For me, the end result was a hypnotic, almost hallucinatory, experience. As I began to look more closely, I found that the drawings weren't mazes per se (containing starting points with single, hidden pathways leading to exits) as much as they were intricately woven fractals.

Eventually, the drawings migrated from the margins of workbooks to full-page sketchbook designs. One day, during an indoor recess as I sat watching a student work on his maze drawing, I wondered aloud what it might look like if his maze drawing were to cover a larger area. The student asked if I was referring to a poster board and I responded that I was thinking of a classroom wall. Upon hearing this he paused, lifted the point of his pencil a few millimeters from the page, and asked me if it would be okay for him to draw a maze on the wall. With this simple, direct question, the basis of my philosophy as a teacher was put to the test.

In my teaching experience, students were never allowed to draw on the classroom walls; however, as I considered this appeal I found that I couldn't think of a good enough reason to preclude my students from drawing maze designs on the walls of our classroom. In fact, I thought these beautiful and intriguing works of art could only serve to improve the appearance of our scuffed, white washed walls, and so I gave my consent.

It wasn't long before the idea of drawing maze designs on the walls grew in popularity, and by December there were 10 different maze drawings in progress. During these times it was exhilarating to witness the arts-based learning that transpired. Some students wanted to be the sole creator of their drawings whereas others sought out partners to help them generate their complex, large-scale pieces. Two of the students even wrote a "How To" book that delineated their particular style and approach. I did my best to be part of the conversations without coming across as authoritarian or didactic. This activity originated with the students, and I wanted them to retain ownership, but I must confess that I was taken aback when suddenly, and without warning, they stopped production, leaving a wide array of unfinished maze drawings on the walls of our classroom. However, not wanting to influence the creative behavior of my students, I concealed my disappointment that the wall drawings were left in what I considered to be an unfinished state.

Over the course of the next few months, the students followed other creative pursuits while the wall drawings remained untouched. I wondered what the children thought, if they even noticed the drawings anymore or if to them, the drawings had become part of the visual landscape, as inconspicuous as the scuffmarks on the drywall over which the mazes had originally been created. But perhaps the wall drawings were in a state of gestation, like the spider egg sack Wilbur lovingly looked after in the children's book, *Charlotte's Web*. In E. B. White's story, Wilbur the pig decides to take care of the egg sac of his beloved friend,

Charlotte, after she dies at the end of the County Fair. As spring arrived, the egg sack hatched and all but three of the baby spiders made tiny silk thread balloons that carried them away on a warm updraft of air. With the coming of spring, most of my students were also carried away by the excitement of other creative endeavors. However, like the three tiny spiders that remained with Wilbur, one day I noticed three students sitting on the floor, crouched close to the wall, patiently adding swirls of parallel lines to the maze drawings.

Final Thoughts

What is art? Many have wrestled with this question (Barrett, 2008; Dissanayake, 1988; Eleey, 2009; Tolstoy, 1899) and these examinations have invariably led to a desire to determine a purpose for, and definition of, art (Anouilh, 1961; Curtis, 1976). However, in education, the questions surrounding art have often encompassed the ways in which art should be taught rather than its philosophical aspects. Much has been written about the developmental characteristics of children's artmaking (Danko-McGhee, 2006; Goodnow, 1977; Louis, 2005; Mendelowitz, 1963), the therapeutic possibilities in creating artwork (DePetrillo & Winner, 2005; Henley, 1999), integrating arts in other curriculum (Efland, 2002), the inherent contributions of the arts (Eisner, 2002), giftedness (Harrison, 1999), the role of the teacher (Bae, 2004), and classroom methodologies (D'Amico, 1942; Dorn, 2005; McLean, 2003). But little has been said concerning what constitutes art in the school environment. Elliot Eisner (2002) wrote that, "it is from surprise that we are most likely to learn something" (p. 8) and the advent of the forts and mazes held many surprises for me as a teacher as well as an artist.

So far my exploration of student-initiated creativity has been an investigation, which has necessitated that I first turn the focus back on me as a teacher in order to discern how my actions could be adjusted to better allow for creative independence to take place, and my classroom could become an environment for students to "exercise their agency" (Wilson, 2005, p. 23). My eyes could not have been opened to the value of the forts or the wall drawings until I changed my attitude concerning student agency and acknowledged the power structures inherent in my 4th-grade classroom. Many adults have a narrow cultural definition of art, whereas creativity for children is not a singular act, but an ongoing presence taking on a variety of purposes and modalities, and sometimes children "do not draw the way we expect them to draw" (Kindler, 1999, p. 342).

As a teacher I have had the opportunity to observe how children approach self-initiated and adaptive creativity "far outside the boundaries of the typical classroom" (Rolling, 2007, p. 5). When the heavy winter snows fell and the hill trails became too slippery to traverse, the students reworked the trails, changing them into sliding trails using their snow pants as ready-made sleds. Looking up from the base of the hill the view resembled a joyfully animated game of Shoots and Ladders. Initially assuming that the wall drawings were going to be a short-lived fad, I eventually understood that I had been entertaining an outdated perspective based on a modernist approach to artistic conventions.

Since I have become more aware of the possibilities of micromoments in my own classroom and allowed them to germinate, my students have taken part in a host of creative learning activities. I have also noticed that some of the most intriguing creative artifacts are produced during what teachers refer to as transition times, recess, or even while students are waiting to be dismissed at the end of the day.

This journey has made me re-evaluate my philosophies as an educator. Placing their marks on the walls gave the students a sense of ownership, a deeper relationship with the classroom space, and a way to "set an agenda for their own graphic development" (Thompson, 1999, p. 158). Building forts allowed the students to interact with the architectural elements inherent in the landscape. Neither the forts nor the mazes reflected the visual or methodological conventions and expectations of school art in the modernist paradigm that require "predetermined goals and objectives" (Rolling, 2007, p. 4) with no room for student generated explorations. However, I have found that in order for growth and learning to take place, educators must be willing to embrace artistic and creative serendipity.

My students benefited when they were allowed to develop the aesthetics of our classroom environment and had the freedom to explore beyond the customary parameters and boundaries of the playground. Over the course of the school year, the students became proactive citizens, growing in knowledge, discernment, and creative acumen. In fact, during the Lower School's "Preview Night" in March, parents of the 4th-grade students had the chance to meet the 5th-grade team and hear about the following year's curriculum. One parent inquired about the ability of our 4th-graders to transition from our classroom environment into subsequent grades. The teachers responded that, although the students are at different academic and social levels, they all come to school ready and eager to participate. Perhaps the most rewarding outcome of our child-centered learning environment was that I witnessed my students become confident and critical learners. For me, this experience set the stage for the establishment of a classroom dedicated to transforming students from "manipulated objects into active, critical subjects" (Shor, 1987, p. 97).

The arts may embody one of the oldest forms of knowledge and knowing. By contrast, they "continue to be seen as frivolous and trivial" (Clover, 2011, p. 12). What I experienced during the 2009-2010 school year not only provided valuable insight into the self-initiated creative processes of children, but also served to deflect the "systematic underestimation of children's competence and integrity" (Thompson, 2006, p. 38) in which "we often disregard children's problems, squelch their creativity, deny their emotions, and generally ignore or diminish the significance of their daily experiences" (Stremmel, 2002, as cited in Thompson, 2006, p. 38).

In the classroom, teachers may support the self-initiated creativity of students by recognizing what Ronald Beghetto (2009) refers to as "micromoments of the classroom" (p. 2). Beghetto argues that many creative ideas happen unexpectedly. Instead of dismissing these ideas outright, students should be encouraged to explain the rationale behind their ideas as a way to "enrich and enliven the classroom learning experience" (p. 4). Since I have become more aware of the possibilities of micromoments in my own classroom and allowed them to germinate, my students have taken part in a host of creative learning activities. I have also noticed that some of the most intriguing creative artifacts are produced during what teachers refer to as transition times, recess, or even while students are waiting to be dismissed at the end of the day. I've always found it impressive what kids are able to construct using rubber bands, cardboard, scrap wood, a few crayons, and a handful of pushpins with their "hidden potential of unexpected ideas" (Beghetto, 2009, p. 2).

In the late 19th century, the Viennese art instructor Franz Cizek valued the creative ideas of children (Efland, 1990) and recognized the importance of spontaneity in education (Wilson, 1974). Over 100 years later, I believe it's time for teachers to allow opportunities for children to create in serendipitous ways.

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