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## Entering the Cultural Milieus of Children's Drawing: Complicated Proximities

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### Abstract

This article provides an introduction to and discussion of the concept and practice of *being there* with children in research—a way of thinking with and about the early interactions that researchers have with young children's material engagements. Organized around a short narrative account, the author of this article highlights what he perceives as an understated, albeit impactful quality in the scholarly work and practice of art educator and researcher, Christine Marmé Thompson. This quality refers to the broader problematic of how Tina—and other researchers, too—*enter into* and *engage with* the shifting cultural milieus and critical proximities of children and their drawing.

[Y]oung children are generous in admitting others to their expressive acts. If we are attuned to the language through which their invitations are made, greater proximity to early artistic experience is possible. (Thompson & Bales, 1991, p. 54)

[B]eing there—observing and documenting, but also interacting with and responding to children is essential—to my participation as a researcher. Just as looking and listening are things that research requires and children demand, it is necessary to take the time to linger, to live within the situation, in order to see those things that begin to occur or perhaps are noticed only when given enough time to become evident. (Thompson, 2009, p. 27)

### **“Hey there, kiddo.”**

It’s Saturday, around 8:40am, just a few minutes before the start of our third Saturday art class, of which there will be a total of eight over the course of the fall semester. It’s unusually cold outside, even for central Pennsylvania. Upstairs, on the second floor, I am standing in the doorway of the preschool classroom. I can hear the first set of thudded steps—that casual plodding sound—as the children make their way across the carpet of the front entryway. Shortly thereafter, the children’s steps are joined by a cacophony of laughter and dialogue, the morning’s banter now fully reverberating off the tile of the stairwell. For many of the children who attend this Saturday “art school,” the start of each class—and the few critical minutes that sometimes precede it—is thoughtfully marked by a small but “special” (Thompson, 1995, p. 7) period of time, dedicated to the “personal projects” (Thompson, 2003, p. 142) of the children, endeavors that reflect most directly their own interests and expertise.

Prompted by the multicolored blank pages of a spiral bound sketchbook and a small communal basket of markers, the children who gather during this special time, steadily and enthusiastically “fill them with images of their own choosing” (Thompson, 1995, p. 7). From *Ninja Turtles* and *My Little Pony* to a bounded repository of mathematical musings, even a young boy’s graphic struggle to grasp the death of his pet fish, Sketchbooks do well to “capitalize” on children’s and young people’s “narrative impulse,” that inbuilt yet socially affianced bent to “create stories in their drawings” and in the conversations and play that “surrounds and supplements” this drawing (Thompson, 1995, p. 8). As a graduate student, assigned to assist Christine “Tina” Thompson with Saturday School, I quickly came to realize the power of this teacher-purposed, child-powered site, what Brent Wilson (2003, 2005, 2007) refers to as the third pedagogical site, where children’s cultural work and explorations are not only permitted, entered meaningfully into the time of a classroom’s life, but taken seriously as well.

On this particular morning, as I made my way around the preschool classroom, Tina sat nearby in a small chair—on the “sidelines” (Thompson, 1995, p. 7)—greeting the children as they made their way to the carpet and began to draw in their sketchbooks. “Good morning, Steven.” Tina said. The first of many salutations to be shared. Typically warm to Tina’s welcoming remarks, the children seemed especially eager to know that Tina would again be close by, an adult whose presence clearly lends to the children a feeling of being more “comfortable, confident, motivated, and respected” (Thompson, 2009, p. 27), especially regarding their work. As the minutes passed, and when prompted to do so, Tina continued to interact with the children; asking questions, listening, at times responding, and inquiring too, even subtly, about the stories that were starting to emerge.

Then, with a little less than ten-minutes remaining of sketchbook time, two of the children made the decision to relocate, moving from their respective spots on the carpet to a nearby table, by which Tina’s chair happened to be placed. Steven, one of the two children who’d decided to make this move, was quite pleased to see that Tina was available, and similarly enthused at the sight of the empty seat that was next to her. Though he’d known that Tina was nearby, having quietly acknowledged Tina’s welcoming remarks, Stephen had nonetheless elected to wait, to delay further interaction. But the circumstances had changed and the time had now arrived. After lifting his body onto the weathered wooden surface of the chair, he leaned in... And then, to get a little bit closer, he did it again. “Do you want to see my drawing?” He asked, with just a tinge of uncertainty present in his voice. Softly but assuredly, in Steven’s direction, Tina replied. “Hey there, kiddo. I do.”



*Figure 1.* Tina, 2015, at Penn State’s Saturday Art School.

### **Entering Children’s Cultural Milieus**

As I reflect back on the events of this morning, particularly on the experience of observing Tina’s presence with the children and the many exchanges that came about during this time, I am reminded of William Corsaro, the sociologist of childhood, whose principal strategy for entering children’s cultural milieus was “to move into play areas, sit down and let the children react to him” (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008, p. 243) (see also Corsaro, 1985, 2003). Though understated, and to most passersby, a rather unsophisticated approach, it is nonetheless a gesture that takes seriously the facility of children in a given moment to “opt out as well as into the research process” (Edmond, 2005, p. 136), and that minds too the significance of that fleeting but critical moment when children, from a position of trust and generosity, do in fact make the choice to opt in. And then, taking that next important step, invite you to partake in their work and learning—to lean in, to look closer, and to listen more carefully.

For those who have had the pleasure of following Tina's work, or who have even had the fortunate experience to witness the subtle yet complex ways that she builds an attentive presence in the lives of children, this milieu entering gesture is far from simple. Nor is it just a mere starting point—a set of actions that one simply gets out of the way at the beginning. Rather, it is a process that is as lasting as it is vulnerable, a gesture that must be repeated over and over again, with each and every recurrence selfless enough to reflect the particulars of the children, to whom it is being committed. Like Corsaro, Tina understands this well. As was expressed in the epigraph above, children are indeed “generous” in permitting others to encounter the complicated but sometimes undetectable complexes that make up their “expressive acts” (Thompson & Bales, 1991, p. 54). And though it is true that children are both quick to open and keen to maintain their relations to others, they are equally savvy in detecting the types of intent that approach and that become part of these relations, especially as it pertains to those who frequent their worlds through practices that only seem to demonstrate a want *for something*. Or, that merely yearn for children and their work to become *something else, something different*.

It is not only essential then, that to become attuned to “the language” of children's “invitations,” we must also take seriously what underlies our own efforts to pursue this sense of attunement. After all, while children are well practiced in the art of discerning why adults choose to “live within the situation” (Thompson, 2009, p. 27), they are equally prolific in their evaluations of how adults elect to correspond with them—their motives for and ways of *being there*. What is it then about Tina's presence that made the children feel comfortable? Not only on this particular, cold October morning, but more generally, too, throughout her career as a researcher, teacher, and interested adult? What was it that she did or that she made possible, which inspired in the children around her a confidence to live through the contours of their own thinking and interests?

Informed by select publications from Christine Thompson's expansive program of inquiry, the remainder of this article sets out to provide an introduction to and discussion of the concept and practice of *being there* with children in research—a way of thinking with and about the interactions that researchers have with young children's material engagements. Essential to this rendering of being there, a concept and practice that Tina herself has critically embodied as a researcher, is the complicated play of correspondences that occur *with* children, in the milieus of their experience. Correspondences that are not only critical *for* and critical *to* the fashioning of a “greater proximity to early artistic experience” (Thompson & Bales, 1991, p. 54), but that are also critical *of* the various languages and practices that get used in the production of such proximities, many of which originate with the adult.

### **The Complicated Proximities of Being *There***

The matter of how and why someone—an interested adult, for example—moves to establish a presence *with* and relation *to* children, and *among* the milieus of their cultural work, is essential. It relates both to the ways we become attuned to the language of children's invitations, and that which underlies our efforts to pursue this sense of attunement. It says something about what we think we know—about these milieus and about the children who frequent them. It also speaks to our own expectations, especially as it relates to issues of access *with* children, and the extent to which we feel entitled to know or do something with and through this access. Establishing a presence *with* and relation *to* children then, is, at least in part, about being there.

As Thompson (2009) suggested, being there is about “observing and documenting, but also interacting with and responding to children” (p. 27). She goes on to note, however, that while “looking and listening are things that research requires and children demand, it is necessary to take the time to linger, to live within the situation, in order to see those things that begin to occur or perhaps are noticed only when given enough time to become evident (p. 27). Of particular importance is Thompson's reverence for lingering; an attentiveness that centers on the need to *live within the situation*, to exist in a state of solidarity *with* children. This state of solidarity has to do with thinking, creating, and inquiring *with* “others in a research endeavor,” insofar as the work itself—whatever that might entail—is “determined by others' needs and perceptions in conjunction with our own” (Glesne, 2007, p. 170). Interestingly, there is a rather compelling parallel between Glesne's use of solidarity and Thompson's conception of being there *with* children.

Informed by the work of Uruguayan novelist Eduardo Galeano and Mexican activist Gustavo Esteva, Glesne stresses a conceptual and empirical bent toward solidarity, as that which is “horizontal” (Galeano, 1999), a mutualizing proximity that reinforces the feeling that, as a researcher, if you have come to help (i.e. to save), go home. But if indeed your presence here is complementary, stay. This understanding of solidarity emerges from a sense of ethics that actively challenges the ideological perspectives brought about by Western social scientists, especially white men. It is a conception of solidarity that is intentioned foremost as a challenge to the “majoritarian stories” that are produced and “that carry layers of assumptions that persons in positions of racialized privilege bring with them to discussions of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2007, p. 28). So, how does this square with Thompson's conception of being there?

The parallel is that persons in positions of privilege—in this case adults, whose aim is to story the work of children—bring with them layers of assumptions. After all, children have long been the subjects of majoritarian stories, having to “leave the interpretation of their own lives

to another age group, whose interests are potentially at odds with those of themselves” (Qvortrup, 1994, p. 6). This point is especially apt for children who, in addition to being defined on the basis of their age (James & James, 2012, p. 1), are also measured against an ideal of childhood that demonstrably negates the diversity of the world’s children, as well as their experiences. When approached as a solidarity practice, Thompson’s conception of being there includes too an inbuilt urge to challenge “the sense of entitlement that often comes along with us into spaces not our own” (Glesne, 2007, p. 2). Tina has a clear understanding of this; which is what makes all the more significant her ongoing position at the sidelines of children’s drawing. It’s no mistake. Rather, it is an integral part of Tina’s research pedagogy—an intentional, crafted gesture toward being in solidarity *with* children.

Like Corsaro; who entered children’s milieus and then waited for them to respond to the tenor of his presence—often for extensive periods of time; Tina too is someone who waits, who idles in the company of children, to ensure that it is *the child* who is first empowered to set the tone: to approach her; to question and evaluate the credibility of her presence; and, to discern with the benefit of additional time and a prolonged sense of attention, if indeed this is a relationship deemed worthy of commitment—however tentative it might be. It is thus vital that children not only have the power to opt in and out of the research process, as Edmond suggested, but that children also be empowered to assume responsibility for how these opt-like movements come to be.

It is about ensuring that children have the capacity to both view themselves and get viewed by others, as “*rights-holders*” (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011, p. 129, original emphasis), and in so doing, that they are “not just recognized as *able* to but also *entitled* to be engaged in this process, with a concomitant duty on the adults working with them to ensure that their right to express their views and influence their own lives is respected” (pp. 129-130, original emphasis). For Stephen, the right to express his own views and influence his life includes too the right to make Tina—and other adults—wait. Indeed, it is Stephen’s right to restrict Tina from having access to his work and thinking, just as it is his perquisite to clarify the authority that he has over such endeavors. After all, children’s preoccupations with art and their “reasons” for making it are “revealed most clearly in work which places the greatest range of artistic prerogatives in their hands” (Thompson, 1999, p. 157) (see also Leeds, 1989), including the important matter of who gets to be part of it, and when.

Tina understands this—the importance of being *there*, of making oneself available “to provide suggestions or support *when and if they are needed*, to admire and question and listen to explanations” (p. 157, emphasis added). Of course, here, the point to emphasize is that of *when and if* this support is needed, or even desirable. Consider, for example, the encounter that occurred between Stephen and Tina. Having already had two prior weeks of experience in

the preschool classroom, Stephen was somewhat accustomed to the fact that Tina, a “familiar figure” (Mayall, 2008) during sketchbook time, would enter the milieu of his drawing, or at least make a point to reside on the edge of it. Stephen seemed to understand that Tina was “atypical” (Corsaro, 2003), different from the other adults in the classroom, a person keen to lend a friendly ear (Thompson, 1990, p. 221) yet willing to hang around (Walsh, 1998, p. 91) and wait for that all-important invitation. It is also critical to remember that, as Lundy and McEvoy (2011) suggested, “While children are undoubtedly best placed to talk about their own lives and the only people who can represent their views directly” (p. 141), it should not be assumed that they are necessarily willing or ready to do so. It is too often the case that children, when asked to speak about themselves and their work, must do so at the expense of personal convenience.

Though a frequent point of discussion is the matter of how adults, like Tina, interact with children in the context of their drawing’s obvious becoming, less common is that conversation, which centers on the withitness (Kounin, 1970) that often precedes this more recognizable set of engagements. Even Thompson; who, by all accounts should be credited with thoroughly evolving the ethics of the role of the researcher in the adult-child relationship, especially in the context of young children’s drawing events; has focused mostly on the complexities of being *with* children. But make no mistake about it, Tina is someone who very clearly respects the demands of first being *there*—in that small chair, on the outermost edge of Stephen’s drawing, lingering with and listening (Thompson, 2009) to the particulars of his milieu. She knows that what comes to matter with Stephen and his drawing, emerges foremost from her own capacity to wait *there, with* and *for* him.

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### About the Author

Christopher Schulte is Assistant Professor and Undergraduate Coordinator of Art Education in the School of Visual Arts at Penn State University. His research explores the overlaps of children's art and play, poststructural theory, and the use of qualitative research methodologies. He is co-editor with Christine Marmé Thompson of *Communities of Practice: Art, Play, and Aesthetics in Early Childhood* (Springer, 2018) and is currently editing a second anthology, titled, *Ethics and Research with Young Children: 'New' Perspectives*. His research and writing has appeared in handbooks and other edited volumes, as well as national and international research journals in art education, early childhood studies, and qualitative studies. He can be reached by email at [cms580@psu.edu](mailto:cms580@psu.edu).

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