

DISSERTATION

HOW IS CHILDHOOD POWER AND POWERLESSNESS  
EXPRESSED IN THE OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM?  
A NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

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## ABSTRACT

### HOW IS CHILDHOOD POWER AND POWERLESSNESS EXPRESSED IN THE OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM? A NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION.

This dissertation seeks to deconstruct the complex social and cultural understandings of a classroom of two- and-a half through five-year-old preschool children and what it means to be powerful and powerless in their outdoor classroom. Based on constructivist and critical theoretical foundations, and using traditional ethnographic methods of inquiry coupled with the narrative approach to storytelling, the questions around what it means to wield power, be powerful with others, and what the role of powerlessness is in their lives in the outdoor classroom are explored. Through the children experiences with the participant-observer researcher and captured through use of the children's own voices in the telling of their stories the author seeks to explore the ways children perceive their own power and powerlessness through their actions, both physical and emotional, in the outdoors.

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Above all, I wish to thank my husband and partner Brice. Thank you for being a rock when I wanted to quit, taking our children on adventures alone so I could work in a quiet house, and supporting me in beginning this doctoral journey in the first place. I could never have done any of this without you. I love you!

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my parents, Donald Haywood and the late Kathleen Haywood.

While the value you placed on my education did not sink in early or easily, the freedom to make my own choices and mistakes taught me more about my personal strengths than any classroom did. I love you both, and mom, while I miss you every day, I know you would be proud.

I also dedicate this to my four children; Laurelle, Ori, Yarrow, and Linus. Thanks for being such awesome kids and putting up with your old mom. Love you all heaps and tons!

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Up on small hill, in between a bush dripping with burnt-orange colored berries, a small child hides, the little bit of sunshine yellow hair peeking out of her hat giving her away. She is hiding from her friends who are adeptly climbing over a rough granite boulder even while outfitted in their cozy gloves and waterproof boots. "I see you!!" rings out clear above the din of laughter all across the hill. The yellow-haired hider has been found and in so has transformed into the finder in this game of hide and seek, a game beloved and played by generations of children. She thrusts her pink cheeks into her hands and begins to count.*

### **Background of the study**

Children today are not being allowed to play out of doors nearly as much as children in the past (Louv, 2008; O'Brien, 2010). Lack of physical play, in particular unscripted play out of doors in nature, has become restricted in the last 25-30 years because of two key factors. The first was a large scale Tort reform in the 1980's that allowed for more personal injury lawsuits (Moore, 1997). This policy allowed angry or hurt parents to sue municipalities, schools, other parents, and manufactures of play equipment if their child was injured on their property or toy, even if there was no negligence on the other party's part. A second issue was the advent of nationwide broadcasts of sensationalized journalism (Louv, 2008). Shows like "America's Most Wanted" and "Crimestoppers" feed into parental anxiety of their child being abducted or gravely injured if not constantly in their sight (Louv, 2008). Fear has become a common reason for not allowing children to play out of doors (Louv, 2008).

The nationwide best seller status of Louv's (2008) book, *Last Child in the Woods* demonstrates that this is national issue. Researchers focused on the way the brain develops in



childhood without having experiences in the natural world are just beginning to inquire into the importance of nature in the life cycle of a human. Berger and Lahad (2009) found that children who did not have varied exposure to nature lacked the resiliency seen in children who had time to play outside every day. Researchers hypothesize that ‘den building’ play and exploration could be an important activity in the development of the young brain (Berger & Lahad, 2009). For example, den building or as Maller (2009) calls it, tree house construction, is seen across the world by children of all cultures. Regardless of ethnicity or economic status in the United States, den building is openly discouraged as universally dangerous and many cities and towns have actual ordinances against children trying to build small structures, even in their own backyards (Maller, 2009).

In addition, school is now taking up much more of the children’s lives than in the past (Louv, 2008). The eight hour school day is a relatively new phenomenon for early childhood (Rivkin, 1997). Add on after-school programming, and the modern young child does not have much of an opportunity to get outside except during the school day. Because of this new trend in longer days in school, advocates make the case for nature to be part of the school day, every day, and believe that schools have a responsibility to the children to make sure they are able to get outside and explore (O’Brien, 2007). While I could find no empirical research critical to these ideas, current educational policy seems to ignore the findings that favor of more outdoor play for children. In the past decade, schools across the nation have slowly been giving up recess in favor of more instructional time in the classroom, even in the federal preschool program Head Start (Morrison, 2001). In the local school district where the participants in this work reside, only one elementary school allowed children past first grade a morning, lunch, and afternoon recess, instead opting for just a lunch break (personal communication, 2012). Indeed, even the

youngest children in Head Start, only receive one 10 minute break to play during their academic program (personal communication, 2012).

Childhood is changing and so is the role of the schools in the lives of children (Rivkin, 1997). Recess has historically been a component of school in the United States but today this is not always the case (Jarrett, 2009). Recess is being taken out of schools, even for the young child, in order to create more teacher-directed instructional time in the classroom (Jarrett, 2009, Paloni, 2007). Schools that have kept recess as part of the day have changed it to be a short, heavily monitored, and often unnatural movement of going through the motions of play. Strict rules on physical activity have not left room for imaginative physical games to emerge and relationships between children to be forged on the playground (Kernan & Devine. 2010, Jarrett, 2009, Paloni, 2007). Indeed, teachers have noticed this change and the perception that childhood is now “less fun” and child-like than what they remember as children has taken hold (Kernan & Devine. 2010).

Children are becoming more dependent on technology to play at home than to play outside (Louv, 2008). Since many children are not getting their need for nature met at home, the burden is therefore falling upon the schools (Wilson, 1995) The current trend in education in the US is that schools are taking on more aspects of childhood development, educating the whole child head, heart and body (O’Brien, 2009). Since schools have these children for so many hours per day, they should be getting them out into nature. However, instead many schools are cutting recess out of the day entirely in favor of more “work” time (Jarrett, 2009).

Louv’s book was just the starting place for me as a teacher and researcher. As I became more and more interested in what outdoor play looked like in the United States, I found that there were preschools in Finland, Germany, Norway, and the UK that conducted class entirely

outdoors. Children had free rein of a large outdoor space and spent the majority of their time outdoors, even in the deep dark winters of the Nordic regions of Europe. I wondered, if children up in these areas of extreme weather were able to spend long periods of time out of doors in play safely there really should be nothing stopping our schools here in Colorado where we have 300 plus days of sunshine each year. These Forest School or Waldkindergartens, inspired me to look for a program that was similar in my local area; while actual, all outdoor preschools are rare in the United States, I did find a preschool that spent a good deal of their day outdoors.

For the purpose of this study, the terms of nature, out of doors and outdoors will be used as synonyms and have the same meaning of open-ended free play time outside. This is not environmental or nature education where students are taken out doors to learn a specific outcome or topic (Hamilton, Klebanoff, & Sharp, 1990). For this paper, these terms will mean exclusively free-playing time out of doors.

### **Inquiry and Purpose**

The purpose of this ethnographic narrative is to discover how preschool aged children understand themselves are individuals within a culture that values out of door play. I chose to take the approach of the critical ethnographic gaze for the observations in the field. As defined by Hesse-Biber and Levy (2011), I sought to, "...get a holistic understanding of how individuals in different cultures and subcultures make sense of their lived realities" (p. 193), in this case, within the context of the Forest Preschool class. I enter this space with the intention of studying the collusion of development and play in the outdoors. Forest Preschool is a pseudonym for the school, as are all participants names, used to protect the identities of the children and teachers as fully as possible.

Critical Theory was chosen as the theoretical perspective because young children are traditionally a culture that is dominated by another group. Young children are not often allowed to speak with a collective voice and are caught in a power dynamic where their feelings and experiences are discounted by the adults around them. These adults interpret how they think the children should be instead of how the children actually relate to the natural world through their own experiences. However, a distinction should be made between an ethnographic study that uses a critical lens and a critical ethnography. A critical ethnography is expressly focused on working toward change for the marginalized group being studied. What I did here was use the critical lens to ground my thinking about the children as whole, human beings. While these children do live in a marginalized paradigm, my ultimate goal in this study is to learn about their experiences in the outdoors instead of work toward their broader social justice. While I do make a marked attempt to provide the voice of the child in this work, the majority of the analysis was completed using the children perspective as interpreted through both actions and dialogue.

### **The Pilot Study**

I was fortunate enough to carry out an abbreviated version of this research during the early winter of 2012. Observations outdoors were conducted within a classroom of 25 preschool aged children and their four teachers. Three major themes were discovered (Table 1.1) and within these three themes, subthemes were detected as well. I discovered that the natural world was used by the children as a scaffold, to help them navigate a complex social structure of the outdoor classroom. Children used the trees, dirt and snow to construct experiences for themselves that tested and retested how they each understood their role in space and in the culture of the classroom.

Table 1.1

*Coded themes from pilot study*

<p><u>Coded Theme: Social</u></p> <p>Sub-themes:</p> <p><b><i>Game play</i></b>              “bear chase              game”              Collecting items</p> <p><b><i>Conversations</i></b>              Offering treasures</p> <p><b><i>Arguments</i></b>              About found              items              Pulling the wagon</p>	<p><u>Coded Theme: Curiosity</u></p> <p>Sub-themes:</p> <p><b><i>Individual</i></b>              Collections              Digging with              fingers              Investigating              Seeds.</p> <p><b><i>Group</i></b>              Collecting shells              Finding treasures</p>	<p><u>Coded theme:</u>  <u>Physical Risk Taking</u></p> <p>Sub-themes:</p> <p><b><i>Risky play</i></b>              Climbing trees              Sledding on ice              Sledding with              others</p> <p><b><i>Teacher supported risk</i></b>              Caterpillar rope              Crossing road              Facilitating the              line</p>
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In table 1.1, three major themes were discovered as ways the children within the outdoor classroom understood themselves in the outdoors. Under each main understanding, sub-themes emerged of cultural categories I observed children engaged in. For example, in the first box, the main theme of Social was discovered as the main theme of the three sub-themes. The sub-themes, Game-play, Conversations, and Arguments were cultural contexts I found supported the main theme. The sub-themes were then further broken down into the actions I directly observed the children engaged in that, when combined, supported the sub-theme categories.

The positive impact of nature on children’s learning is well documented. Howard Gardener, in his book *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (1999), discusses the addition of a naturalistic intelligence to his well respected Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Defined by Gardner as the ability to discriminate within the natural world, other researchers believe this “newly minted intelligence” was actually developed during our evolution

and was an innate and necessary ability for survival (Louv, 2008, O'Brien, 2007). I argue that this concept applies to all three major themes I discovered. Children of the Outdoor Preschool used the natural world to explore and redefine their risk tolerance, navigate and learn through their curiosity and to understand the complex social structure of the games they co-constructed. The long blocks of unscripted play outside are times when children can develop several important lifelong skills.

Learning how to navigate situations that are risky and make proper choices in safety is a common theme in the early childhood empirical literature. Rivkin (1997) is echoed a decade later by Maller (2009) in finding that children who are given an opportunity to play in a natural area are more flexible. Just as interesting, Berger and Lahad (2009) found that children in nature were better at appropriate risk-taking. Basically, these children are allowed to take appropriate risks in nature and because of this, they are more resilient and flexible in other aspects of their lives. Flexibility and the ability to discriminate an activity as overly risky are developed throughout childhood and are both important skills for adults (Berger and Lahad, 2009).

What I observed was that the children were protected from actual dangers out of their control by the teachers while at the same time allowed to explore the natural world in an appropriate way. I did not see any overtly dangerous activities from any children during my observations. However, since I made a choice to only focus on single actions that were seen more than once, I know that I have only a very slim section of time captured in my observation in regard to the children's experience in the cultural environment of the Morning Walk.

### **Theoretical Perspective: Constructivism and Critical Theory**

When I embarked on this research, I felt that a constructivist viewpoint would be most beneficial. As a participant-observer, I knew that I would be co-constructing the culture and

reality of the classroom along with my participants. I also knew that through ethnography, this co-construction would be helpful for me to understand the internal social structure and what it means to be part of this culture in a way I would not be party to as a singular observer. However, I also knew that I needed more than just a co-construction for this work to be an authentic representation of the children's experience

Critical Theory was also chosen as the theoretical perspective because young children are traditionally a culture that is dominated by another group. Not often allowed to speak with a collective voice, young children are caught in a power dynamic where their feelings and experiences are discounted to what the adults around them deem they "should" be instead of how the child relates to the natural world through their own experience. As Diaz Soto and Swadener (2002) argue, early childhood should be looked at as currently colonized by adult minds. I strive in this work to decolonize the classroom and deconstruct each in a way that is entirely accountable to the child as a whole, individual human being, fully formed as themselves even at the start of each of their lives.

### **Researcher Perspective**

My interest and understanding of this topic initially came from my idealized memory of the times I spent playing out of doors when I was a child. I knew that my feelings of being emotionally and physically challenged while also having freedom to explore my imagination in a wild environment have shaped who I have become as a person. I have fond memories of exploring fallen trees in pastures and sailing leaf boats down ditches.

What I found as my own children began to grow and attend school, was that this part of childhood I had taken for granted was disappearing from the collective culture's radar. Fear was a driving force for childrearing now. I met parents in playgroups who seemed amazed I would

consider allowing my three-year-old walk on a hiking trail, even with me by her side. Children seemed to live their early lives either confined to a stroller or carried in a backpack. It was because of these experiences and interactions that I purposely sought out an early school program experience for my children where nature was not just a part of the day but a focus of the day.

The research presented in this review supports my intrinsic feelings that nature and communal time for children within nature is important to not only the physical body but the emotional and cognitive selves of young humans. The majority of the literature is focused on how childhood has changed over the past 20 years, those outside influences that have facilitated the change, and what the children are missing developmentally if their early life does not include time in the natural world. As I delved into the large body work, I discovered that the most important voice of all seems to be absent from the discussion; the children themselves.

It is for these reasons, I made the choice to explore this complex and emerging topic through a critical ethnographic narrative lens while maintaining a constructivist worldview. The purpose of this perspective is to add the perspective of the children to the empirical evidence, to allow the children a space for me to work together with the children to construct the story of their collective development and use of power in their young lives. In addition, this exploration focuses on what power means to this group's culture in using both a larger cultural lens of what is perceived to be positive and negative use of the children's power and those experiences that the children were essentially powerless to change.



## **Reflexive Statement of Research and Personal Stance**

### **My early story**

I came to early childhood education completely by accident. I had every intention of teaching fifth or sixth grade when I came out of my undergraduate program, BA degree in hand. I always knew I was going to go on to graduate school and that I was going to become a teacher. I found an experimental and very new program at the University of Colorado-Denver where I would have my tuition paid in return for my labor at a Denver area school. One important bonus was that I would also be able to practice my newly learning skills, methods, and theories of education in my placement with the help of a mentor.

The degree was a Master of Arts in educational psychology and the placement was not at all what I expected, or what I wanted, at the time. My year in this one year program, 2003-2004, many applicants wanted to teach elementary school, much more than were projected so the program ran out of placements. I was offered a placement at a school for children birth through six years and told that once I got my early childhood teaching license, since the requirements were the same for both ECE and elementary teachers, I could just add an endorsement after I took the PLACE test. I was not happy, but I did want this degree so I decided to think about it over the summer. At that point, I chose to dive in and do it. This was the single best professional choice I have ever made.

The school I was placed at is considered to be inspired by Reggio Emilio. The Reggio Emilia region of Italy is known worldwide for their quality municipal early childhood program and the Reggio approach to education is directly named after it. Reggio is commonly believed to have invented action research at the early childhood level. We were encouraged from day one to document everything. We took pictures, wrote everything we could down, made video, created hypotheses about the children's thinking, revisited all these mediums with the children and then

nearly always revised our hypotheses. It was my first introduction to what qualitative research actual looked like at the classroom level.

I became a convert to qualitative research when I became educated in its power by my students. Children who could barely talk could tell me all about their thinking and what they thought about their place in the world by me taking the time to watch them closely. I found these children to have rich and meaningful lives, full of wonder and unique focus. While having children in a laboratory setting might have created a situation where I could be more confident of each child's reactions to a specific stimuli, I would not have been able to honestly know them and let them tell their own story. As I have become more and more interested in finding those stories children do not tell us through their words, experimental research has become less appealing. I am not interested in what they do in a controlled environment but what they think in their daily lives.

### **My current story**

I know that children are full of stories that I learn from and document. This knowledge dictates how I teach, plan, and engage my students. I have also come to understand that by creating a space that is safe for young children to construct their knowledge and personal experiences within, I am also a player in their construction. This sort of co-construction of knowledge lets me get to the root of what the children need, crave, wish for, and resent. I find that I have become better able to teach when I think of our classroom space as a co-constructive environment.

This has fully spilled over into my doctoral research life. I believe there is power in the children's experiences, in their view of their lives, and their understanding of their place in the world. Young children are a marginalized population who generally have no voice and certainly

have very little power. By coming to such an equitable orientation, I have learned young children are considerably honest, forthcoming, and excited to talk with me about themselves and their learning.

I acknowledge that is possible I have been blinded by my desire to bring forth the children voices in a way that furthers my own strongly held view on the topic. Like every researcher, I am only human and took the utmost care to authentically represent the children's voices and experiences in the work. I understand that my presence alone likely influenced the children in some ways. Two through five-year-olds are very eager to make the adults in their lives happy and are generally very adept at reading the adults around them for cues to what they think are the right answers. Because of this, I choose to become a fixture in their classroom: an everyday occurrence and not something new and shiny that needed to be catered to. I chose to construct a shared reality with the children so I could best understand and represent their experiences authentically.

As I moved into this space of professional research opposed to action research, I find I am often falling back on the clique of narrative ethnographic research: I want to tell their stories. Actually, on reflection, I do not want to tell their story, I want instead to give the children the space to tell their own story, give them the space to feel free and comfortable to be so open. I want to make their collective voices ring true to their intention and bring change to their collective lives. I chose to construct a shared reality with the children so I could best understand and represent their experiences authentically.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I will offer a road map of the literature on the history of early childhood development regarding the outdoors, theory relating to the child's development of self and feeling of power, and examples of outdoor early childhood programs throughout the world that have been successfully implemented. I will offer a critical examination of current conceptual frameworks around risky play, power-sharing, and different approaches to utilizing outdoor spaces.

One need only to look at a modern playground with the bars on all the open areas, prison-like walkways that only allow one child at a time through, and slides that physically funnel the child down only one way to see what has changed since the recess times of the past. Playing Capture the Flag or Tag on such a structure is nearly impossible. Strict rules on physical activity have not left room for imaginative physical games to emerge and relationships to be forged on the playground (Paloni, 2007). Running is often banned on outdoor playgrounds (Jarrett, 2009).

### **Home life**

Home life for children today has also greatly changed. Television and computer time are now make up the majority of hours children spend their leisure time on (Paloni, 2007, Charles, 2009). Today's young child spends an average of 30 hours in front of the television (Louv, 2008). According to Charles (2009) that means that for most children, the 30 minutes of recess they get at school is the only time outside they will have for the entire day.

Screen time and reduced recess time are not the only barriers to kids getting outside to play. Children today are also facing an epidemic of parental interaction coined 'helicopter

parenting' by parenting experts (O'Brien, 2007). O'Brien (2007) found that the majority of free play time in American households has been replaced by outside classes and group sports. The idea that children need to be kept busy instead of allowed time to explore and play relatively unsupervised has become part of our culture very recently. In the past, children played with their friends after school and any sports they did participate in were regional and did not take up entire weekend days or after school times (O'Brien, 2007).

### **History of preschool**

While preschool seems a relatively new invention and part of the modern culture, the conceptual framework around young children and how they should be using their bodies to learn about themselves and their culture is not new. Starting during the Enlightenment, giants of philosophy John Amos Comenius, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote about the need and aim of educating the young child (Morrison, 2011). While differing in their individual image of the child as a person, all three men agreed on the method. The young child should be allowed to explore new concepts or objects with their physical body.

As time progressed, so did the understanding of how much young children could do themselves when allowed choice by the adult in power. Philosophy eventually gave way to approaches and models like Montessori, Waldorf (sometimes called Steiner), High/scope, and Reggio Emilia being the most well know. The current best practice thinking about early childhood is a reality where children have open access to an enriched and engaging environment where choice of play, place, and general activity is the rule (Morrison, 2011). In the highest quality programs, children and their development are at the center of all planning and classroom considerations (Lee and Walsh, 2005).

But something has shifted. The focus from scaffolded exploration to sanitized control has been swift. Lee and Walsh's (2005) research examining how stakeholders (teachers and directors) defined a quality experience in preschool differed quite a bit from what many early childhood researchers considered best practice in approach. Teachers and directors in preschools who were interviewed often spoke of a clean, safe, and orderly classroom being the most important aspects of a good early childhood program. This was secondary to the themes of raising independent children and having a supportive classroom for childhood development. If stakeholders in this study are similar in their view to most preschool teachers, sanitation and safety appear to have taken over from the traditional exploration and choice offered to children in the classroom, outdoor time not being immune from these changes. If in fact free play and outdoor play is being reduced and/or overly structured and controlled by adult caregivers in preschool environments, there could be negative consequences for children. I will examine next some of these consequences by examining neurobiology and resiliency development.

### **Neurobiology and resiliency development**

The impact of nature on the developing brain and the understanding of its importance is an emerging science. Both Maller (2009) and Rivkin (1997) have taken the Biophilia Hypothesis and applied to children. Biophilia suggests that humans are hard wired to develop in nature. Research around the way the brain develops without having experiences in the natural world is just beginning to show the importance of nature in the life cycle of a human. Researchers hypothesize that 'den building' play and exploration could be an important activity in the development of the young brain (Berger & Lahad, 2009). For example, den building or as Maller (2009) calls it tree house construction, is seen across the world by children of all cultures,

regardless of ethnicity or economic status. Through den building, children learn about physical and emotional choice as well as how to create their den from found items, something that may have been a very important stage in neuro-development (Berger & Lahad, 2009). In the United States, den building is openly discouraged as universally dangerous and many cities and towns have actual ordinances against children trying to build small structures, even in their own backyards (Maller, 2009).

The Biophilia Hypothesis is a theory that grew out of the marriage of anthropology and evolutionary science (Kahn & Kellert, 2002). Broken down into root words, “bio” meaning nature, and “philia” mean crave or yearn; philia is the opposite of a phobia, meaning “fear” (Louv, 2008). Simply stated, Biophilia is the concept that humans evolved within nature, have always been within nature and therefore, as a race, we crave nature (Kahn & Kellert, 2002). Humans need nature to not only feel whole but to *be* whole (Louv, 2008). In the United States, many people grow gardens though they do not need the harvest to supply their food (Louv, 2008). Why would humans engage in the physical work and possible emotional toil of garden growing if there was not some sort of developmental gain other than dietary requirements (Louv, 2008)?

In order to subscribe to Biophilia theory, the researcher must make a fair number of assumptions (Kahn & Kellert, 2002). Belief in human evolution is a core and central limitation of the Biophilia Hypothesis (Kahn & Kellert, 2002). An understanding of nature as an overall positive force in human existence is also paramount as is a belief that the positive view of nature and the outdoors is cross-cultural, being found all over the globe (Jarret, 2009). The nature of reality through a Biophilia lens is that all humans, through human history, need nature to be properly developed (Louv, 2008, Paloni, 2007). The collective race must have time out of doors

to properly grow into whole, individual people (Louv, 2008). Indeed, belief that humankind will suffer without exposure to nature brings the theoretical assumptions full circle: humans are hard-wired for time in nature and should be included during the school day (Kahn & Kellert, 2002, Ege, *et al*, 2011).

### **Impact of nature on development**

The positive impact of nature on children's learning and development is long documented. Howard Gardner, in his book *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (1999) discusses the addition of a naturalistic intelligence to his well respected Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Defined by Gardner as the ability to discriminate within the natural world, other researchers believe this was developed during our evolution and was an innate and necessary ability for survival (Louv, 2008, O'Brien, 2007).

Multiple Intelligence Theory is not the only modern developmental theory that incorporates and recognizes the usefulness of children interacting in and with the natural world. According to Crain (1997) and Wilson (1995) both developmental psychologists, Jean Piaget and ground breaking educator Maria Montessori, acknowledged the primal need children have for nature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Montessori observed that by being outdoors the child senses became heightened and they were more receptive to social cues from their peers (Crain, 1997).

Similarly, Piaget observed that children under age seven learn almost exclusively through motor manipulation and addition studies on young children using the Piaget model have shown that children learn more about themselves and their environment when their materials are closer to a raw state (Wilson, 1995). There is nothing rawer than nature. It became evident in the analysis of my data for the present study that the intersection of raw nature and personal choice



as power in outdoor classroom space revealed much about how children were learning about themselves and their own power while at play.

Long blocks of unscripted play outside are the times when children develop several lifelong skills. Executive function's like self-regulation and other higher level brain functions are honed and fine-tuned in this sort of play (Maller, 2009.) Martin (2010) defined self-regulation as the theory behind agency. As defined by Martin (2010), agency is the individual's capability to "...make choices and act upon those choices. It is framed are free will, such agency assumes that persons themselves determine their choices and actions" (p. 136). Children are more fit and suffer from fewer chronic ailments when allowed to play out of doors, in fact research has shown that children who live and play on farms have a much lower rate of asthma and allergies than their city-bound friends (Ege *et al.*, 2011).

Waite (2010) found in her study of outdoor learning, *Losing our way? The Downward path for outdoor learning for children aged 2-11, for children in the UK*, time spent out of doors playing has decreased while the amount of time in scripted physical education classes has increased. In the UK, as in America, the focus of "play" has been around physical fitness and not how time out of doors might help children develop in powerful way, be it emotional, social, and academic ways, beyond just this physical body.

Children who are happy are better learners, better at taking appropriate risks and making appropriate and powerful choices. They retain more new concepts when they are feeling good than when they are stressed or have poor mental health (Maller, 2009). According to Berger and Lahad (2009), children who spent their afternoons watching TV or playing computer games showed signs of decreased motivation in social relationships and motivation during the school day, essentially they were powerless to make personal choices. On the other side, when those

same children did play outside, in a creative way, their self-isolating tendencies decreased and their learning increased. What makes the Berger and Lahad (2009) study so important to the concepts of power as choice explored in this study it that the creative outside play was only in short interludes during the school day, some as simple as walking outside to water a plant. It is not hard to bring this back to the Biophilia Hypothesis, that young brains need nature in order to develop power emotionally, cognitively, and physically (Kahn & Kellert, 2002). It is also worth noting that there seems to be no research to contradict what is discussed here, that nature and outdoor play are important to children.

Martin (2004) makes the case that in Bandura's social cognitive theory, self-actualization and agency development can only occur in a social context. This agency is specifically through intentional acts and fosters an understanding in the child that his or her development of beliefs of choice and power. Bandura directly challenges the paradigm which focuses on teacher-direction and teacher-choice in fostering development of self-regulation. Drawing on Bandura, Martin (2004) also argues that self-regulation and agency can only be developed authentically if the child is not under the tight control and the power of the adults, instead given that power of choice and power of participation in the cultural environment. In this study, the cultural environment and the physical environment interest in new and innovative ways where agency development and outdoor play choice are one and the same.

### **Public policy and grassroots push-back**

Since it is clear that children need to play outside and that they are not getting that time while at home, educators are starting to advocate for their role to be expanded for making sure children get out of doors every day. I examine such efforts in this section and discuss what

research about these efforts suggest about the value of unrestricted outdoor play for young children

Movements within education, *No Child Left Inside* (Paloni, 2007) being the most well-known, have begun to impact a nationwide paradigm shift. Rivkin (1997) wrote a full decade on the topic before coining this battle-cry motto, “No Child Left Inside.” From this perspective, implementation of a nature based education is falling more and more to the schools and being in nature is a right of childhood that teachers need to understand and allow children to fulfill (Rivkin, 1997).

### **Developmental Appropriate Practice**

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is a concept that the overall approach to early childhood education, from curriculum to room arrangement to ethical behavior by teachers, should be framed around the principles of development of the child (NAEYC, 2009). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the foremost authority in early childhood policy and a leader in child-based advocacy, developed a guideline position statement lately adopted in 2009. The core of DAP is that each child be considered as an individual and that the child should be considered an active and contributing member in his or her construction of knowledge (NAEYC, 2009).

Additionally, children are to be considered within their cultural contexts, and at different rates of maturation when curriculum and/or activities are planned and that teachers should be cognizant of each child’s need to be challenged. NAEYC directly endorses a play-based model for early childhood education through the DAP Position Statement, specifically stating, “...play apparently serves important physical, mental, emotional, and social functions for humans...,and

each kind of play has its own benefits and characteristics.” (p. 14). This feeds directly into this concept of outdoor play being a necessary component to help children develop a sense of self and who they are as individuals

### **Finnish nature schools**

Even as movements to create nature experience for children are starting to move more main stream, the United States still has quite a distance to go before catching up to other nations. There are wonderful examples of schools that either use nature as their classroom or where children are out of doors much of the day. The Finnish Nature Schools are tax payer-funded public schools that operate a nature-based curriculum. Children have daily time with a nature/environmental teacher during which they work in a garden, walk through the woods or do other nature-based learning. These schools were developed in the 1990’s as a national reaction to the increasing evidence that global warming was becoming a big problem for the sub-arctic region (Jereon, Jereon & Raustia, 2008). Quantifiable evidence was found that children were more inclined to care for the earth and understand their role within it in the Nature Schools than in the regular Finnish public schools (Jereon, Jereon & Raustia, 2008). The Nature Schools can be credited for bringing to light the concept of outdoor education which is discussed in the next section; while the original approach of the Finish Nature Schools was to increase the stewardship of the planet by the children, it spawned another, more holistic and child-centered approach to outdoor education in Europe, the Forest Preschool.

### **Forest School model and benefits of outdoor education**

The Forest Schools of the United Kingdom are also a model for nature-based education. In her qualitative study, O’Brien (2009) interviewed teachers, observed children at several

different programs and searched for themes in the children's work during their days at school. She found that children were very social, improved their gross motor skills and were all very motivated and happy during the school day. Conflicts were rare and the children were often able to settle squabbles easily often without adult intervention. Children were allowed to explore their own power in both physical (choosing where to play) and emotional (choosing how to play) ways.

Additionally, the program models that use nature-based education seem to use some of the best teaching practices and learning theories available to schools from a constructivist perspective. By the nature of the play, children are able to construct their own learning. While the trend in education policy and curriculum is to create more structured experiences in a controlled environment (Stipek, 2006), children who are allowed to explore their surroundings without adult intervention seem to engage more authentic, powerful learning (Rivkin, 1997). However, advocates for an academic preschool model claim that structure and direct instruction of academic material are the most effective way to increase test scores within important content areas (Sonnenschein, Baker, & Garrett 2005). Indeed, the No Child Left Behind legislation requires teachers to use a direct instruction model for literacy in Head Start (Stipek, 2006). According to Maller (2009), children who had the power to use newly learned academic skills in nature retained the newly learned information more often and were more creative with answers than their traditional counterparts.

Children in the Forest Schools in the United Kingdom also seemed to have an extra benefit: time for the teacher to really observe the child (O'Brien, 2009). One of the major themes that emerged from this study was the amount of time the teachers took to get to know each individual child, creating a child-centered curriculum. The researcher found that since the

children spent so much of their school day outside in exploration, the teachers were able to see where the child really excelled, where their natural abilities were (O'Brien, 2009). Learning styles that would be difficult to accommodate in a typical classroom, like kinesthetic or spatial styles, were easily identified by the teachers while the children played (O'Brien, 2009).

### **Risk-taking as learning**

Although I entered this study with open-ended research questions about how young children experience outdoor learning in a preschool setting, my analyses focused on a clear pattern of children making choices about taking emotional and/or physical risks within their outdoor classroom. Although the modern “helicopter parenting” syndrome suggests that at least some cultural groups of parents have sought to reduce risk in their children’s growth, O’Brien, (2007) argued that such parental control is a barrier to proper nature-based development. Rivkin (1997) is echoed a decade later by Maller (2009) in finding that children who are given an opportunity to play in a natural area are more flexible in their thinking and more powerful in their actions both in and out of the natural areas. Just as interesting, Berger and Lahad (2009) found that children in nature were better at appropriate risk-taking choices. They argued that when children are empowered to take appropriate risks in nature they are more resilient and flexible in other aspects of their lives. Flexibility and the ability to discriminate an activity as overly risky are developed throughout childhood and are both important skills for adults (Berger and Lahad, 2009). Without this time out of doors each day, children are less likely to take appropriate physical and emotional risks and learn about their own power of choice (Louv, 2008). Berger and Lahad (2009) found that children who did not have varied exposure to nature lacked the resiliency seen in children who had time to play outside every day.

Concerns about road safety were shown to lead to teachers restricting childhood movement and to decreases children’s outdoor time significantly when getting students to

outdoor space involved negotiating street traffic (Carver, Timperio, Hesketh & Crawford, 2010). Current research on the developing brain in regard to risk taking behaviors is that this sort of activity is necessary for complete and whole childhood development (Tranter, 2005; Little & Wyver, 2008; Duffy, 2010; Carver, 2010). Proper exposure to risk increases a child's well-being (Tranter, 2005), and powerful confidence in their own physical and emotional success (Little & Wyver, 2008).

Similarly, Kernan and Devine (2010) found what seemed to be a disconnect between teachers' views on the importance of outdoor play and the tolerance for risk in an outdoor environment in Irish preschool programs. Risk management and the mitigation of outdoor flora deemed too risky by individual programs have made outdoor play areas less natural and more sanitized. The researchers ultimately found that while participants' beliefs around outdoor play and risk were positive, the actual practice was far less so. Teachers and administrators essentially operated out of a place of fear when planning time for children outdoors. Kernan and Devine (2010) Kernan and Devine (2010) highlight the separation between what is known about the need for unscripted outdoor play on the early childhood experience and the actual practice schools may be carrying out.

### **Power and research about young children**

In order to effectively examine young children's experiences in outdoor environments, I sought to adopt a child's perspective in this study (Corsaro, 1979). Waller and Bitou (2011) attack three challenges they believe exist in engaging children in participatory and critical-framed research. The main concern of the authors is that the researcher may not understand how, as an adult, his or her own agenda influences child behavior and if participatory research is actually empowering to children. The article discovered that many children just "opted out" of

the research by not being near the researcher doing the fieldwork while others instead “played it up.” The authors argue that the only true way to empower children in the research process to make a leap from ‘listening’ to the children to giving the children a ‘voice’ by acting on their concerns. With that leap comes a separation of the researcher from the children, where observation instead of participation takes the lead in the field.

Warming (2011) conducted an ethnographic study within a childcare setting that broached the sticky topic of what it means to “give voice to children’s own perspectives” (p. 49). Contrary to Waller and Bitou (2011), Warming argues that the only way a researcher can authentically represent the children’s views is through actual participation in the child’s activities, at the child’s level. Through her experiences in the field as an ethnographer, the author soon discovered that whatever her original research intention, she was learning more about the methodology of power through her experiences than anything else.

I was interested to find that there are many research position papers advocating for the use of critical, participatory research design with young children. Yet, I found little research that was specifically approached children’s experiences in this way. I find this to be a glaring gap in the empirical body. The interest in conducting work around what power means to a young child’s experience is clearly there but for some reason unknown, the action into using this approach seems to be lacking. What is power and how it can be expressed by young children is a need in the current body of work.

### **What is missing**

There was very little within the empirical literature on the other side of this issue. I was unable to find a single academic study that argued for a decrease in outdoor time for young children. What I did find were news stories about children being injured and the litigations



schools and municipalities have had to defend against, both in the United States and abroad around this issue. This has created a culture of fear (Kernan and Devine, 2010; Louv, 2008) that has informed current practices in outdoor exposure for young children (Maller, 2009).

In this review, the benefits of outdoor play seem vastly important to the child's development. Cognition, social skills, and emotional well-being for the teachers and children seem to all be benefits of outdoor free play, as nearly this entire review attests. But I still find the empirical body lacking. Where is the voice of the child? What do the children think and feel about outdoor play? I wonder what their experiences are in this sort of environment. There seems to be a great deal of research that looks at what the teacher or parent feels the child gets out of being outdoors but nothing from the child her or his self. I am most interested in documenting the experience of the child as directly as possible. This paper seeks to address these two identified gaps in the current research about outdoor play, and the young child's development of self-reflecting power in that outdoor environment.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Given that this dissertation focuses on the perspective of the children's experiences, I have developed a narrative ethnographic design to examine the collective experiences in the outdoors at one preschool. In this chapter, I will explain my methods of inquiry, the challenges and goals of analysis, as well as the way I have approached the research question formation.

### **Research Approach and Procedure**

#### **Plan for inquiry**

I designed this study as a narrative ethnography. In this study, the ethnographic approach of fieldwork and focus on the study of culture was used to collect the data in the field. The narrative approach was added to the ethnographic approach since the focus was on capturing and telling the experiences through personal stories within the space of the outdoor classroom (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) define place space as “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place” (p. 480).

I spent five months as a participant-observer within a preschool classroom where children are given extensive time out of doors every day. I used an ethnographic approach to data collection, capturing my observations in a handwritten field notebook. The inquiry was conducted in a constructivist, emergent method where I was also a co-creator of the knowledge and experiences in the classroom. I believe that narrative ethnography is the best route for this dissertation because it allows for an “...emergent method that takes us outside of stories and their veridical relationship to storytellers and experience, (a) method of procedure and

analysis aimed at close scrutiny of social situations, their actors, and actions in relation to narratives” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008, pg, 249). Being a member and co-constructor of the experiences in this classroom of 25 children and four teachers in real time, the fieldnotes was not a passive reconstruction of the memories of play, it took place in real time (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008).

It is assumed that the participants or research subjects are telling the truth; either in their actions or in their stories, but this truth is very different than the positivist “Truth” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Post-positivists would say that this sort of truth is flawed because the participants’ experiences are not controlled. I reject this stance for young children. This truth is about the experience and reality of the subject, not about the facts of the story (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Between the researcher and the participants, a new truth is constructed through their experience together (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). The participant is able to piece together their experiences and the social influences that have impacted the story creating a “unique personal history” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 41).

Intersubjectivity instead of objectivity is the goal of narrative ethnography with the focus on the environment of the subjects and the researchers in that environment as much as the subjects themselves (Tillman-Healy, 2001). Because another co-constructor of the group’s personal narrative is the outdoors, being part of that environment is imperative (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008, Tillman-Healy, 2001). Since my main questions are focused on the experienced narrative of the class, both individually and as a whole, and how they use these experiences influence each child’s own personal theories of young identity and their place within the world, narrative ethnography requires real-time reflexivity in the environment where the plots are being created (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008).

As I made my way through the collection of my fieldnotes, it became clear that the information I was gathering and experiencing was focused around six children who spent the most time around me, either through their choice or through playing with a child who made the choice to include me in his or her play.

Because of this emergence through the research process, I made the decision to write personal narratives on each of these children. I felt this approach was necessary for three reasons; the first was to keep me grounded and close to the research. The second was to keep the children's experiences as the forefront of the narrative I was exploring and to help keep me, as the researcher-participant, from projecting my own voice over the child's voice. The third and most important to me was to attempt to bring to the forefront of this study the diversity of the children who were participants in this work.

## **Participants**

Participants for this study were the 25 children, age two-and-a-half through five years from the three-day classroom and five-day classroom at Forest School and their four teachers. All children are of middle-class income range based on the monthly tuition cost of the school and all are perceived to be European-American decent. The school does offer a tuition assistance program of up to 20% and also accepts the county assistance program for working families, though at the time of my observations, only two children in the population were participants in this program. Most children attend the school while their parents are working. The four teachers are all trained in the Waldorf approach to early childhood education which has a strong focus on free outdoor play and outdoor community walks. One teacher is perceived to be middle aged, a second is perceived to be mid-30's and two are early 20's. The two younger teachers are Waldorf school graduates themselves. All four teachers are also perceived to be of European-

American decent. The two older teachers have taught more than five years each and the two younger teachers each have less than three years each in the classroom.

The school is located in a middle-class neighborhood in City Town, CO however, there are currently no neighborhood children who attend. Children come from all over the city to attend this preschool. The city is majority white (89%) with a population of just over 146,000 residents who have a median household income of nearly \$50,000 per year (Census, 2012). Fifty percent of residents in the City have at least an undergraduate degree (Census, 2012).

These co-creators were chosen because of the educational model used at the school that allows for children to spend several hours per day out in nature. In addition, my four children have all attended this preschool and I already have a warm and friendly rapport with the administrator and teachers. It is important to note that my youngest child is part of this inquiry and a current student of Forest School.

### **Research questions**

One of the greatest lessons I learned from the Pilot study was that I needed to enter the space with some sort of main guiding question but that this question should be broad and allow substantial space for new questions to emerge. The original main guiding question was: What is the experience of the young child who has extensive time out of doors during the school day?

As I collected my observations and began to formulate my codes in the research, I found that new questions emerged in my work. As I discuss in the following sections, the final sub-questions I constructed through the collection of my data are:

1. What does it mean to be powerful for this group of children?
2. How do children wield their power in the outdoors?
3. What situations and interactions are preschool children powerless to change?

4. How does power influence the children's choices in the outdoors?

### **Data collection and approach to analysis**

The approach to data collection was as a participant observer in the classroom. Over a 20 week period, many hours of observations were conducted of children at Forest Preschool in City Town, CO. The observations took place on the school's "morning walk" to an open green space called the Forest. The observations began three weeks after school started in the fall and ended about five months later. There were two breaks the school took where I was unable to attend, one week for the Thanksgiving holiday and a two week break around late December.

Observations included the time before the class left the school when the children played on the playground, the actual walking to the Forest, and the walk back to the school. The Forest is located down a busy road, about ¼ mile from the school. The children walked down the sidewalk and crossed this busy road to reach the forest, following the reverse path to return to the school.

In the pilot study I learned that I could not equally capture dialogue and descriptive elements with just my pen and paper. As the school would not allow for video or audio recordings to be collected, I made the choice to collect transcription of exact dialogue or I would collect my perception of what I was seeing unfold and then check that perception with the children involved. This choice was necessary so that I was able to be a participant in the play and I found that the children tolerated my writing and were sometimes very interested in what I was writing. This made checking in with them just part of our interactions and never something I had to carve out time to complete.

I carried a single composition notebook where I keep all my raw observations, transcripts of dialogue I was able to capture, and personal thoughts about what I was experiencing. I then

took the time to expand my condensed notes after each observation, to include more detail that could not capture while in the field, as well as any additional interpretations (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001). After reading my fieldnotes, I transcribed these rough cuts into a readable narrative (expanded field notes) of the cultural drama I witnessed and experienced (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001).

### **Expanding**

As completed, all data were analyzed in real-time, in that I did not wait to expand and transcribe my fieldnotes at a later date. I used an approach what Vaan Maanen calls an impressionist style of expansion (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001), blending both my thoughts and feelings about the moments captured with descriptive passages of my observations or captured dialogue. I took my raw notes and expanded them to include thick, rich descriptions of the activities, including all dialogue I was able to capture in writing, within an hour of the original collection.

I used my field notebook openly with the children to transcribe quick notes, making a point to ask the children before I wrote anything if it is alright with them. Several of the children were interested in my notebook I allowed these few children to write in my notebook. I then re-read my expanded fieldnotes and memos that I wrote at the moment in the field. My voice is present throughout the notes and findings as well, as I have co-constructed these experiences along with the children (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001).

### **Coding**

I found the transformative method of coding for themes described by Wolcott (1994) to be the most beneficial. The three step process in Wolcott (1994) for data transformation is: (1.)

Description: Where I asked myself, “What’s going here?”; (2.) Analysis: Where I began sorting data in charts and themes, asking myself, “What does it say?”; (3.) Interpretation: Where I looked back over my sorted data, asking myself, “What does it all mean?”

I began by reading through my notes and asking, “What is going on in this?” looking for simple descriptions of the action. I worked through the notes creating the first broad codes. Coding the expanded fieldnotes took several months and two complete run throughs of the research. Initially, I coded my expanded notes to help me understand the culture of this classroom and what it meant to be part of this culture. After this initial coding, working through Wolcott’s (1994) transformation of data still asking “What is going on here”, I re-coded looking at the initial codes through a lens of Critical theory. New codes emerged from this second through reading of my field notes.

### **Creating a matrix**

After the second coding, I took another cue from Wolcott (1994) and began sorting my data into a visual model. I found that the themes that I had constructed could be sorted into two main categories of power; Negative use of power and Positive use of power framed by child development. I defined power as the choice of a situation or activity. Positive or negative power was a determination of the other person or persons’ reaction to the use of power in a negative way or positive way. For example, when a child grabbed a second child’s hand and happily walked down the sidewalk together in this manner, the first child’s actions would be considered positive. A negative expression of power would be if that second child reacted by pulling away or crying, a culturally accepted negative reaction. I then took the themes I had discovered around power and sorted them into these categories using a handwritten matrix. I found in this matrix



that the experiences could be further deconstructed to the children being powerful or powerless in the categories of Positive and Negative use of power.

After creating a second matrix sorting the themes into these four categories of power, I created a frequency table of the codes to determine which of the several dozen codes should be focused upon. I chose to focus on only the codes that were present during a majority of my observations as determined within my field notes.

Once these core codes were discovered, I then created a table that sorted the codes into the time in which I observed or experienced each code. These categories are; on the playground before the walk, on the walk to the Forest, in the Forest, and on the return walk back to school. I then culled out the codes that I only saw once. Because of the different cultural norms that were part of the classroom during each of the segments of the outdoor time, some codes were only seen in one of the physical places.

Because of the sheer amount of themes I discovered, I found that organizing the big ideas into an interaction matrix very beneficial because it helped me make sense of the where and the why and how it related to the outdoors in each category.

### **My troubles with writing and the emergence of five focus children**

After the codes were sorted into the table, I attempted to write up my results. I spent a great deal of effort trying to capture the voice and feel of the children instead of just talking about my experiences with the group. I started by trying to write this up using a metaphor. First I tried using the developmental domains described as the metaphor of a tree. This initial draft was a disappointment because I felt after reading it and editing it extensively, the children were still missing and their voice was not on the forefront. Wolcott (1994) describes this stage as

interpretation and I had fallen prey to the common, "...overly simplistic explanations of complex social phenomena or always looking at issues from the same perspective" (p. 40).

I went back to my original expanded field notes, combing over them yet again for some insight. What I discovered was that the drama that I both experienced and observed seemed to focus around five specific children; Omar (m, aged 4), Jasmine (f, aged 4), Ronny (m, aged 3), Sally (f, aged 3), and Eve (f, aged 4.5).

Upon this discovery, I made the decision to create personal narratives of each of these five children to help me focus on the findings and themes from the child's perspective. Once I began to write up these narratives based on my observations and my conversations with these five focus children, I found that I had some gaps in my knowing of these children. I decided the only way I could fill these gaps was to approach each child's parents and ask for their input about their child.

I created a short, open answer questionnaire with some focused questions about each child. I felt like I needed some background knowledge about these five children and check in with the parents about whom I thought I understood these children's narratives to be. One hundred percent of the children's parents participated in the questionnaire. Most importantly, the answers given by the parents helped me understand a little better who these children are as people outside the classroom.

### **The narratives**

The narratives are only a snapshot into the lives of these children; each individual story framed within the context of the outdoor classroom and the experiences they had there. Within the context of this study, the narratives are primarily used a grounding tool for me to gain a

deeper understanding of the culture from an individual level, to see the intersection of power and self within these five children. However, these narratives are not intended to be used as a complete representation of the experiences of all the children in this classroom culture.

The parents were recruited to expand my knowledge of the child's history and personality, affirming and expanding what each child taught me about themselves through our work together in the field. These child narratives do contain the voice of the parents alongside that of their children. The narratives have been included in this write up to both help ground me as the researcher inside my experience and to focus the findings through the children themselves.

### **Research poems**

The use of research poems in analysis was primarily to focus my thinking about each child as his or her story related to the bigger picture cultural themes I found through my coding. The role of the poems in my thinking about how to present the narratives of each child was to draw down my attention to the differences in each child through his or her use of language (Cahnmann, 2003). I used each of these poems as introductions to the each child's narrative. The poems kept me close to the research and helped me understand the complexity of this topic in a way that the codes and narrative alone did not. I created these poems-with the exception of Sally's- out of the child's own words. I wanted to give the reader a snapshot of who the child was through the child his or herself.

Sally's poem was not created out of her words as she did not talk around me enough for me to craft a poem for analysis. Instead, with Sally, I tried to interpret her thinking behind the actions over the entire 16 weeks I was with her outdoors.

## **Trustworthiness**

One of the dangers in qualitative research is that participants, in this case the children, will be so far removed and reduced from their experiences the final written product will not be an authentic representation of their experience (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). Another strong danger to trustworthiness in ethnography is that the researcher is unable to see herself as part of the experience of the group's culture in study and therefore downplays her personal impact on change in that culture (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). Interpersonal relationships with the children and teacher will in all likelihood develop in such a close and physical research orientation (Josselson, 2007) which was certainly the case with me in this study. I became friend with many of the children and close to the teachers. There is also potential that the children when they grow could be jarred by what was written about them as young children by another person and while it is nearly impossible to negate all possibilities of this (Josselson, 2007) there are actions I can take to minimize the risk (Josselson, 2007; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008).

Doing ethnography with preliterate children is challenging from a best practice stand point. Taking a cue from Rossholt's (2009) ethnographic work with young children and body awareness, I followed her suggestions for noninvasive field work with young preschoolers by allowing the children to take the lead. Because children this young sometimes lack the skills to always vocally articulate what they may want from me in the field, I made a concerted effort to notice and read each child's body language for any sort of distress or discomfort (Rossholt, 2009). I did not pressure anyone to engage. I was cognoscente that not all dynamics of power and privilege between me and the children could not be erased (Walcott, 2008; Rossholt, 2009). My position both as an adult and as a parent innately created a sort of permission-based power structure that can never be dispelled. I am an adult and they are small children and the cultural

norm of the adult as the being in charge was evident at times in my experiences in the field (Walcott, 2008).

I always asked the children if I could play with them before joining their group or walking along the road next to them. Through in-field reflexive notes in my notebook, I was able to capture my thoughts in the moment about my researcher role whenever I was with the children, acknowledging that my presence may be changing their play. I also acknowledge that my presence alone might be created an entirely new cultural norm (Rossholt, 2009). I also tried to clarify with the children what I think I understood as the meaning of their actions or words.

To solve both these queries, I engaged in reflexive memo-ing in the moment when I was in the outdoor classroom. I engaged in personal thoughts about what I think I am seeing and what I perceive the children are doing in my presence. Reflexive practice is often defined as a reflection in the moment where the researcher changes their actions or way of questioning to better support the subjects and not cause any harm (Josselson, 2007). In my case, I memo-ed in the field so I was better able to bring from that intersubjectivity in the final work without also dehumanizing the participants' stories through over generalization of the analysis (Josselson, 2007, Tillman-Healy, 2001).

After the final work was written, the final paper was sent via email to all participant families to read before publication. Comments were encouraged but none were received.

### **Significance of the findings**

No ethnographic study can guarantee results that can then be applied to other situations. This study can be viewed as an authentic representation of the experience of these children in a preschool where they have a great deal of time out of doors each school day. Understanding the experience of the child is often a piece that is left out of policy in schools. Adults spend a great

deal of our time trying to do what we think is best for children without understanding their experiences with top down rule making. To the field of early childhood education, this study will work as an illustration of a different way children experience their lives within a preschool and how power and powerlessness is used by this group in the outdoors.

This study will contribute to the empirical literature because it addresses what I see as a gaping hole in what has already been published on the topic, the children themselves and what being out of doors, means to their concept of self and the development of their own personal concept of power. Bringing this neglected piece of the outdoor play pie to light could also have an impact on policy of outdoor play in public and private early childhood schools.

In addition, while not the focus of this particular study, I believe it to be a jumping off point for researchers looking specifically on parenting practices as related to outdoor time and play for their children. If it is indeed extremely important that young children have time to play out of doors in order to support their development of self and how they see themselves as powerful individuals then parents, as the child's first teacher, would best be served to learn about natural play, just as they learn about any other proper care activities for their child.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### **Method of Transformation and Discovery**

#### **Description**

My data was constructed of 112 pages of expanded field notes and was used to assess my research questions: What does it mean to be powerful for this group of children? How do children wield their power in the outdoors? What situations and interactions are preschool children powerless to change? How does power influence the children's choices in the outdoors? These field notes consisted of journaling and reflexive statements I took in the moment, all action I captured in my observations in the outdoor classroom, as well as much word for word dialogue as possible without a recording device from teachers, children, and myself. I also included my reflections of what I had experienced in the field. As I explore these themes' evidence through vignettes and stories, I want the children's voices and experiences to be the focal point. Because of this, I have reserved linking the finding to current research for the following chapter discussion.

I used Wolcott's (1994) method described as transformational process as a touchstone in my analysis by developing themes through a process of coding. To further guide my analysis I created personal narratives of the five focus children that appeared in my notes within the classroom drama outdoors as a way to ground myself in the students' voices. I use thick, rich descriptions and details throughout to show readers the complexity of both the setting and the interactions. Wherever possible, I have used the quoted words of the children themselves to explain what is going on in regard to the research questions: What does it mean to be powerful for this group of children? How do children wield their power in the outdoors? What situations and interactions are preschool children powerless to change? How does power influence the

children's choices in the outdoors? Organization of this chapter will begin with a walk through the narratives of each of the five focus children as well as their individual research poems, then a discussion of the big picture themes, sub-themes and action-codes. Finally, vignettes of illustration will be used as evidence for the themes.

### **The five focus children**

These narratives are only a snapshot into the lives of these children; each individual story is framed within the context of the outdoor classroom and the experiences they had there. The parents were recruited to expand my knowledge of the child's history and personality, confirming and expanding what each child taught me about his or herself through our work together in the field. The narratives have been included in this write up to both help ground me as the researcher inside my experience and to focus the findings through the children themselves. At the start of each child's narrative, a poem is introduced. These poems, except for the case of Sally, are constructed out of the words of the child. My intention was to let the child speak directly to the reader. Sally never spoke when I was in her presence except for once, uttering a single line to me out of the blue on a walk back to school.



**Omar**

*I put a leaf in my mouth*

*It tastes funny, like soap.*

*The bare trees drop the leaves to the ground,*

*They are all falling down.*

*The frost is on the leaf,*

*I'm licking it, it's cold.*

*Come with me,*

*You can't go there.*

*The cloud looks like a bone.*

Omar is a male child of four years old. Of average size and build, he has fair skin covered in tiny freckles that touch every edge of his face. He is the youngest child in his family of six. He lives with his parents and his four siblings and is one of the two children who are on a sliding scale tuition rate at the school, though his parents describe their income level as being middle-class. Bright eyed and quick to anger, Omar spent the majority of his time in the forest alone or with an adult. I had many one on one interactions with Omar both on the walk to the forest and in the forest itself. Based on my interactions with him, I would describe Omar as being keenly curious about the environment around him but that curiosity that is firmly planted in fact instead of fantasy.

Unlike many other children Omar's age, I did not witness Omar engaging in much imaginative play, either alone or with others. Omar noticed objects in nature more than any of the other focus children and was able to describe these objects' purpose and usefulness. He also seems taken with small objects like tiny "baby pinecones" and "shiny" rocks, which he would bring to me while exclaiming, "Ah, it's so cute!" in a high-pitched, sing-song voice.

Perhaps the most striking part of Omar's personality that I observed was his ability to hold information within his memory for long periods of time. This is illustrated by an amazing interaction I witness between Omar and his two teachers. As soon as we arrived at the Forest, Omar asked Ms. Star if he could be the flag holder on the way back to school. Star responded, "I don't save it, you have to remember and be the first one here when the Follow Song is called." Omar took in the information and went off to play for the 40 minutes spent in the forest. The moment he heard the first sounds of that Follow Song, Omar sprinted for the flag. He had remembered his teacher's instructions along with his desire to hold the flag on the way back to school for the entire 40 minutes, even though he had played the entire time.

In relation to his memory, I would also describe Omar as a rule-keeper, which is he saw large injustices when others, including myself and the teachers, broke a rule of the classroom. Though not a tattler, Omar would instead tell the other individual exactly what and why he or she was wrong. Omar, himself, was not a rule follower and often had to be reminded by teachers to hold the Caterpillar rope, not run on the sidewalk, and to stay in the forest area while on the morning walk.

Omar's mother described him in her survey in the following way:

*He is really can be very loving but he is also kind of a loner. He is very close to his siblings but not really other children. He can have epic tantrums and doesn't like a break in his routine. Schedule is the best way for him to function. He is very physical.*

**Ronny**

*Look at me,*

*I'm up.*

*Go that way,*

*No, it's that way.*

*AHHHHHHHH!*

*Here, take my sled,*

*Come with me.*

*Mine!*

Ronny is an only child and lives with his parents. His parents describe their family as being middle-class. Ronny's father shared with me that they chose Forest School for Ronny specifically because of the amount of time outdoors, saying, "Ronny is ALWAYS (sic) happier outside." At the start of my observations, Ronny is not yet three years old but his 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday occurs on the second day of my observations. Ronny is a solid child, with thick chestnut hair, large eyes and stocky build. He is quick to smile and often seems to have an imp-like twinkle in his eyes, like he is constantly planning something. Ronny does the majority of his communication through his body. He likes to move and was often up a tree or running. The teachers often had to keep the running in check on the walk and there were sometimes power struggles with him around on this subject.

Even at his young age, Ronny seems easily able to play with children of all ages in the group. He prefers to play with children who he can direct or that agree with his directions of the play. He could be mean to children who voiced opposition or did not want to do what he said in the play. He sometimes was physical with children who did something he did not like and a teacher had to redirect him. He has quite a strong amount of attention to detail in his play.

Ronny's parents describe their son very much the same, as, "happy, strong-willed, silly, smart, goofy, boundary tester."

I would describe Ronny as precocious and with a risk tolerance that would rival most experts in extreme sports, based on my interactions and observations of him over the 16 weeks. Of all the children I observed, Ronny twice hid from teachers when the end of the forest time was called; the first time led to quite a bit of anxiety from the teachers until he was found up a tree, grinning like a Cheshire cat. Ronny seems to love all kinds of attention, both positive and negative, from his teachers.

## **Sally**

*Cuddling and comfort,*

*The choice is mine.*

*Swinging and singing,*

*The choice is mine.*

*Walking, far back*

*I watch and see.*

*My choice, my need,*

*I like being with me.*

Sally is an only child she lives with her middle-class parents. Born with crossed eyes, Sally has worn glasses since before she turned one-year-old. Sally was three years old when I begin my observations. While on the surface, Sally appears to be shy after just a few observations, I discovered that her isolation was not because she did not like playing with other children but because she seemed to really enjoy her time with herself. I was able to spend time next to Sally as she spent most of her time under a picnic table singing to herself. Sally's parents are very involved in her day to day life and I often observed her father staying for an extended period of time when he dropped her off.

Even with her self-induced isolation on the walk, Sally is often sought out by children and is given many opportunities to play. While the majority of these times, Sally chooses to not join the play, these interruptions in her alone time do not seem unwelcome and she often smiles and answers in a voice that lets the other children know she is making a choice. Sally is close to

the teacher, Margret, and I observed her often holding hands with Margret when not playing alone.

Sally's mother describes her daughter as, "curious, assertive/direct, loving, playful/creative, sociable, brave (does things that scare her with support and reassurance)."

When asked to describe his daughter, her father said,

*I try not to. I feel like her personality is still forming, still changing, and I try to avoid giving her labels -- at least negative ones -- that could reinforce negative or limiting behavior. For example, she's sometimes acts shy, but I hesitate to call her shy, especially to her, because I don't want her to think "I am shy." Sometimes she's shy. Sometimes she's very open and loving and chatty. She seems to be creative and enjoys expressing herself, particularly through singing and drawing. She seems caring -- she likes to play "doctor" and "mom" to her dolls and take care of their ouches. She seems nervous, often talking about or playing games involving monsters. But she's quick to switch them from "mean monsters" to "nice monsters" and back again. She seems clingy and prefers playing with others (especially mom and dad) to playing by herself. She seems strong-willed and doesn't like to be told no. But she's more focused on getting what she wants than garnering acceptance. She can be silly -- I see this more when she's interacting with other kids her age. She seems creative and positive.*

## **Jasmine**

*I see a puddle,*

*I want those pinecones,*

*I have strong muscles,*

*I like those clouds,*

*I hate this ice,*

*I want my stick,*

*I want to do that,*

*I ate the bike,*

*She didn't say excuse me,*

*It's just pretend.*

Jasmine is the oldest child of two at four years old. She was born prematurely and spent a week in the Neonatal Intensive Care unit at the hospital on a ventilator, as well as being diagnosed with holes in her heart. These holes seem to have closed on their own, according to her mother. She has been at the school since she was two and a half years old. She lives with her baby brother, mother and father. She is quite tall and thin for her age. She had brown hair that starts the days nicely brushed and put back in a nice style but within an hour of her arrival at school, Jasmine has often pulled out whatever tool was used to hold her hair in place. Her parents describe their economic status as upper-middle class.

Jasmine can be described in a single word: intensity. Jasmine does nothing without a great deal of enthusiasm. She is a director and will not allow herself to be pushed out of that role easily. Jasmine has a very vivid imagination which can sometime get her into trouble. Jasmine was often in conflict over what and how to play with two other focus children, Ronny and Eve.

Jasmine knows how to ask for what she wants and if she does not get what she wants, she will continue to ask in different ways. Her intensity can lead to power struggles with teachers and I observed her several times push her teacher's limits, as illustrated in the story below.

Once on the way back from the forest, Jasmine did not wish to leave the forest and decided to kick her boot off to stop the entire line from walking. After kicking off her boot, she refused to put it back on. Instead of stopping the line, a teacher, Nan, stayed back with her until she was ready to put on her boot and walk. Staying back at the Forest for what seemed a long period of time, the two then ran to catch the group as it continued down the road, making the way back to the school.

Jasmine's mother describes her daughter as,

*“Adventurous, capable, affectionate, headstrong, helpful, curious, and loving. Jasmine has a really good memory. Ever since she could talk, she could recite books back to you after hearing them once. Now, I like to mix the words up when I read her stories and she loves it.”*



**Eve**

*Ho, ho, ho -I'm a ninja,*

*Can you be on the bad team with me?*

*Don't bother him with that horse,*

*I'm waiting until I can gallop.*

*I can get it for you,*

*You're still my friend, I just want to be alone.*

*We are making tents,*

*You bend it like this.*

*It's a fire,*

*My house is nice and warm.*

Eve is a tiny in stature, big on imagination, older four year old. Eve turned five just a couple weeks after I stopped my observations. She has short wavy hair that is somewhere between blond and red and a small round face that often holds an intense yet pleasant look. Eve is the middle child of three, living with her brothers and parents. She comes from an upper middle-class family and has attended the school since she turned two-and-one-half-years old. Eve spends all her time on the morning walk in imaginative play. She is often the director of the play and offers up complex yet flexible ideas. She is very strongly verbal and spends much of her time in play talking to other children, explaining what she is thinking and feeling.

Children often want to play with her because her dramas are very complex and she is sure to create a role for each child that is equally complex and meaningful to the play. She never dominates even when she is directing. She does sometimes have conflict with other focus child Jasmine but instead of fighting, she chooses to change. Eve has great empathy for others and will often invite children who are being excluded by others into her group to play. She is also

excellent at explain her feelings to other children as can be seen in the poem above. She is not easily angered. Eve's mother describes her daughter as, "Feisty, vivacious, determined, observant, exuberant, and affectionate."

## Themes

Some themes were quickly evident. One of the themes that I very easily discovered was the use of choice by the children as way of expressing power. Children made so many choices through the course of their play, how these choices became empowering was easy to see in my data. Risk as an expression of power also emerged quickly. However, the sub-themes were less evident and took longer for me to mentally unpack. The emergence of powerlessness and what it meant to the culture of the classroom was slow to emerge as was the subthemes around positive and negative power and powerlessness. Finding a way to describe the differences between ways the children and teachers wielded their power were much more tentative.

The first codes I found I consider actions. As I explained in chapter three, I then recoded these action codes using a critical lens. It was upon this final coding, the themes I constructed through my analysis, while simply titled, encompass the complexity of the interactions within the classroom and nature. A brief summary of these themes is presented in Table 1 with more descriptive passages following below.

Table 1  
*Categories of codes from the ethnography*

Theme	Definition
Outdoors and powerful actions: risky play choices as an expression of power	I defined powerful actions outdoors as taking physical and emotional risks and choices in the outdoors.
Exploration as a power: choice in the outdoors as power	I defined exploration as the ability to make choices of who to be with and what to play within the outdoors.
Powerlessness defined: what it means to be “little” in the “big” outdoors	I defined powerlessness as choices that were made for the children by adults and that the children did not have input upon.

### **Sub-themes as evidence**

Within each theme, I recognized and constructed sub-themes that were directly related to observed activities. The sub-themes were: power-positive, power-negative, powerlessness-positive, powerlessness-negative. These sub-themes can be described as the actions of power observed of the participants being majority physical or emotional power or powerlessness. The idea of positive and negative power is not to be understood as positive meaning good and negative meaning bad. Indeed, both positive and negative power and powerlessness is instead only the cultural reactions I saw from those others when the child or group of children's choices in actions. If the actor, either adult or child, reacted to the exertion of powerful choices through positive re-engagement then I considered this power-positive. The same is true for powerlessness-positive. If the adult's position of power was perpetuated on the child through necessity and was therefore thoughtfully explained to the child and the child accepted that explanation, then I considered this positive as well. Within these subthemes, the original codes of actions are sorted in Table 2 and Table 3 and explained thoroughly in the next sections.

Table 2

*Sub-themes matrix- power*

<b>Power-positive</b>		<b>Power-negative</b>	
Physical actions	Emotional actions	Physical actions	Emotional actions
Sitting alone	Choosing friends	Tantruming-physical	Tantruming-nothing physical
Interacting with nature	Vocally stating needs	Hiding	Laughing at teacher instructions
Choosing who to walk with	Organizing play	Running away	Laughing at friends
Climbing trees	Negotiating pretend drama	Refusing to walk	Shouting instead of singing
Walking on rocks	Leaving play	Standing in gutter	Tattling
Creating and using tools	Directing play with teachers	Walking off sidewalk	Crying when parent leaves
Helping friend out of tree	Directing conflict	Running under trees	
Holding hands with friend	Initiating play with teachers	Standing on post in line	
	Voicing dissatisfaction with teachers	Stopping the group on walk	

**Physical actions, Power-positive**

As I explained above, the action codes are sorted into two separate hierarchies: Positive or negative power and emotional or physical actions. In this section I will explain and give examples of each of the Action Codes and talk about why I decided each should be sorted in the way I have shown in the tables.

*Sitting alone* is just as it sounds, a child sitting alone by choice. I decided that sitting alone was a physical action instead of emotional primarily because the children who made the choice to be alone did so in a very physical way. This could be by isolating one's self with a tool or through placement within the forest area. I will discuss later in this chapter is Sally and her uses of the picnic table as shelter from the other children. Sally and her uses of the picnic table as shelter from the other children. Sally would often choose to sit alone under this table while at the forest.

*Interacting with nature* is the catch all of physical interactions with the environment that were seen only once or twice and alone seemed to have not strong individual pattern but on a whole seemed important to note. This included activities like picking apples, hitting a tree with stick, collecting pine needles and cones. This is in contrast to the actions that were also interactions with nature but were seen daily and by many different children.

*Climbing trees* was one of the most common positive-power physical actions I observed within the forest and on the playground. I defined climbing trees as either solo or with a friend(s) using your own physical body to ascend and descend the branches. This action was seen every day from many different children. Because of the amount of time the children spent in climbing trees, I felt it needed to be separated from the more general *interacting with nature* action code.

Another action that was seen daily was *walking on rocks*. Within the center of the Forest, large granite boulders had been placed which created an area of interest both visually and physically. The children took to balancing on these large boulders, walking back and forth across their uneven surfaces. I also defined that this code captured actions on these boulders that were either with friends or alone, and like the other stand-alone environmental action codes I chose to piece-out from the general nature code, was seen every day from many different children.

Tool creation was another common action that looked at the physical interaction with the environment. *Creating and using tools* was an action which included items on the child's self or items the child found in the Forest. Sticks, rocks, gloves, hats, and even snow were the most common tools. Children used the tools mostly as props in pretend play but sometimes were used to access higher areas within the Forester space that the children would have otherwise been unable to reach without some sort of physical help. For example, a child would procure a stick to dig more effectively in the frozen ground. Again this action was seen every day from many different children in some sort of physical way and could be with a group or alone.

*Helping friend out of tree* is an action code where one or more children would physically help pull another child out of a tree. The child being helped out the tree may or may not have asked the child verbally for help. The help could include a child climbing up to meet the stuck child and then helping that child climb down, holding up arms to help and other child down, or catching a friend who was jumping to the ground. This code was not seen every day but was seen often enough to note. It is possible that this action was completed everyday but that my physical placement in the Forest would have precluded me from seeing the action take place.

*Choosing who to walk with* is a physical action seen only on the start of the walk to and from the Forest. I decided that this was a physical action because of the specific use of a physical component by the children to make their wishes known. I determined that this code was using a physical action like grabbing hands or arms to choose a partner to walk with during this transition time. I found that children often used physical actions as a way to exercise choice in walking partners and that these actions seldom elicited a negative reaction from the child who was the choice. The physical choice did not always last for the duration of the walk: the children

would sometimes drop hands and arms and recede into walking in close proximity to each other instead.

*Holding hands with friend* was split from *choosing who to walk with* because often time children would begin holding hands after the walk began or during play. This type of hand-holding was most common among girls but was also seen in boy-girl and boy-boy groupings. I also saw that larger groups of children sometimes wandered the Forest holding hands in a large line as part of a game or just in their explorations. Because hand holding crossed through all social groups and most children, I decided it should be its own code.

### **Emotional actions, Power-positive**

Within the emotional action codes of power-positive, I found many required a child to take what I considered to be an emotional risk while they wielded their power. All but one of these actions had to do with play, either between children or between a child and teacher. For example, *Choosing friends* was the overarching, catch-all code for when I saw children at play together. The children were making the choice of their playmates regardless of what kind of play was being engaged upon. Alternately, *Leaving play* was determined to be when a child or children moved on to another activity, either alone or with a group. Both these codes represent positive power because I saw much more positive engagement, as I defined earlier, from the others in the field of play when these actions wielded powerful agency.

*Organizing play* and *Negotiating pretend drama* were first coded under a single action code I called “pretend play.” However, as it became clear that the give and take of power between the children was a constant, I found that some children were powerful in the start-up organization of giving out character roles and scenarios in pretend play to others and others were powerful in the negotiating aspects of the play unfolding, giving feedback to director of play



about scenario or character in a co-construction of the play. I will give examples of this sort of powerful play later within the vignette Dragons, Soldiers and Wizards.

*Directing conflict* and *Vocally stating needs* are unique emotional action because both include children and teachers. *Directing conflict* can be described as child acting as a mediator between children or between another child and teacher. I most often saw this occur between children but I felt that the few times I witnessed this occur with a teacher was important to this idea of wielding power by the children as it was a juxtaposition of the typical power dynamic in a classroom setting. However, since this occurred so infrequently, and with only a single child, I did not feel the teacher/child conflict direction warranted its own action code.

*Vocally stating needs* similarly included teachers and children. To be included in this action code, a child would tell a teacher or friend what he or she wanted or needed. These needs could be physical (go potty, wanting to leave, wanting to stay) or emotional (stating hurt feelings, saying where he or she wants to play) and I decided to be part of this code were successfully heard by the other party, even if the need was not immediately met.

The final three emotional power-positive codes all directly relate to child/teacher interactions. *Directing play with teachers* was determined to be times when a child was telling the teacher what her role in the play is or where the teacher needs to play with the child. This included group play and singular play dramas. *Initiating play with teachers* was simply asking a teacher to play. The teacher did not have to say yes to have this action be considered, only answer the child in a culturally accepted positive response. This could include an explanation of why the teacher needed to say on that patch of grass and that the child was welcome to wait with her until the teacher's duty was over. *Voicing dissatisfaction with teachers* may seem like it would naturally be a negative code but again, because I chose to describe the codes by the

reaction of the other party, I found that teacher reactions to this type of power-wielding was majority positive. This action is described as a child telling a teacher that she is playing wrong or that he or she does not like what the teacher is doing, either physical (where teacher is walking, standing) or emotional (talking to another child, saying no).

### **Physical action, Power-negative**

The large majority of the actions I classified as physical and power-negative have to do with either rule breaking or rule testing. Like the power-positive codes, the power-negative code also has to do with the reaction from the other party involved. In this case of these action codes, the vast majority had to do with either rule breaking or rule testing from the children.

*Tantruming-physical* is described as a the child showing unhappiness to a teacher or friends about a situation by crying and yelling, accompanied by using their body in some physical way. For example: kicking legs while lying on ground, pounding on ground with fists, or hitting teacher. I saw this action much more often when children wielded their power with teachers than friends but there were a few cases of physical tantrums within social groups.

*Hiding* was a very specific activity outside. When it is time to transition to walking at both the playground on the way to the Forest and at the Forest to walk back to school, instead of coming when the children are called, a child or children would run away and hide in another area of the space. Hiding could happen under the play equipment, in a tree, or behind an object. Later in the chapter, this action will be explored in detail in the Vignette, Hiding Away.

Within the scope of the walk to and from school, many action codes became focused around power on the walk itself. *Refusing to walk* could happen on either the walk to or from the Forest. Children would refuse to walk with the group, choosing to stop the group using varied methods including kicking off shoes, standing still while the rope was trying to move, and trying

to stay behind teacher. This approach to power was utilized for varied reasons but if one child refused to walk, it always stopped the group from moving forward for at least a little while. *Walking off sidewalk* also occurred on the walk to and from the Forest when children were required to stay on the pavement of the sidewalk. Sometimes children would walk off the sidewalk on a grassy area along the north side of the sidewalk, generally to get around slow moving children, or to move to another part of the line. Still this was not technically allowed by the classroom rules and the other children and teachers would correct the behavior. The final action found on the walk to and from the Forest is *Standing in gutter*. On the walk a child would go off the sidewalk and stand in the gutter. I only included instances in this code that were deliberate rule breaking, not children who accidentally stepped off the sidewalk and stood in the gutter for a moment. This was a major safety breach and the children who utilized this action to wield power seemed very deliberate in getting a teacher's attention.

Two of the actions were very space specific. *Running under trees* only happened at a single time on the walk to the Forest. On the way out of the playground at the school, children would run up a small hill next to the fence and under a pair of low growing crab-apple trees. The teachers could not see the children under the trees but more importantly, could not get to a child under the trees because of the low hanging branches. *Standing on post in line* also happened on the way out the gate on the way to the Forest. While in line to leave the school, there was a post for children to stand upon to reach the zip line during free outside play later in the day. As the post was cemented into the ground, even when the zip line was put up and out of reach, children would stand upon it instead of standing with the group waiting to leave. Sometimes it would be a single child, sometimes it would be two or three together standing on the post.

*Running away* is simply running away from the group or a teacher, most often seen on the walk to and from the Forest on the sidewalk but sometimes children would run away from a group of friends in the Forest when unhappy. Similarly, *Stopping the group on walk* is stopping a group in play by doing something like picking up sticks, standing in front of others so they could not walk or refusing to hold the rope to cross the road. This is different than in the in the line only, *Refusing to walk*.

### **Emotional actions, Power-negative**

The vast majority of emotional, power-negative actions encompass children using their voices as a way to wield their power with others. *Tantruming-nothing physical* is described as times when a child was showing unhappiness to a teacher or friends about a situation by only crying and yelling. This is different from the stand alone action *Crying when parent leaves*. This action would only occur at the time of child drop off at school from the parent while *Trantruming-nothing physical* could happen at any time occur on anytime during the walk. Children were dropped off on the playground at the school, on the walk to the Forest or at the Forest, depending on the parent's timing. When a child was dropped off by the parent, there would sometimes be crying for the parent to stay, met with a negative reaction from the parent.

Two codes deal directly with child actions focused on teachers; *Laughing at teacher instructions* and *Shouting instead of singing*. *Laughing at teacher instructions* included times when I witnessed a child or group of children laugh in response to a teacher giving the child or children directions or instructions. For example, the teacher would tell a child to stop running on the sidewalk and the child would laugh at the teacher and ignore the instructions forcing the teacher to escalate the situation and force compliance, often by a forced holding hand situation between the child and the teacher. *Shouting instead of singing* happened only on the playground,

the children and teachers sing a call and response song about the rules. A child or a group of children would yell their response part instead of sing. Often the teachers would then stop the group and begin again. I found that this did not decrease the instances of yelling as the child or children would continue on in the second try.

*Laughing at friends*, like *Laughing at Teacher* were times a child or children seemed to wield power by using laughter to ignore another. While playing with friends, a child would laugh at what a friend has done or said and the friend would react negatively to the laughing. For example, a child laughs at a friend's actions who is in a tree and the child in the tree would become angry. *Tattling* also had to do with peer relationships. I witnessed times a child or group of children would tell the teacher on another child, group of children or other teacher for not following what they perceive as the rules. The teachers actively discouraged this type of tattling while encouraging tattling about physical safety rules being broken so for this reason all actions coded with this action code were not safety related, only socially related.

Table 3

*Sub-themes matrix- powerlessness*

Powerlessness-positive		Powerlessness-negative	
Physical actions	Emotional actions	Physical actions	Emotional actions
Holding hands with teacher  Holding caterpillar rope  Walking on sidewalk  Forming line  Come when Follow is called	Asked to apologize  Asked to share  Being on teacher's schedule	Changing routine  Imposed rules  Sent to school while ill  Not properly dressed for weather by parents	Teachers not enforcing rules fairly between children  Teachers having different expectations of rules  Child removed from play  Play stopped by teacher for safety reasons

**Physical actions, Powerlessness-positive**

As defined earlier in this chapter, Powerless-positive are times that the child or children could not control the choices they made but had a culturally accepted as positive reaction. Like many of the physical positive and negative power action codes, the majority of the powerless codes also have to do with upholding rules of physical safety. *Holding hands with teacher* was coded if a child was not listening or needed support following the rules of safety, and a teacher would take that child's hand to scaffold of force rule adherence. For example, sometimes a child would run on the sidewalk several times and after verbal reminders had failed, the teacher would take the child's hand and have the child walk the rest of the way holding on to her.

*Holding caterpillar rope* and *Walking on sidewalk* are both action codes specific to the walk to and from the Forest. *Holding caterpillar rope* describes the bright green rope that the

children each were required to hold a loop of in order to cross the road. This action was completed twice each day one to and once from the Forest. *Walking on sidewalk* is an action that is based on a rule and because the majority of the children followed this rule happily and easily, I felt it worth attention in the coding process.

The final two powerless-positive physical action codes are both related to transitions in leaving the school and leaving the Forest. *Forming line* was a safety rule both on the playground to walk to the Forest and forming a line at the Forest to walk back to the school. Children would form a line as the Follow Song was sung at each location. *Come when Follow is called* actions would come directly before *Forming a line*. The Follow Song is a song, always the same tune and words, sung by the teachers on both the playground to transition children to stop play and line up and in the Forest to prompt children to stop their play and make a line at the designated place to walk back to the school.

### **Emotional actions, Powerlessness-positive**

This section is quite small compared to the other action code sorting. Within this label, codes are all about teacher-imposed rules and the way the children relate back to those rules. *Asked to apologize* either by teacher or a friend, a child was asked to apologize for an action and apology given easily and without argument. If it was a child who asked for the apology, the asker always told the asked what rule had been broken and why he or she had been wronged. Teachers where also fairly explicit about the reason for an apology. For teacher asked apologies, the teacher was most often acting as a proxy for another child who wanted or needed and apology. The same basic concepts afore mentioned are also part of the action code *Asked to share*. A would be child asked to share an object or a place by a teacher or a friend. Like *Asked*

*to apologize*, the teacher to child and child to child dynamic was very similar been the asker and the asked. Child would share easily and without argument.

*Being on teacher's schedule* is the largest of this section's action codes and the most common emotional, power-positive code I saw within the field note data. In this action, children were on the teacher's schedule and data was coded when changes in the rhythm that were easily tolerated by the children. This included sub-teachers without notice, staying at the Forest longer than normal, and staying at the playground longer than was standard. It is important to note that this was coded to small groups and individual children, not the whole class at one time.

### **Physical actions, Powerlessness-negative**

*Changing routine* is very similar the above powerlessness-positive *Being on teacher's schedule* in that any actions coded into this action were received in a negative way by the children. Also, unlike *Being on teacher's schedule*, I determined this was a physical action instead of an emotional action. This was primarily because the reactions I saw to changes in routine were very physical and often lead to actions explored in physical power-positive and negative. In this code, children were on the teacher's schedule and included any changes in the rhythm that were not easily tolerated by the children. This included sub-teachers without notice, staying within the Forest longer than normal, staying at the playground longer and other such actions. This was coded to small groups and individual children, not the whole class at one time. Similarly, *Imposed rules* can be described as times when the rules imposed by the teachers on the children were reacted to in a culturally perceived negatively physical way.

*Sent to school while ill* and *Not properly dressed for weather by parents* are both actions that the neither the teachers nor the children could control. They were both equally powerless in these situations. *Sent to school while ill* was just as it sounds: times when a child arrived at school ill and not able to function normally. This was actually more common than I expected,



happening at least once per week while I was on site. *Not properly dressed for weather by parents* equaled times when a child arrived at school improperly dressed for the cold or wet and had to borrow clothes or were cold. I will delve deeper in an explanation of this within a later vignette: You get what you get.

### **Emotional actions, Powerlessness-negative**

The vast majority of these codes within Powerlessness-negative were teacher/child interactions. *Teachers not enforcing rules fairly between children* was observed when teachers would sometimes overlook safety rule breaking by a child while enforcing the same rule strictly with another child or when one teacher would give a child permission to do something in the outdoor classroom but before the child could bring that to fruition, another teacher would stop the child and quote a rule.. For example, a child is walking on grass instead of sidewalk to get around another child and teacher ignores it, while physically removing another child from space in line for deliberately walking on grass.

This was also most always directly related to the second action code, and some actions were coded as both actions because it seemed that the single action was a convergence of two separate actions. *Teachers having different expectations of rules* was when one teacher would tell a child to do something and another teacher would tell the same child to stop, or vice-versa, leading to confusion and often tears from the child. An example of this is a time when one teacher tells a child he or she can go to an area of the Forest alone, while another teacher stops the child and send the child back to where the child came.

The final two codes in this section relate to teachers stepping into play without being asked by the children. *Child removed from play* was most often a conflict that the children seem they cannot solve themselves and has escalated into a fight, the teacher steps in and removes a child from the play to stop the conflict. The child who was removed was never happy about that

outcome. *Play stopped by teacher for safety reasons* occurred when a teacher would stop some sort of play, either a solo child or group of children, because play was considered unsafe by the rules. For example, a game would develop where children played pretend sword fighting with sticks and would become too rough, or a child would climb higher than the marker on the tall climbing tree, or a child would be throwing rocks.

As I explained, each of these sub-themes is found throughout the main themes and while I do not specifically address each subtheme by name in this analysis, this code sorting through creating a taxonomy helped to galvanize my thinking about power, privilege, and what this idea means to this culture of this single school. The taxonomy made visible the wide range of actions and interactions associated with choice and power in the outdoor classroom. It also brought to the fore what interactions existed between physical and emotional power, what actions were considered positive or negative within the culture, as well as how these actions interacted in the three big picture themes I constructed. Essentially, this analysis helped me to examine how actions in the outdoor classroom supported and defined power. To further examine the complexity of these interactions, I created a mind map of the codes, themes, and action codes (see Appendix 2). This mind map supported my analysis of the interactions among the coded actions when I analyzed them more holistically within the vignettes, which I turn to in the next section.

### **Using vignettes**

In this section I have collected stories of specific experiences I had and observed with the children at Forest School. These vignettes represent a snapshot of the experiences that are meant to illustrate authentically the experiences of the participants and should in no way be considered

an exhaustive list. The selection of the vignettes was deliberate because on careful reflection, each one was a very specific example of the big picture theme the story is being used to describe

### **Outdoor play as powerful actions: Risky play as an expression of power**

One of the themes that emerged was the idea that children making risky choices outdoors was a presentation of his or her power. Risks were both physical and emotional in nature. The risks were seen both alone and with other children. Whether the risks taken were perceived as positive or negative depended on the reactions of the other children or teachers.

#### **The nest bush**

Children in the forest were often engaged in tree climbing play, engaged in both as independent play and in groups, children could be found hanging, climbing and sometimes falling during this play. Of the children I saw in the tree climbing activities, I found that each seemed to use the tree climbing as a way to practice physical aptitude, face fear, and develop agency. I became interested in this tree climbing as power after an interaction I had with three children in the nest bush.

The nest bush is four feet tall and around six feet wide. It has the look of a weeping willow, with branches that fold over upon itself creating a sort of branch waterfall effect. The nest bush sits right at the front of the Forest and going around it to the main trail is both the entry and exit point when the walk reaches the forest.

The first time was part of an interaction with the nest bush, three children engaged me in their play. Ryan (m, age 4), Sarah (f, age 4), and Ronny (m, age 3) were all climbing up what is the back-side of the nest bush. Each was climbing to the top of what seemed to me a very

unstable climbing surface. Taking a cue from the teacher standing nearby, who while watching, did not interfere, I walked nearer and asked them about their play.

Each child was climbing the nest bush at this or her own pace. Ryan was very slowly and meticulously having to look down at his feet before deciding where to place it next. Climbing this bush seemed to be a challenge for Ryan as he slowly made his way to the top. As he rounded the top, I read the look upon his face as fear and asked him if I could help him down. Answering a strained yes, I moved to his area, and told him I was going to fly him down. I grasped Ryan under each arm and gently pulled him down to the ground. He enjoyed this flying and ran back around to the other side of the nest bush to climb it again.



**Figure 1: Photographic artifact “The Nest Bush.”**

As Sarah, a confident climber who did not seem to me to be fearful at all, rounded the top, I asked her if she would like to fly. Her answer, “No, I’m jumping.” Instead of jumping

from the top as I expected, Sarah moved herself down the front of the bush, sliding very carefully on her bottom with her legs bent in front of her. When she had reached her destination around the front, about two feet from the ground, she sprang off the bush with a strong push of her legs, landing on the ground with what I saw as a practiced maneuver.

Ronny also reached the top of the bush at the same time as Sarah. Seeming conflicted about if he wanted to jump or not, I asked him if he wanted to fly. Without taking a moment to mull it over, he answered fly. Using the same method as I had to hold Ryan, I flew Ronny down to the ground as well and he ran for the back of the bush again to climb again.

This interaction examines how taking the risk to climb the nest bush was at different levels for each of these three individual children. It seemed that by the space allowed to take this risk outdoors, the children were able to determine what level of risk each could tolerate. Feeling powerful to choose this risk seemed to lead to a strong sense of personal accountability in how the individual child wanted to leave the nest bush, either through their own physical power as Sarah did, or through my physical power as Ronny and Ryan chose to do.

The children of different physical abilities and risk tolerance were all able to use the same area of the forest to practice what it means to be powerful. Because each child had differing physical abilities, the choice to be flown down by me from the nest bush, or to jump without aid, allowed for that personal tolerance of risk to go un-judged. Being powerful in that moment, was about ascertaining and then having respected his or her own ability to tolerate the risk involved with leaving the nest bush.

### **Eating leaves**

I found that taking risks also often meant experimenting with natural objects in new ways to discover a new truth. While this sort of experimentation took place in several distinct ways,

the most common way by was through the children's' mouths. Children would often choose licking objects as a way to discover more about what the object's property were. This is illustrated by the interactions I observed with Omar and the frosty leaves.

The first time I was part of this exploration of the leaves, it was late fall. It was cold and frost covered the ground but there was not yet any snow on the ground. As we arrived at the Forest, Omar (m, age 3) stopped right at the edge of the grass and picked up a large maple leaf that had fallow from the tree. I observed him as he turned the leaf over in his gloved hand, and then he licks it.

*Eden: What are you doing?*

*Omar: It's covered in frost.*

*Eden: What does it taste like?*

*Omar: It tastes cold.*

*Eden: What does cold taste like?*

*Omar: Its tastes like soap.*

*Eden: Like soap?*

*Omar: Sometimes like bubble gum.*

Several days later, I again observe Omar licking leaves, only this time instead of engaging in this activity alone, Omar has been joined by Eve (f, age 4) and Emery (f, age 4) in the activity. I spend several minutes observing this group interacting with the leaves but not with each other. Each child was carefully inspecting the leaf before licking off the frost. If something caught the child's attention on the leaf with his or her tongue, he or she would again inspect it. Several times this inspection included re-licking the same surface. Once the leaf had been licked clean of its frost, the given child would drop the leaf and pick up another to begin again.

While licking leaves does not seem to be an action of power on the surface, what I observe in these two child and nature interactions could be seen as quite a risky and powerful choice. The mouth is a risky place to put anything into and couple that with the uncertainty of what the taste of the leaf, good or bad, these children were taking a great risk. The power in this action was both pushing themselves to take the risk physically but also the construction of the personal theory of the leaf. As Omar answered my questions about taste, we was constructing his own theory about the properties of the leaf, creating his own, newly minted truth.

### **Refusing to walk**

Several children often used their bodies in a risky way by refusing to walk either to or from the Forest. The child who employed this powerful statement of independence was Jasmine (f, age 4). In fact, I would say that our interactions around refusal to walk dominated our personal relationship. The first time I encountered this action from Jasmine was the early on in my time I was in the classroom. I had not yet established strong relationships with the children and I did not yet feel comfortable in what my role was within the classroom in the eyes of the children. On this day I was walking near the back of the group on the way back to the school after the play. The teacher, Ruth (middle aged), was nearby singing softly when suddenly Jasmine began to cry. Ruth, startled by the outburst, urgently asked the child what was wrong.

*Jasmine: I dropped my stick! Someone made me!*

*Ruth: Oh no! Well, you know sticks are not allowed on the walk. They must go in the bag (chuckles).*

*Jasmine: (begins to cry harder)*

At this point Jasmine stops dead in her tracks, refusing to walk further without her stick. Ruth is trying to get her to move forward but Jasmine seems resigned to not move without her

stick. After a few minutes of this with the group at a standstill, I observe other children becoming antsy and milling around. Ronny who is nearby begins to knock back and forth into his neighbors and is asked to stop by Nan (mid-20's). I decided to engage Jasmine, offering her my pen to hold instead of her stick. Jasmine accepts my offer and begin to walk again, so the group can continue on the way. She has essentially allowed the group to continue the walk back to school.

The refusal to walk is a risky move because the culture of the classroom is that the children must all walk as a group to be safe. It is a risky choice for Jasmine because she could be in trouble by the adults or have some sort of consequence. It is very powerful action to stop the entire group progress to the next goal because you are not happy about the current prospect on the walk.

Jasmine was not the only child who used stopping the walk as a way to make their personal power known to the adults in charge. Indeed, Aaron (m, age 3), Ryan (m, age 4), and Ronny (m, age 3) used this strategy to regain power often when dropped off by their parents in the morning. All three boys often entered the walk after it had begun, right after the group had left the gate for the front yard and each would refuse to walk once the parent had given over the charge of his care to the teachers. While each boy had different outcomes, their motivation seemed fixed; all three wanted their feelings of loss at this transition acknowledged by the teachers and parents. For Aaron, this meant having his dad walk with him, for Ryan this meant being carried by Ruth, and for Ronny this meant getting a last hug from his mom before she left.

### **Exploration as a power: choice in the outdoors as power**

While giving children the right to choose their own activities in the classroom is considered developmentally appropriate, the amount of space allowed for choice and lack of



teacher-initiated props in the outdoor classroom creates a unique environment for decision making for the children, bridging choice to powerful choice. The sheer size of the Forest area allows for children to make so many more choices about where their bodies should be in space and how each wants to spend their time in play. Indeed, even in a more structured activity like the walk to and from, and a more structured environment like the playground, I saw that the opportunities for choice to be very powerful for the children.

### **Dragons, soldiers, and wizards: choose your own drama**

The children spent a great deal of their time in the forest engaging in pretend play drama. Since there were no props as there are inside the indoor classroom to give the children inspiration, the games rose organically and often collided with each other. I often saw one group who were pretending one drama intersect for a time with another group playing a completely different drama and for a moment, a third, co-constructed drama would emerge before the groups would separate again by mutual choice. The children seemed to feel equality empowered by the space afforded by the Forest as well as by the opportunity to switch groups, combine groups, and reform new groups in this outdoor classroom.

Jamie (m, age 4), a sweet faced little boy with glasses, is standing under one of the big trees that is on the edge of the Forest and the grassy area, organizing a group of four boys into two equal groups of two. Jamie is pointing that one group should stand on the north side of the tree and the other group should stand on the south side of the tree, not looking at each other. The tree is a very large elm and has a trunk that can easily hide one group from the other.

As Jamie is continuing to tell the four boys what they are to be doing in this drama, another group of children, Marcus (m, age 4), Riley (m, age 3), and Jake (m, age 4) come running around another large elm tree, just to the east of the tree Jamie is directing his drama.

For a moment, the two groups negotiate but I am able to hear what is being said as I am not close enough by to catch it. After a short moment, Jamie opens his arms wide and begins to run, pretending to fly. The other four boys of Jamie's original group follow his lead, also spreading their arms out to use pretend wings. Marcus, Riley, and Jake watch for a moment and take off running into the Forest, away from the other group.

Jamie and his group spend some time running around the amply spaced trees in the grassy area. Another group of children, this one seemingly led by Eve (f, age 4), has entered the space where Jamie's group is flying. Jamie and Eve meet first and I am finally able to hear their conversation.

*Jamie yells: "We are all dragons!" He demonstrates how to be a dragon to the new group by growling and flapping his arms.*

*Eve, looking incredulous says- "No, no, I don't hear the roar."*

*Jamie tried the roar again but Eve still seems unconvinced. She takes the stick she is holding and instead casts a spell on Jamie, using a sound that sounds like air quickly escaping from her mouth. Jamie runs away from her in a large arc, making his roar dragon sound.*

At this point, Marcus's group re-emerges from the forest and they began to beat and kick at a large tree with their hands and feet, kung fu-style. They then join up with the other two groups. For a moment, a large group comprised of all the three separate groups has emerged and there is some negotiating going on about how the play will continue. It does not last long. Eve watches for a moment while Jamie and his group break away continuing their dragon play, not interested in having Marcus' group of soldiers become part of the play. Eve yells after Jamie, reminding him that her group is wizards.



**Figure 2: Photographic artifact “view of the forest from the north.”**

As the group of soldiers headed by Marcus leaves the area, one of the children from Eve’s group leaves with them. Eve looks after them for a moment and then turns back to her remaining member, Ryan. She turns her stick turned wand upon him and he slowly crumples to ground. As Ryan is on the ground, Eve continues to pretend to cast her spell, becoming louder and louder and Ryan stands back up. Jaime’s group runs by again, still flying dragons and Eve take the time to cast a spell upon this group again. One of the members of Jamie’s group stops and says something to Eve I cannot hear. She answers and her group follows him to Jaime’s group on the others side of the grassy area, creating a new, larger group of wizards and dragons.

This reconstruction of a single dramatic episode illustrates how the children felt empowered to make choices in their pretend play. While it can be argued, and I agree, that pretend play choice as powerful activity for the young child is not exclusive to the outdoor classroom, I believe what I saw illustrated in this drama is importantly free of the conflicts often seen in pretend play in the classroom. Since the children have a far larger space and because the teachers do not have a hand in the direction of the play through prop choice and placement, the children have a wide open canvas of creation.

Additionally, I believe the lack of fighting I experience in these pretend play situations increased the children's constructing agency and practicing methods of social engagement. Conflict did exist, and resolution is important to learn but what I discovered is that through the open space, the children had the freedom of choice to move to another group, create a new group, or leave the play all together. The children were not right on top of each other in a small, confined space. It was a fluid construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction process with children moving in out of the position of power, in the construction of their play.

**“This is my house.”**

As I stated previously, I was often drawn in to participate in the drama of the pretend play. I made a point of only following directions from the children instead of adding in my own imagined ideas because I wanted to record the children's participation experience more than I wanted to record my own. One game that I was part of quite a bit was what I called The House Game. This game predated my time in the classroom and was played in some form by many of the children. Each time the House Game was played, it was slightly different in format and approach with the only constant being the placement inside the Forest. The House Game always took place under a mass of bushes on the Forest's southern treed area. In order to be part of The

House Game, I was required to crawl under these bushes on my hands and knees and then be seated in a small, cleared area on the frozen ground. I never engaged in the House Game without being invited by a child but I was fortunate to be invited into the house often.



**Figure 3: Photographic artifact “The House.”**

On a sunny and cold day in early December, I stepped off the road and into the Forest. Nearby me are Jake (m, age 5) and Trevor (m, age 3).

*Jake: Do you want me to show you mine in Trevor’s house?*

*Eden: Sure.*

I walk with both Trevor and Jake through the whole woods area, going to the back bushes. Eve and Omar follow us through the forest. We make a line, snaking back through the wooded area as we make our way to the back. Together, we come to the back clump of bushes and Omar, Eve,

and Jake begin to climb through the bushes while I couch down to crawl through to the place where the house game is always played. Being much smaller than I am, the children can take different paths to the place under the bushes known as the House. I sit in the only place tall enough under the bushes for me to sit upright. Near me is Eve, making her way to another section under the bushes.

*Eve, seeing me sitting: I have a different house. The house is over here. I just like it, it's nice and warm. There is also a sunny place that can make you warm.*

I attempt to move to her spot, about six feet away from where I am currently seated. I am not very successful, so Eve moves closer to me, while remaining under a different bush than I am. Another child, Mary (f, age 4), comes over to where Eve is. Mary sits down next to where I'm sitting.

*Eve: This is my house.*

*Eve says this very matter-of-factly like she is stating something that everybody should already know. It has the feel of being informative and there is no meanness or exclusivity I can detect in her tone.*

*Mary: Can I come in?*

*Eve: Yes.*

Mary scoots to the other side of the bushes and sits next to where Juliet is sitting. I am still sitting rather close to them but under different bush. At this point Jen (f, age 5) and Monica (f, age 3) come climbing under the bushes to where we are.

*Eve: This is my house.*

*Jen: But we need shelter for little kitty.*

*Ede: Jen, are you little kitty?*

*Jen, flabbergasted: No! Monica! I'm little puppy!*

*Jen says this in a tone that suggests I should know that she is a puppy and Monica is a kitty.*

Jen, Monica, and Mary run out of the forest at this point, leaving me and Eve underneath the bushes alone. Eve comes from *her* house into *my* house and asks me about my notebook. I explained that I am taking notes on what the children are doing and how they are playing. Eve asks me if she can write in my notebook so I give her pen and she draws a picture in my notebook. It is a big, round-shaped figure with two arms. I asked her about the picture to describe it to me.

*Eve: He's big and he's not nice.*

Before I have a chance to ask more, Omar comes into the house. As he is walking up to where I am sitting, he finds a half branch sticking out of the ground. He begins to kick it back and forth. As he does this, the branch makes us crazy, strange vibration.

*Omar: It's a tornado.*

*Eve: Omar, can I try it?*

*Omar: Yep.*

*Eve and Omar essentially change places with Eve going to my right side and Omar going to my left.*

*Eve, pushing the branch back and forth with her hands: I'm making a fire for us. This is my house.*

Again, it is to be understood that Eve is not trying to be exclusive when she says this is my house. Eve sounds so much like she is just being informative.

Marcus then appears behind the stick that Omar called a tornado and Eve called a fire.

*Eve, to Marcus: Do you want to come in?*

*Marcus: Yes, what are you doing?*

I get the impression that Marcus is talking to me and not to Eve because he is looking at me when he speaks. After a moment, Eve does not answer so I do.

*Eden: Omar was exploring the branch, the way it moves and then Eve explored it and that's about it.*

*Eve: Do you want to come in?*

Marcus does not answer but he comes through under the brush to where we are sitting. Monica and Jen reappear on left side, being cats and dogs complete with cat and dog sounds of meows and barks.

*Eve, to Monica and Jen: Do you want to rest your paws?*

*Jen, in a doggie sounding voice: Yes please.*

*Marcus, exploring the stick: This stick is magic. It has candy.*

We hear the Follow song being called at the same time that Omar has come through and begun climbing the bush.

*Omar: Look at me!*

*Eden: I need help getting out of this house.*

*Eve: No, you have to stay in here all day.*

*Eden: Oh, I hear Miss Star singing follow and I follow the rules so I'm going.*

I make my way out of the forest and Marcus and Eve follow me out.

The drama above unfolded over the course of the entire time the children play in the Forest, about 40 minutes. The way that the children moved in and out of the House area, co-constructing the reality of the House and what the House represented to each child and the way that Eve felt the confidence to state to each friend that it was “her house” gives the impression



that these children feel completely empowered by the environment to facilitate their own choices of where to be in the Forest, how to play in the Forest, and who to play with in the Forest.

### **Being alone by choice**

Playing alone is culturally seen as only something a so called anti-social child would choose to engage in. In my observations of the classroom, the culture of the classroom was such that children who chose to play alone were given that freedom and the teachers would allow the child to remain alone if he or she wished it. One child, Sally (f, age 3), would more often than not, find a space that was near others but not near enough that the other children would constantly engage her. Often found sitting alone under the steel picnic table and singing softly to herself, I came to see Sally as an observer, not a loner, constructing her own agency in a unique way.



**Figure 4: Photographic artifact “Sally’s picnic table.”**

One sunny and cold winter morning, I found myself standing alone on the western side of the Forest. All the children except for Sally were climbing through the treed area in quite a noisy fashion. Over my left shoulder, I was aware of Sally singing *Old McDonald* softly to herself so I turned and slowly began to walk near her. As I closed the gap to about six feet away, her singing stopped and so did I. I stood there a moment, facing away from Sally. After about a minute, when her singing did not begin again, I took a few steps away from the table, back in the direction I had come. Sally began to sing again and I knew I had not been what she considered a suitable distance way, about 10 feet from her.

From the north side of the treed area, Jasmine and Eve burst forth into the grassy area, making their presence known through the loud giggling. Running and quickly closing in on Sally’s table, I heard Sally stop singing again. I turned to watch the trio. Jasmine was sticking

her head between the table top and the table seat, asking Sally if they could play with her. Sally remained silent but looked up Jasmine with an expression I read as wonder and curiosity. Eve took a seat at the table, took off a glove, and began to use her right index finger to draw on the table's frosty top.

Not receiving any sort of answer from Sally, Jasmine joins Eve to draw on the table but instead of using her fingers, she uses a stick she has found on the ground. Jasmine seems to quickly tire of the drawing because she begins to use the stick to drum on the table top. The drumming makes a dull thudding noise and Sally begins to peek out from under the table to see what the noise is. Jasmine throws the stick away from her and takes up running to the other side of the treed area of the forest. After a moment, Eve follows her, Sally watching them leave. When alone again, Sally crawled out from under the table and procured the stick Jasmine has been using and brings it back to her spot under the table. I hear her soft voice begin *Old McDonald* again, this time using the stick to lightly bang the table seat in front of her face.

Sally seems to be playing with others in her own way. She is mostly alone by choice in this episode but what I understand about this action is that it is indeed a choice. She could have easily entered Jasmine's and Eve's play. Jasmine and Eve gave her three very clear opportunities to join them. When they entered her space and talked to her, when they sat at the table playing in the frost, and in the space where Jasmine left and Eve stayed with her. Instead, Sally decided she would stay under her table, using her power to make choices for herself.

### **Hiding away**

There was one observation moment where I felt an incredible amount of anxiety about the safety of a child. This was the day that Ronny and Jasmine were missing at the child count after the rest of the group had formed the line to walk back to the school. As we were standing in line, the teachers each were doing a count of the children and all were coming up two short.

Margret asked Ruth who was missing. Ruth had the list of children written a small piece of white paper.

After a moment of Ruth looking back and forth between the paper and the children, she announces that is it Ronny and Jasmine. The teachers seem worried but are not allowing the children to see that they are worried. Nan says, "I saw them over by the Crystal Cove when I got here" so Margret (mid-20's), Star (mid-30's), and Nan scatter around the forest are looking for the two children. The children in line are becoming agitated and starting to lose patience in the waiting. Some are dropping their rope loops and some rough play is breaking out, with children pushing and pulling each other. Star reminds the children to be kind to each other and that is will not be a long wait.

After just a minute of looking, Nan yells that she has found the two children up a tree and the three of them appear around the west corner of the forest. Ronny and Jasmine have huge grins on their faces as they come up and take a loop of the caterpillar to walk back. As we walk back, I discussed this incident with Nan and she tells me she believes these two chose not to join the line on purpose.

The next day, at the same time, Ronny is again missing, this time with a different child. The two of them are discovered easily in the same place but this time instead of the two of them coming back and taking a loop, Ruth holds Ronny's hand and discusses why his running off is unsafe and scary. He listens but does not seem happy about being at the back of the line holding his teacher's hand. He is frowning.

The next day I was also observing and at the moment the Follow song is called, Nan has placed herself near Ronny and as he begins to turn and run, she stops him and reminds him where is he is supposed to go. Surprisingly to me, Ronny just smiles and heads straight to the

line, seemingly like he is content with his testing of his teachers and their interest in his safety going back to school.

What seems to be a simple rule testing approach by Ronny is actually a complex power-sharing arrangement between the teachers and the child. Because Ronny was given an opportunity to show his power through choosing to hide from the teachers twice, the third time he tried this out and was thwarted, he did not feel powerless. He had shown the teachers he was powerful enough to make this choice and stop the walk and that seemed to be his goal, not to actually hide and go missing.

### **Powerlessness in young children's experiences: what it means to be little in the big outdoors**

For young children, powerlessness is essentially a part of each of the children's daily life. Young children are taken from place to place, fed food not of their choice, and told when to sleep and wake every day. Children have rules imposed upon their lives to keep them safe and healthy. The experience at Forest Preschool was no different in many respects. The children were on the teacher's big picture plan at all times.

### **The gorilla in the room**

As much as I saw children using their own power to make choices in their play, the fact remains that the rhythm and approach to the day remains squarely in the hands of those adults who hold power over the children's lives. Going on the morning walk was inherently not something children had the power to change. Indeed, I witness many times when children would have made the choice to stay on the playground, explore something on the sidewalk, or remain longer in the Forest had the choice been theirs to make. The reality was that the teachers were

the keepers of the timing and creators of the rules. While the teachers were, for the most part, empathic and understanding of the children, the rules and timing generally seemed created without the input of the children.

While the times I witness a teacher strip a child of his or her power were not many, I did witness a few instances of a teachers dominating a child in what I perceived as a disempowering way. This is illustrated by the story Omar and sledding. It is late January, the second time on the Moring Walk that there has been enough snow to sled down the small hill that leads from the treed area of the Forest to the grassy area.

### **A child, a sled, and a teacher**

Omar is standing at the bottom the hill with his back to all the children sledding. He holds a round, shiny blue plastic sled in his hand. Jake (m, age 4) sleds right into Omar's legs and he falls backward on top of Jake so that he is laying back to back with Jake on his tummy on the sled and Omar on Jake's back. They both laugh.

Omar gets up and seems to decide to go up to the top of the hill. Jake follows Omar to the top of the hill and a game between Omar and Jake emerges. The two boys keep going back up to the top of the hill and trying to crash into each other on their own sleds as they slide down. They are able to do this a couple times before somebody gets hurt. Omar comes sledding down and as he is trying to crash into Jake actually crashes into Jen, who is coming down nearby.

*Omar: Owie! I bonked my nose.*

*Jen comes over and says: How about we go together?*

*Omar: Okay*

Omar and Jen go back up the hill they slide down together on a single sled with Jen in the front and Omar holding onto to her around her middle. Again, they go back up again they slide back down. Jen grabs a spare sled so both her and Omar are holding their own sleds.

*Jen: How about this, how about I hold on?*

Omar does not answer but he follows Jen on up the hill. They run back up to the top of the hill this time, Omar on his own sled and Jen on her own sled with Jen holding onto Omar's sled, making a kind of two person sled train. The two of them side down the hill this way. Jake watches from the top of the hill.



**Figure 5: Photographic artifact “The Sledding Hill” viewed in summer**

Omar and Jen go back up to the top and this time Jake is in on the sled train so this time when they go down, there are three in a line like a big long train. They are laughing like crazy when they get to the bottom.

*Jake: Let's go again!*

At this point, without warning Miss Star comes over and takes Omar's sled out of his hands as he is turning to follow Jen and Jake back to the top of the hill.

*Miss Star: Omar, it's time to share. Liam needs a turn.*

Seemingly shocked by the sudden removal of his sled, Omar drops down in the middle of the hill crying then runs away to a nearby tree, away from the hill where he sits, still crying. He is alone. Jen and Jake continue to stand in the middle of the hill for a short time and then break away from each other, walking back up to the top of the hill separately. The game has abruptly been ended.

In this narrative, Miss Star used her power as the adult in charge to take away Omar's sled. Omar was very engaged in the play at the time. Being a rather solitary child, Omar is rarely seen playing with other children in co-constructed games. This was one of only a handful of times I encountered Omar playing with another child in an interactive way. Omar was feeling real power in this game until Miss Star abruptly stripped him of his agency when she took his sled.

Later, on the walk back to the school, I asked Miss Star why she made the choice to take Omar's sled. She replied that he has a difficult time sharing the sleds and he had had a long turn already. I pressed, asking her if she realized he was playing a game with other children and she answered she was not aware, she thought he was just sledding alone. I got the impression that Miss Star was focused on teaching Omar to share the sleds without taking into account the entire social situation at that moment. Even though her dominance over him was not planned, and her



intentions were to help him learn a new social skill, the way Miss Star approached this lesson ended up reducing Omar's feeling of power over himself and the teacher's lesson was lost.

### **Following the Rules**

Creating and enforcing rules were both squarely within the realm of the teachers' power. This is one of the few spaces where I did not see that give and take of power between adults and children. The rules that the teachers had were created by and enforced by the teachers only, no child input was taken. The children were told of the rules, and scaffolded through the following of these rules through both physical and verbal cues. Creating and enforcing the rules was the domain of the teachers only. The best example of the how the rules were scaffolded was the use of the Caterpillar Rope to keep the children in line while crossing the busy street.

The Caterpillar Rope is a bright green, climbing rope which contained about 30 child sized loops tied within it. Each walk to and away from the Forest, the children would choose a loop to hold and would then be attached to the teachers in a long line of tiny bodies as the road was crossed. The teachers would also sing a song called the Chug, Chug Choo-choo Song to let the children know that the Caterpillar line was beginning to move. Then, the train of children would make their way across the road.

In my pilot study, I found that the Caterpillar Rope was a place where power struggles between teachers and children would often occur. However, the opposite was true in this study. Here, I discovered that the children viewed the Caterpillar Rope to be a powerlessness-positive activity. The children did not have any power in this situation, each had to hold the rope and cross the road as a group, but neither did I see that the children rejected this powerlessness in a negative way. The teachers' responsibility was to keep the children safe when they were not able to make safe choices themselves.

### **“You get what you get.”**

The one place I found the children to be the most powerless in their walk was in the choice of what they were wearing that day. Children often came to school improperly attired by their parents. I would often see girls dropped off on the playground in a dress, bare-legged even on the coldest days and children were often missing gloves and hats. This would lead to a spiral of powerlessness in the classroom as the children would be forced into borrowed items of clothing by the teachers. This would often include mismatches gloves, snow pants that were too big or too small, or in colors that the child did not want to wear.

The worst examples of this were the times children were dropped off late while we were already at the Forest. One time that particularly illustrates this powerlessness was a snowy, very cold day in January when Jen’s dad quickly dropped her off in nothing but a light fleece jacket. Being away from the school, she could not borrow a warmer coat, a hat, snow pants, and boots so was forced to remain outside until the class returned to the school. Jen, normally a very social and active child, spent the time huddled up next to Miss Margret until the Follow Song was called.

### **Overview of Chapter 4**

In this chapter, I discussed the coded themes to examine power, choice in outdoor play, and how all these concepts interlock in the child’s experience outdoors. The thematic analysis made visible a wide array of power positive and power negative actions and the dynamic the children used to express that power. I then chose selected vignettes explaining and describing experiences I had with the children and teachers. The stories included here sought to clarify the role of the big picture themes, sub-themes, and actions codes in the process of responding to my research questions. These human-centered descriptions increase an awareness and understanding

of the unique experiences of powerful choice in the classroom and how the outdoor plays cape supports this stage of child development. In chapter 5, I will continue this exploration in reference to current research, including what I believe future implications of this research might be and my anticipated future directions for further study.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

For the 20 weeks I spent as a participant observer in Forest Preschool, I was able to be part of an incredibly complex cultural web of co-constructed norms. Originally, my goal for this research was to provide a voice for young children and what it was like to be in a school where a great deal of the day was spent put of doors in free-play. Instead, I found children and teachers with a complex tug of war around what it was to be in charge of one's own destiny in this classroom culture. I do not use the term destiny lightly or ironically. Indeed, what I believe I saw was something as innate and human as free-will being fulfilled by the children and in contrary, sometimes being inadvertently squelched by the teachers. I believe that this is in line with what Lee and Walsh (2005) learned about teacher attitudes in classroom practice. The concept of fostering independence in the children took a back seat to the perceived health and safety needs, even if the teachers themselves did not want choice to be taken from the children.

I found that the outdoor forest area was the ideal environment for me to explore these questions around power and what it means to be a powerful child because of what might be considered by some teachers, lack of supervision by the adults. Because the forest area was so large and it was nearly impossible for the teachers to see all the children all the time, the children were able to make choices about where they wanted to be in physical space as well as be able to remove themselves from situations with other children that they did not want to be part of, the

children could use the space to either withdraw or participate (Martin, 2004; Skånfors, Löfdahl, & Hägglund, 2009). While this could have had negative implications around safety, I did not witness anything that I would say was overly dangerous to the children, physically and when rules were broken around safety, teacher would intervene. Seemingly taking a cue from Bandura, just by placing these children within such a space, the teachers implicitly seemed to say to the children, “Go. Play. We trust you” (Martin, 2004).

When reflecting on my question, “How do children wield their power in the outdoors?” I was most surprised to find that it was not physical choices of risk that showed up the most in the classroom with the children. Even those times where the physical seemed on the forefront of the activity, the emotional choices being made were just under the surface, sometimes seemingly hidden from my adult eye by some sort of physical actions (Martin, 2004). This was in contrast to what I found in my pilot study, where physical risk was the most likely used risk strategy utilized by the children. It was not until I had a chance to re-read and re-code my field notes that the objectives of emotional power negotiation being clear to me. Humans are emotional beings and children, being at an early stage of emotional development, are still trying to puzzle out what they need to know about themselves (Johansson, 2009). I did see children who were receptive to social cues and were able to model power in a productive way for their peers, just as I found in the literature (Crain, 1997, Wilson, 1995). This came out in a sort of power sharing, a power give and take. The children who most often coordinated play for a group, represented in the stories of Eve and Ronny, were also most adept at reading the other children. By giving up their power these coordinators would openly take in the other child’s comments on the current direction of play, and make adjustments to plot and character development. I felt as if I was

actually watching agency in these children develop as each made choices and wielded power within both the cultural and physical environment (Martin, 2004).

This was the only question that I believe interacted with all the big picture themes. Children would wield power only to find that he or she was suddenly inside a situation that was out of their control. Often children would attempt to wield power with both children and adults in the same situation which might lead to that power being inadvertently stripped away by a teacher and given to another child. As I have said, I do not believe that the teachers did this lightly, and most of the times I witnessed this action take place it was because the child had crossed a line into rule breaking while wielding power.

When it comes to the situations children were powerless to change, these were most often times when rules were being enforced by adults. I have found in my career as a preschool teacher and then as an instructor for pre-service teachers, that anxiety over harming children can take over and begin to rule the culture of the classroom. The balance that I saw in most of my observations generally appeared purposeful. For the most part, I found the teachers to be cognizant about their role in the children's choices and safety when purposely making decisions to intervene (Lee and Walsh, 2005). The teachers would give the children choices and that would keep the child's power firmly intact. That said, I do not believe the teachers were aware of the power dynamic that existed between them and the children, or that any sort of power was present between the children. There was also an interesting power dynamic between the teachers, not a tug of war per se, but more of a different understanding of the classroom rules. Children sometimes were subjected to powerlessness because of this communication gap between the adults in power.

The truth is that young children do not yet have the cognitive ability to be completely in control of their lives. If young children could keep themselves safe, develop physically and emotionally to be happy healthy adults without any guidance, then parents and caregivers would not be required (Boyer, 2012; Martin, 2012). Children are children and to a certain extent must learn these skills with the scaffolding of adults who care. Allowing children to feel their power does not mean that the children are capable of being in charge of their destiny 100% of the time during 100% of their activities. My discovery is directly in line with what O'Brien (2009) discovered in her study of the British Forest Preschools who had similar results.

Because of this developmental roadblock for the children, there were inevitably times where children and teachers engaged in what I considered to be a power-struggle. The power-struggle has a very negative connotation in the greater culture and is known by parents of children all over the world (Boyer, 2012). The majority of the power struggles I witness at Forest Preschool were around the rhythm of the morning and those times of the day that the children could not change. Wearing warm clothes, walking on the sidewalk, and coming when called to leave the Forest, coming to the fence to start the walk, and just walking were all times I witnessed power struggles emerge between teachers and children.

For the most part, the teachers were able to dispel the struggle quickly and nearly always without giving up their power to the child in ways that might be considered by developmental experts to be giving in. Instead, the teacher was kind but firm on the topic of the power struggle by giving the child some sense of power in another space at the time. Developmentally, these power struggles are a learning experience for the child who is learning about his or her limits and norms within the culture. Indeed wielding power could be considered both intra and interpersonal in nature because of the way children approached their own power in relationship

to themselves and to their friends (Gardner, 1999). In a preschool setting, this is the norms of the classroom which are generally reflective of the norms in the greater culture (Martin, 2012). As illustrated in the Caterpillar rope example, the teacher ultimately owes it to the child to keep her or him safe, warm, and happy so that she or he can be given the opportunity to explore his or her power in a more developmentally appropriate manner (Martin, 2012).

There were times where teachers wielded their power in a way that seemed contrary to their overall classroom management strategy. The time with Omar and his sled was an example of this sort of forced-power upon the child without explanation of power difference to another area. The layers of power in these sorts of interactions were multiple. The stripping of the Omar's power was complete and seemed without thought. Though Miss Star did have a strategy in mind at the time, the actual implementation of this lesson was poorly executed and thus deeply hurt Omar.

When reflecting on what it means to powerful in this group of children, the dynamic is multi-layered and infinitely complex. Being powerful did not mean that children were dictators or that they were the leader. Being powerful seemed to be a space that children moved in and out of, a negation of choice in their play. I was really fascinated by the interaction between positive-power and negative-power in the classroom. Behaviors that have been considered negative in other research like choosing to be alone or leaving play in process (Newton, 2011), I found had a positive spin in this specific classroom.

Power seems to be a way children learned social cues in this classroom. What I saw was that the children who were most efficient at navigating the complex social structure of the classroom were also the ones I most often saw effectively wielding their power. These young ones often had positive-power reactions from peers and teachers. This finding is reinforced by

the work of Crain (1997) and, Wilson (1995), both found similar results in their study of peer to peer social play.

Children's ideas of what is powerful, both positive and negative, seemed to shift, depending on the social cues. Because the layers of power in the play was so complex, I found that the child's perceptions of what it meant to be powerful were very fluid in nature. Just as Warming (2011) advocates for researchers to always keep in mind when doing ethnographic work with young children, the children are still constructing what they believe to be their individual truths. As seen in the story of Eve and the House Game, she moved through her power and what it means to be powerful in different cycles. In some interactions, being powerful meant stating her intention, other it meant allowing another to join in her play, and still in another interaction powerfulness was negotiating for change in her play with others. In all her interactions, the reactions were all positive. I do wonder what would have happened should the shift in power to the other child have been to answer 'no' to her question for shifting but since I did not witness any such shift, I feel unable to judge.

### **Reflection of Process and Limitations**

I feel that the largest limitation for me was the time constraint. I would have liked to have started my observations when the school year began but the teachers wanted to have some time to be a class before I began. I also wish I had been able to utilize videotape and audio recording but the natural approach to schooling and curriculum Forest School implements, meant technology in the classroom is not something the teachers felt comfortable with. The use of the notebook did give me less time to write detail and having to make a choice to record action versus take dictation of dialog means I certainly missed nuances in interactions. I also was limited by the time the children spent out on the walk and in the Forest. There were times when



interesting interactions were cut short and not allowed to play to fruition because the time in the Forest was ended and the children were called to walk back to the school.

Similarly, this school is quite small and the teachers all dedicated to using the outdoors as a space for learning. Not being in a traditional, academic preschool program, I did not get another perspective of what it means for a child to be powerful and powerless outdoors. This study is a snapshot of the time in a certain school in a certain space.

From a researcher stance, my role as a participant observer was perfect for this study. I felt fortunate to be included in so much of the children's play and be given so many explanations about what they were doing and what they were thinking while in the moment. I also was fortunate to have such a strong rapport with the teachers. Without knowing each of these women well, I would not have felt as welcomed into the classroom space as I was from the first day. Relationship building is a fundamental part of trust, in both teaching and learning and I feel truly fortunate to have been so openly welcomed.

Additionally, the parents of the focus children were excited and open to providing me additional information about their child. This partnership with these parents came to be irreplaceable when I was constructing the personal narratives for these children. I learned more about each child's experiences outside the classroom and how these experiences have shaped the little person I knew inside the classroom. These parents seemed to trust me greatly with this intimate knowledge of their children, their families, and their history.

## **Implications**

One of the most interesting aspects of this study was the use of the space provided outdoors by the children to explore their power. Even those children who seemed shy and withdrawn, on more careful examination, also seemed to be using their own power to make

choices to be alone, leave play in progress, and explore the forest in his or her own manner. The silent power I saw in Sally's choice to play alone and sing to herself, the matter-of-fact power I came to love in Eve's direct yet kind explanations of the play, and finally, the sadness and bewilderment from Omar when his power was taken from him in an instant on that sledding hill all are examples of how the outdoor forest facilitated the children's construction of self.

As mentioned in the literature review, the outdoors can be a wonderful place for children to explore who they are as people and make choices that help them understand their place within the culture. Children who are given the opportunity to play are building their brain in a way that is impossible to replicate in an indoor classroom environment (Berger & Lahad, 2009). Because of the current understanding of appropriate practice for early childhood teachers, I can see a substantive conversation could be started using this research as a jumping-off point. The construction of power and how that relates to the child's sense of self and how that self interacts with a culture should be addressed.

For me, I am most concerned with how this research could influence the creation of developmentally appropriate practices in preschool curriculum. As it is now, this concept of young children being powerful is looked upon as a teacher-presented perception. Power is thought of as something that is given to children in the classroom not as something children should have as a human right. Children are often not allowed much power within the context of the classroom. I believe that this lack of a conversation about power and the young child's right to wield such power is a glaring hole in Developmentally Appropriate Practice. Indeed, within the NAEYC Position Statement (2009) any reference to power and the child's right to have his or her own power is not explicitly stated. The closest the document comes is to state on page 14, "Always mentally active in seeking to understand the world around them, children learn in a

variety of ways” (2009). There is no expressly defined right to control of one’s body and one’s mind in the DAP statement nor a specific nudge to teachers for outdoor freedom. The use of the outdoors as a scaffold to power may very well be a way to metaphorically kill two birds with one stone.

By exploring a classroom culture where the outdoor classroom was not a place of injury and teacher anxiety, my hope is that teachers who are inspired by many different approaches to education will take up the mantle and take their children outside to play every day and for a longer period of time. At this point, multiple studies have shown that children need nature to evolve into the best humans they can be. Mauler (2009) specifically showed that teachers believed that this sort of direct contact with nature improved student social and emotional health in their classrooms. The Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and Waldorf approaches to early education all rely on the environment to act as the “third teacher” to the children (Edwards, 2002). In all three highly successful educational approaches, outdoor play is highly valued and made a priority (Edwards, 2002).

As explored within the literature review, the Biophilia hypothesis has been used by Louv (2007) and others to explain why nature is needed by children to develop. Other related studies have explored Biophilia as a context for outdoor planning and play spaces (Delavari, Edalat & Abdi, 2010). This has become a jumping off point of research for how technology is changing how children interact with nature, possibly creating children who fear the outdoors and what can be done to stop this possible bio-evolutionary change (Kahn, Severson, & Ruckert, 2009). This shift is another way indoor-only play strips the power from the child in the classroom culture. Changing the conversation from outdoor play being an ‘extra’ to being a right or the child will work toward increasing the opportunities for children to manage their power and empowerment

with each other and with their teachers in early childhood programs throughout the nation. My hope is that this study will begin the conversation and others will begin to take an interest in the topic and bring about some policy statements and statements of the rights of the child to be powerful in an outdoor environment.

It is also entirely possible that the reasons behind the power dynamic in this specific classroom is because the parents of the children in this study already valued the outdoors so the children were comfortable being outside before they reached the preschool classroom. All the focus children parents who responded to the survey had something to say about the use of outdoor play being a deciding factor for coming to the school for preschool. Looking at parental attitudes about childhood, outdoor play, power, and risk would be equally beneficial and informative to teachers and administrators of early childhood education.

I hope this study will encourage teachers to reflect on their practice in the classroom and think about the way their rules and norms are constructed. Self-reflection and reflective practices by teachers are both considered best practice in early education (NAEYC, 2009). While methods of reflection vary from storytelling (Wisneski, 2000) to journaling and self-evaluation (McFarland & Saunders, 2009) to peer collaboration and sharing (NAEYC, 2009) reflective work for teachers is a way for teachers to examine the *why* of the teaching along with the ubiquitous *how*. Rules are required in all classrooms and all cultures have co-constructed norms, but how these norms are used can influence the child's concept of self as a powerful individual. I believe this approach should be part of the teacher's inner reflective practice while creating these rituals and norms. It is my hope what teachers take away from this study just how capable and rich the inner life of young children can be and that while these children have a reputation as

being fragile and incapable they are, in fact, working hard to figure out who they are as individuals, what they like as people, and how to manage themselves in their culture.

### **Conclusion and Future Direction**

This study focused on how the outdoor classroom influenced the co-creating of classroom cultural norms of what it means for children to feel powerful, how they wield their power, and what is powerlessness. I found that children used the space of the outdoors to take risks and experiment with their power, both emotionally and physically. I found that rules, though required in an early childhood context, were usually constructed with the children's safety in mind by the teachers. This is how laws often work for adults. The idea of the greater good can lead to efforts at gun control, the Federal Drug Administration deeming products unsafe, regulations by the federal government on drinking age as well as other impositions like seatbelt laws or speed limits on the highway. As is seen in the current debate over gun control, there is a delicate balance between public safety and individual liberty. Just like teachers should do with children, elected officials should take into account the opinions of the people who their rules will impact and carefully walk the line between safety and personal liberty. There are times when cultural concepts of safety change, for example, when interstate speed limits were raised, in some areas to 85MPH (Griffin, 2013). These sort of cultural shifts around what it means to keep our youngest children safe can also shift.

It is impossible for this study to make judgments about other classroom approaches or environments. However, in their study of a single preschool class, Gambino, Davis, and Rowntree (2009) observed that the early childhood field work in an Australian forest translated benefits for developing abstractions to a traditional closed classroom environment. The children seemed to become more empathetic with each other as they learned the plight of the endangered

animal, the bilby. By taking them out of doors to learn, it was possible for these children to exhibit more caring, to become better stewards of both their environments earth and each other's feelings inside the classroom (Gambino, Davis, & Rowntree, 2009). Though the Gambino, Davis, and Rowntree (2009) research was looking at a very specific classroom project, I find parallels between the concepts of developed empathy through the outdoor lesson and the give and take of power between children I found in this study.

Additional studies should be made in classrooms where children do not have access to open spaces to play and instead are confined to a playground on the schools site. One study out of Norway, sought to quantify the intensity and frequency of children's play on a traditional, closed ended playground versus a natural play scape over three days. Storli and Hagen (2010) report that there was no statistical difference in the children's play but the researchers note that this may have had as much to do with weather differences on the days spent outdoors (one in summer, one in winter, one on spring) than the playground environment itself. Because this study was statistically based, it lacked the voice of the children which could have explained further why the children chose to play in these specific ways. Also, I would question whether having different groups of children who are used to their playground, either as traditional or natural spaces, can serve as a good comparison. I would like to know how children from a traditional playground would react in their play if moved to a natural play scape and how their compatriots would react to being moved from the Forest to a traditional playground.

Ideally, I am interested in looking at further intersections of power and the outdoor classroom. In the future, my plan is to address a mixed methods design, combining a narrative ethnography approach with proven developmental continuums. I am interested to learn the links between outdoor play, expression of power, and developmental milestones. My reason for

switching to a mixed approach from a fully qualitative design for further research is because I wish to expand the study for possible generalization while maintaining the voices of the children's experiences within the body of work.

Finally, study should be made into how power can be used to influence Developmentally Appropriate Practice construction in an early schooling classroom. There has been some research looking at the teacher's role in pretend play and how that influences the power dynamic between teacher and student. Logue and Detour (2001) did a small scale inquiry of how teachers are most impactful in the classroom through pretend play. Their findings that teacher support the play and not direct it lead to more complex and powerful dramas imply that teachers should be looking at ways to support the feelings of powerfulness in their students. A more complete understanding of how these topics weave together will help create an paradigm shift where teachers, administrators, and policy makers can better understand and modify current practices to adapt to the future young child's needs.

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APPENDIX 1: FOCUS CHILD PARENTAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Mom or dad completing this form?

- mom
- dad

2. Child's first name

3. Child's Birthdate

4. What do you consider you family's economic level?

- working class
- middle class
- upper middle class
- wealthy
- at poverty line or below

5. Parent's marital status?

- married
- partnered
- separated, were married
- separated, never married
- single parent family, no partner

6. Any Siblings? If yes, sex and age?

7. Why did you choose RSWS for your child's early education needs?

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8. How would you describe your child's personality?

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9. Does your child have any quirks that you consider a favorite? If yes, please describe.

An empty text input field with a light gray border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom. The field is currently empty.

10. Has your child had any developmental, medical, or social challenges? If yes, please describe.

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APPENDIX 2: MIND MAP OF CODES

