
Noticing Chaos: An Inquiry at Nootka School-Age Program

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What happens when we choose to study a problem rather than solving it?

What does it look like to stay with struggles?

Children are amazing observers. They watch us adults as we rush through our days, and they reflect on our ways in their own ways.

Children are also constructors of culture; they create their own ways of living in a space, and these ways can be a reflection of their observations of the adult world. Sometimes these ways are troubling.

This is a beginning of the study of a troubling culture as we ask ourselves what happens when we notice the way we do things in our space?

The drama room at the Nootka Program is a small room where sound travels and echoes greatly. The room holds 20 school-age children and two educators. The children bring in with themselves a great amount of energy that moves around the room with an invisible, but noticeable force.

At times individuals are so focused on their own agenda that they don't leave room for others' voices to be heard. It has been difficult for children to listen to each other at gatherings. As educators, we notice these tensions on a daily basis and wonder how the children feel about it.

Despite the difficulties, we continue to gather every day with the children



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to think with our organizational intent of creating collaborative spaces, and to give the group a chance to come together and collaborate.

Too often, the gatherings become a meaningless time when we end up managing children, giving repeated lectures. At its best, the gatherings are a time to find out what the children did on the weekend or what will be happening at the program that day. We knew that to work with the idea of collaboration we needed to work with our current conditions in the program and give our gatherings meaning.

At one of the gatherings, one of the children says she feels that her voice isn't being heard because everyone is very loud and no one listens. We ask what others think about this and among the comments, one stands out for us: "It's chaos!"

"Yes! Like when my family has fights at home."

We ask if they enjoy living in the chaotic room. Their answer is a definite "no."

We wonder, what if the chaos itself can be our beginning to think with struggle as a collective?

We invite the children to notice,

“It seems that we have a problem in our room. You are telling us that you don’t like the chaos in the room. Shall we talk about this next time?”

The children agree.

For the next months, our gatherings become a space for us to pay close attention to the chaos in our room:

What is it?

Where does it live?

What colour is it?

How does it make our body move?

And what does Not Chaos look like?

The tangible challenge gives us a collective problem to think with as a group, turning our gatherings into meaningful times in which we can work with a real issue together.

At our first gathering, we discuss what “chaos” means to each of us. One description really gets our attention:

“Chaos is imagination.”

We ask ourselves, “What would it take to think of chaos as imagination? How can we work with this child’s idea?”

We start with imagining what colours chaos could be. We use pastels as it offers fluidity, messiness, movement, and blending. Our gatherings become colourful events in which we draw, colour, and discuss what chaos could look like in colours.

We start to see a level of collaboration and thinking in children that we did not witness before. We also start noticing children coming together and doing yoga during program time. We wonder if this has anything to do with our chaos conversations.

To respond to children’s ideas, we decide to think with the movement of chaos:

How does chaos move in our room?

How does our body move in chaos?

Chaos becomes part of our language in the program. We refer to it mindfully throughout the course of the days and we start to hear children make comments about it.

Our conversations become more intense as children feel more comfortable to speak their mind and trust they will be heard:

Emma: “This room is quite chaotic.”

Aleah: “Yes, it is chaotic. We don’t need to show movement or anything. We are living it. I would rather be homeless and be in a blizzard than live in chaos.”

Elouise: “Living in chaos is more than even a disaster. It sucks.”

Eleanor: “This is the chaos room, not the drama room.”

These conversations give us the opportunity to see how the children are experiencing life in our room. They are also reminders that to treat every day challenges pedagogically, we should be comfortable to stay with them, not to solve them, but to give room for them to be noticed, grow, and change with us.

As educators, we hold difficult discussions at our curriculum meetings, which challenge many of our personal, long-lived ideas of community:

Are communities always in harmony?

Are communities free of problems?

Can we expect to have groups of people who never have problems?



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How does chaos move in our room?



How does our body move in chaos?

These discussions open room for new perspectives. We begin to think that our goal as educators can't be to provide problem-free environments to our children, but to learn with the children that problems always exist among us. Rather than worrying about their existence, we should learn how to notice them and live with them as a collective.

Pedagogical documentation became an important living part of our in-

quiry. Children visit the boards throughout the day, discuss the documentatiaon, add to it, and reflect on it by trying new ideas.

Thinking further with the idea of chaos as imagination and the movement of chaos, we invite the children to draw their chaos movements at the gatherings. Children revisit their photographed movements and they draw them.



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While the drawings are individual, the discussions are collective acts.

We actively notice the photos and discuss the body positions in them. We think about how we can show these movements in our drawings. We make adjustments as discussions continue: these conversations through drawing enrich our gatherings even more, giving them an energy that is exciting—even when challenging.

Our study of chaos continues for the rest of the school year, taking us in different directions, including the study of Not Chaos. As the summer break approaches and we pause the study of chaos (and Not Chaos), we reflect on our journey and the possibilities it offered us.

Noticing chaos and paying close attention to it through drawing made it possible for us (as a group) to “stay in the process of constructing problems” (Kind, 2018).

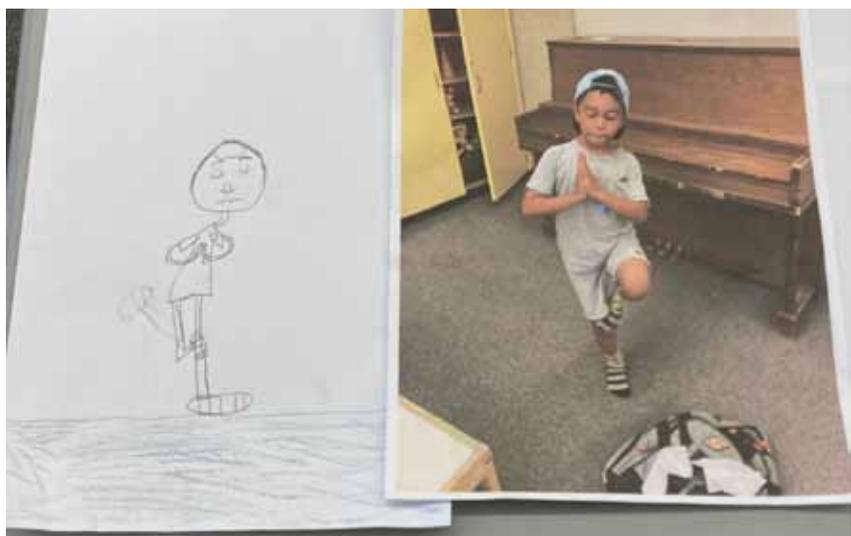
Chaos became an everyday point of attention, creating a focused space for children to discuss problems, experiment with movements, and tackle the challenges of drawing a movement.

We are thankful to the Nootka children for sharing their joy and ideas with us—and showing us that chaos can indeed be imagination.

References

Kind, A. (2018). Collective improvisations. In Schulte, C. & Thompson, C. M. *Communities of practice: Art, play, and aesthetics in early childhood*. Springer.

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