

Light slivers dance across the distance shoreline. The water is receding, pulling its curtain of smooth waves down the beach. This is the place of a child's daydream, a place where sand and water and rocks and sunshine hold possibility, expanding upon horizons without boundaries.



Miller creek at low tide, Haida Gwaii

A small child blends into the landscape, becoming part of the environment; she is immersed and engaged. My daughter joins in the play, acting as a silent older sister who gently interacts while observing. Early morning sun shadows stretch over our beach towel. We are on one of our many pristine beaches on Haida Gwaii, enjoying the late arrival of summer warmth and light.

Amy is six years old. She often plays alone, happily making up imaginary characters and situations. When she plays, she enters into a different place. Known as Kairos, a Hebrew word for becoming lost in a non-linear place where time stands still, Amy's play has taken her to a distant land, both part of where she is now and where her imagination travels. Kairos is the term for the place the mind enters when an artist is

painting, a dancer dances, or a scientist keenly observes and questions. “Explorative play is perhaps the most important means to promote meaningful learning in the early years” (Burke, p.7). As she plays in the sand, Amy is learning about herself and the environment while interacting and collaborating with an adult.



Amy is squatting next to a tiny river, hands deep in water. She digs and scoops with cupped hands. She is scooping out sand from a hole while water pushes into the empty spaces. As she pushes her hands into the hole, she is feeling the sand. Her motions are slow, as if she is savouring the feeling. Her mom comes over and asks her if she wants to put on a sweater. It feels cool this morning and I am silently agreeing with the mom. Amy does not notice her Mom's intrusion and keeps playing; she is focussed intently on the hole she is making. “I am making a paradise here,” she says. “Don't dig out the

water, just dig out as much sand as you can,” she tells my daughter who is now helping with the project. They continue digging, building rivers and canals from this hole to other holes and rocks. The beach landscape is beginning to look like a topographical map. Water roads, intersections and connections sprawl across the beach. Amy finds three small sticks and makes characters with them. She is now pushing a small boat through the water road from one place to another. She stops and seems to change her mental journey. “This is the slide that goes into my bathtub. Changing her mind again, she says, “No, I have a swimming pool. I don’t need a bathtub.” All the while she is singing Diana Ross’s song, ‘Up-side-down’ in perfect rhythm, melody and lyric, while her body sways.

Her Mom tells me Amy was listening while she was practicing at home. The mother is surprised to hear that she knew the entire song.

Amy’s functional play exemplifies how she “enters into imaginary worlds as she chooses to find ways to explore varying episodes that mimic real life” (Burke, p.19).

This inquiry based learning requires explorative thinking resulting from powerful sensory experiences. Amy is almost fully immersed in her environment. “Oops,” she says as she looks at my daughter. “I fell on my bum. Just as long as my shirt does not get too wet. It is okay if it gets a little wet but not if it gets really wet because then it is hard to clean.” My daughter nods her head in agreement, aware that Amy is teaching her about her rules from home. The little rules are a constant, traveling with Amy like a life long

companion, helping her find her place in the larger world. Boundaries in a boundary-less place provide security and comfort.



Learning needs to be a hands on experience in classroom centres that develop independent thinking and learning, initiated by a child's own desire to learn. As I watch Amy, I am comparing my centre time activities from school to her current method of playing. How can I create centres that allow for the free flowing thoughts and body movements of Amy on the beach? She is expanding her place space as she extends the canals over to a distant pile of rocks. "Now let's make a flowing part and take it to the bathtub. Come on, let's get more water to our swimming pool (it is now a shared possession with my daughter as she includes her in the play) and then we can get it all

over the place. And then we can get it to the world and then we can get it to the entire sea. We can swim all over the sea and we can get a whole bunch of tunnels all over.” She is still singing Diana Ross’s song.

“Let’s dig, dig, dig.” She looks across the beach and notices her small blue shovel. “I know what we can dig with,” she says as she walks to the shovel. My daughter finds a rock. Amy replies, “Try to dig it out.” My daughter then asks if she can use the shovel



but Amy tells her no because she is using it. “Just use your hands,” Amy instructs. “We can swim all over the world.” Amy’s words suggest expansive thoughts that are no longer limited by physical boundaries. Her playing is consistent with the environment she is in. How can I create a feeling of open expanse in and out of the classroom in a

learning environment? In addition to frequent field trips to the beach, I want to be able to use this experience to offer a less structured, more exploratory learning experience in the classroom. Currently we have about 30 different centres that rotate with about 12 available at any given time. We limit three children to a centre which encourages a certain type of intimate play offering learning opportunities for sharing, collaborating and problem solving. Children are allowed one centre change in a 35 minute centre time. The reduced changes prevent situations like, “I do not want to play with her anymore. She is using what I want to play with. I want to go to another centre.” We then go back to the centre and work together using cooperative skills and problem solving with a friend. Some centres can be outside (weather permitted) while others are indoors. Children are not allowed to take one centre and mix it with another. I am questioning this was I watch Amy’s play evolve from swimming pool to boat transportation across the world.

Suddenly Amy jumps up and runs to the receding shoreline, now a good 100 metres away. “Come on! Let’s go make more footprints.” She now realizes the sand is different as it seems to suck her little feet into it. There is very little support for walking, causing her to jump higher and dance across the beach. “It’s squishy here! It pulls your feet in!”



I cannot resist and pull off my socks and shoes and run to join them. I am eager to feel the soft squishy sand between my 43 year old toes.

“Exploring the play world is not static; it is constantly moving and changing as children transform their knowing into something relevant and new (Burke, 21). Amy’s thinking and body movements were constantly changing and morphing into new ideas. The environment she was in supported this type of play by giving her opportunity to move freely in a large outdoor space. Sensory stimuli were strong influences as she felt the sand and water, smelled the ocean salt and saw the light reflecting on the water. Her beach visit involved an “integration of play, love and work” (Elkind, p. 13). The Ontario Primary Curriculum for Kindergarten emphasizes “responsive relationships for children with people, places and things.” This involves a mix of “planned experiences and activities and interactions that arise spontaneously.”

As an artist, I am frequently immersed in play based learning involving subject inquiry, imagination and yes, Kairos. Ideas develop from rhizomatic thinking that is inclusive and multi-faceted. As a primary teacher, it is my goal to use this type of learning that is sourced by play, in the classroom. Play initiates new ideas, new creations and imaginative problem solving; it is a necessary process for the great minds of tomorrow. I too would like a Whatu Pokeka to nurture and protect me as I learn and grow. Play based learning is essential for a healthy child who can run out onto the beach and explore the “whole world” and “entire sea” with “a whole bunch of tunnels.” (Amy)

