The Students’ Playground and My Journey of Self-Discovery

Karen Nesmith
Vancouver, British Columbia

“Our children’s voices never cease and the teacher is constantly yearning for something that always seems beyond her grasp.”

Can children design a social responsibility framework to help them solve problems on the playground independently?

When I began this action research project of having children design a rubric to help them with crises on the playground, I believed that if I empowered my students with strategies to deal with problems on the playground and gave them the responsibility to design their own social responsibility rubric, that they in turn would eagerly rise to the challenge. A rubric is a table, an educator’s version of a spreadsheet; in our particular instance with problems down one side, evaluative standards across the top and how students solve these problems in the body of the table.

My eagerness to put children in the driver’s seat was a reaction to the B.C. Social Responsibility Quick Scale of Social Responsibility (Kindergarten through to Grade 3) which defines expectations for socially responsible behaviour—for example, solving problems in peaceful ways—and assigns the student’s development along a continuum, from “in conflict situations often expresses anger inappropriately: blames or puts down others” to “usually manages anger and expresses feeling appropriately.” I felt the Scale had been designed by a bureaucracy which failed to include children’s voices. And, I had confidence in my students—after all, my students were street-wise city kids who were very adept at being leaders, often surprising me with their uncanny ability to behave like miniature adults in a classroom full of teddy bears and nursery rhymes.

I turned to the dictionary for inspiration, where I found Oxford’s epistemological understanding which laid out the following definitions of rubric and play: Rubric n.1., heading of chapter, section, special passage, or sentence, written or printed in read or in special lettering; 2. direction
for conduct of divine service; (my italics) 3. explanatory words, established custom. Play v. 1. play move about in a lively or unrestrained manner, frisk, flutter; 2. Pass time pleasantly.

Who would have imagined that the term rubric had theological underpinnings? I thought it was a lovely coincidence and slightly comical, that this term, often bandied about by the school bureaucracy, actually has a touch of the divine attached to it. That children require parameters for safe play is not in question. It is only when these “established customs and explanatory words” are handed as if from on high, from an unknown entity, that they lack meaning for the children they claim to protect.

This spiritual quality would come to serve as the anchor for my research and for the sharing my students engaged in—as if we in the classroom were conducting our own “service of the divine.” Further into my research, I had a chance encounter with the work of Nel Noddings, an educator on building loving and caring spaces in the classroom, who added yet another layer to my understanding when she spoke of the “state of grace that educators should strive to create in their classrooms,” thus validating my research, giving it legitimacy, and making my experience and that of my students mean something.

While my original intention was to have the children take ownership of this rubric by designing it themselves, the children’s emotional and social anxieties made me pause. I began to wonder if my intense, city smart students were capable of creating their own child-friendly rubric independently, without requiring adult supervision, guidance, and direction at every juncture. Their young minds seemed impervious to the strategies suggested by their peers during our countless class meetings. They would offer up, as if by rote, amazing solutions, yet fail, in the midst of a playground crisis, to bring all this great energy together—it was as if the moment they left the structured haven of the classroom and ran headlong onto the playground, they remained immune to all they had learned mere minutes ago. The same old problems would appear again and again.. No amount of class meetings, friendly reminders, hugs, and gentle loving kindness seemed to have any effect (other than to calm me down).

And then as if to buoy me up, in a pleasant coincidence, my principal introduced a second rubric for our school, which was supposed to be a panacea of sorts for our playground hostilities, and to serve as a supplement to the Ministry’s social responsibility rubric. Relieved at the additional support coming from an administrator who had a wealth of experience in the inner city, I foolishly assumed that the children would feel a vested interest in trying to help the principal make our school playground happier and safer. Yet weeks later the underlying tone of anxiety still lingered and we seemed no further ahead—only more disenchanted.

Monitoring and observing student behaviour on the playground and in the classroom has been a cornerstone of the research of Pellegrini (1995) and Blatchford (1994). The children in Pellegrini’s research become “subjects of direct observational methods,” however the researchers fail to capture the subtle nuances of playground crises. Indeed, their research model is far more global in nature. Unlike these researchers, I was staying up at night worrying about the unique stressors of my students, my classroom, and my school. I worried worry because I knew Justin went to bed at 1:00 in the morning because his mother was out entertaining men. I woke up at 3:00 in the morning wondering if there is any way I could adopt Annie because her 23 year old mother was finding life far too overwhelming. Could I empathize with the alcoholic mother (and friend) who kept on returning to my classroom for a hug and quiet conversation because she had just celebrated yet another month without a drink?

Researchers who study classroom and playground behaviour stand before a far larger audience. Their data and observations, while rich in detail and insights, cannot capture the underlying emotions in a classroom, read the wariness in a six year old’s smile, or read between the cryptic broken lines of a journal entry.

This is the beauty of action research. We become the goldfish bowl and it is these very
experiences which must be heard. In larger research models, it often seems as if both the inner world of the student (Goldstein, 2000; hooks, 1994; Noddings, 1992) and the teacher (hooks, 1994) has been left on the periphery—with the child remaining mute and the teacher behind a glass wall.

Yet my experience suggested that nothing could be further from the truth. Our children’s voices never cease and the teacher is constantly yearning for something that always seems beyond her grasp. And it is these very voices which ended up giving me a new outlook, broadening my horizons, and widening my perspective. Contrasting my experience with these writers finally gave me permission to see myself as part of the picture alongside my students, instead of merely standing guard. Another cornerstone of my journey has been the recognition of my own fearfulness, founded on my belief that I hate taking risks and that I am hesitant about what I will uncover while I am on the journey alongside my children.

When I began this research analysis, indeed before that, when I was having the children draw pictures of the happenings on the playground, I thought that I would have children create pictures, put their pictures in the appropriate category, code them, ask them why some problems happen in a certain area and why not others, and then together we would embark on designing a rubric to deal with these playground mishaps.

Yet what would it yield beyond what we already knew? Would I end up patronizing my students, making them stay away from the monkey bars on rainy days, asking them not to play on the soccer field with the bigger children when these were the very things which made playground life meaningful for the children? Or would this belabouring of these behaviors just magnify them, making the children less willing to explore and face challenges? Would such a rubric simply prevent my students from learning how to change perspectives and walk in another’s shoes?

And then there was the problem of semantics—one that could be easily overlooked but which needs to be clarified at the start. What were ‘problems’? Could there be a disparity, a disconnect between the children’s perspective and that of their adult caregivers? This was suggested in the work of Pellegrini (1995) and Blatchford (1989) and other literature I read, that adults tend to overestimate rather than underestimate the nature of children’s playground “infractions.” The children did have problems…we talked about it all the time but perhaps they didn’t see them the way I did, or there was a disconnect in the gravity. Hurt feelings were momentary, yet adults, me included, often treated them as if being called a “boo-boo head” was going to scar them for life.

This disparity between children’s and adult reality on the playground is often mentioned in the research. What looks and sounds like a problem to adults is often a minor mishap for children which they can figure out independently. Changing my understandings of playground grievances and risk-taking might just create a possibility, an opportunity, a moment to capture change in the making.
Context—Daily Recordings of a Playground

Our school is an officially designated Inner City School in a metropolitan city in Canada. This designation arises because 25% of our families are on income assistance, 20% live below the poverty line, there is a significant percentage of single parent families, and the student mobility and neighbourhood crime rates are high. The student population represents over 40 language groups from over 50 countries.

Our immigrant and refugee students face challenges of learning a new language in an unfamiliar classroom context and in a foreign environment. Their parents are often unable to find work in the profession for which they were trained. Living in the downtown core of Vancouver, and surrounded by apartment towers, our parents represent a huge diversity in incomes—from people who own apartment towers, to First Nations families who are struggling with poverty, and new immigrants who are living with five people in a one-bedroom apartment. Indeed our school has 97 families that have been defined by the school board as being in a state of crisis. We are a severely over-crowded school with a population of 565 in a building which has a functional capacity of 370. It is not unusual over the course of a single day to have three to five announcements (interruptions) talking about safety on the playground and in the school.

My Grade One classroom is on the main floor in close proximity to the office. We have ten boys and eleven girls. Their reading levels span a wide range from mere beginners to late Grade Four. Their socio-economic, emotional, and cultural characteristics, are reflective of the school at large with a significant number of students coming from Yugoslavia and other Eastern European countries. The student’s country of origin is significant in that it was not unusual for the politics of their homeland to be played out on the playground. This concept, that the politics of the state are sometimes re-enacted on the playground is borne out in the research (Blatchford, 1994, 28).

Children, even as young as six and seven years old, bring their familial and political values into the classroom and onto the playground, often with the unwavering support of their parents, adding yet another layer of complexity to the life of the classroom teacher who is trying to instill in her youngsters the value of “keeping their hands and feet to themselves.”

In November and December, I took notes and recorded the children’s descriptions of what happened on the playground. We would pass around the sharing kitty (our stuffed toy cat) and
the children would offer up their stories for their classmates, but this process became far too onerous. It took forever and often cut into valuable “academic” learning time. Part of me believed that this sharing of stories was of less significance than learning about how two plus two equals four. We would talk about how to solve problems and it always left me feeling at once gratified yet frustrated. My students knew all the ways to solve problems but they still had these same problems. Indeed, many of these sessions invariably turned into victimization dramas which repeatedly highlighted the same individuals who seemed to bask in the glow of all of this attention.

Then in January and February, as a time cutting measure, I had the children record their happy and sad times on the playground in a booklet. At the same time, we also did the same thing on separate pieces of paper, and we would work on the book after recess and the paper after lunch.

Then I had the children make up categories for problems, such as “hurt feelings,” or “hurt body” and separate out certain spaces on the playground (such as “the mountain,” the playground, the undercover area, in front of the school, and the field where they gathered to play).

At certain points throughout the day we would take time and the children would separate out their pieces of paper on the carpet into the aforementioned categories. We then talked about where the majority of the problems were happening (on the playground and the mountain) and discussed various strategies to deal with these problems. Children became researchers—recording their behaviour, writing, drawing, reviewing, assessing, monitoring, and evaluating. Through discussions, we uncovered, shared and witnessed experiences that couldn’t easily be categorized.

My first significant awakening was when I realized that a perfect, made for administration rubric, was out of the question. I might want the rubric but how realistic was it? Perhaps, as the definition of rubric suggests, I should interpret the rubric as a spiritual code of conduct and seek out the divine in my children instead of trying to categorize their behaviour. These new understandings seemed far removed from what I had originally set out to do yet I still had to equip my students to deal with experiences of being called names, or having hurt feelings and terrible loneliness. Rubrics, as the definition suggests, can help explain what to do in a particular setting but they can’t prepare students for the unexpected.

This daily recording however, provided me with a snapshot of the day in the life of many of my students. And it provided the children with an outlet to write down their feelings in confidence.
Discoveries—In Search of a Rubric

Teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.

—hooks, 1994

The essence of my literature review focused on the parallel journeys of risk taking and self actualization that teachers and students must venture on together if they are to grow and learn, a concept introduced by bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*. Yet I’ve gone on this journey with my students and I’m troubled by the disparity between what I believe and what actually happens. The children took a running leap but I held back, they dashed madly onto the playground, I told them be careful, don’t fall. I used to think that one of the reasons I was attracted to teaching was to heal myself and in turn to ensure that the children in my care became more sure-footed and assertive. I never realized to what extent I bring my “doubting Thomas” persona into the classroom. I realized that it is not so much in what I said to the children but how I acted, my subtle body language, my nervous laughter.

In one instance, the children were lining up their pictures, taking great care to put them in the right category, and I was frowning, eyes like slits. Rather than praising them for taking risks and doing something, I was worried about categories and having every little thing in its right place so that I could present my administrator with some concrete key visual which would have the blunt touch of the teacher but none of the gentle hands of the student in it. I felt that the product was more important than the process.

Yet if I took the risk and stopped doubting perhaps I would discover just the opposite…that the process was indeed the most significant part of this journey.

When I reflected on the personal journeys of my students, such as one young girl, in particular, who tends to keep many feelings to herself, I wondered how often she felt forgotten through no fault of her own. She wrote:

*I went to play ground and went to the monkey bars. I played with Jessica and Valerie. Jessica made me play in mountain. I didn’t want to play there.*
I like the monkey bars. (and then later on the same day) My big buddy. When I said can I play with you she ignored me. I have no one to play with. I fell down. I have no one to play with.
—Gabi

Once students took the risk by putting their feelings on paper, they introduced the possibility of change and a new way of looking at the human condition. Gabi may not have known that yet but I did. Her booklet became her sanctuary where she could take risks in a safe and comfortable way.

When you give children the opportunity to write something down, provide them with a safe loving community in which to share it and bear witness to the sad-eyed suns and flowers, you cannot help but feel richer, lifted up by the experience. I think, given the right set of circumstances, little miracles like this can happen every day. My experience in inner city schools leads me to believe that schools are far more than simply institutions of academic learnin—for how can academic learning happen when children feel lonely, feel as if they don’t belong, are alienated and afraid? A basic understanding of Maslow’s hierarchy would suggest that the fundamentals of love and belonging and simple human compassion must exist before true, meaningful learning can occur—and this is what this writing and our daily confessional provided for us. They made each experience mean something and when it means something, the ripples of change seem to surface and fan out.

All along I had been focusing on producing something concrete, a document with boxes, a checklist, a rubric. A rubric. If I had the perfect rubric, I thought I would be able to offer up a panacea to cure those children’s supposed problem behaviours. If they followed it, then the ‘problems’ would vanish.

But I couldn’t put the playground of life into a little box. All along I had been wondering if it was all that simple. Was it naïve of the school system and me to assume that a simple rubric would somehow make the children arrange themselves in little boxes to satisfy the orderliness that their adult counterparts so earnestly desired?

Despite my research, my thinking and my care, things still seems much as they it were. I compare this project, not to a statistical analysis, where an hypothesis is made, a new strategy is applied, a change of behaviour is noted and a discussion ensues but rather to the process of an artist who through practicing becomes a better painter or the singer who begins to sing a new song.

**Understanding Ourselves, Understanding One Another—Self Actualization In Practice**

*I want them to be educated for grace…(an) integration of the body, mind and spirit...it recognizes the gifts and limitations with which we were all born and it draws our attention to appreciative forms of acceptance.*
—Nodding, 2002, 47-8

Noddings (1992) reminded me of the significance of using the shared, collective experiences of children to solve problems or simply to reach out and help one another. Parallel to this understanding of the other is an understanding of oneself. Through teaching children how to understand and listen to their own inner voice, through journaling and “testifying” they might be able to better understand the voices of their peers. And this reaching out and helping one another is key because the human experience is by definition, fraught with a range of feelings and emotions in which learning to identify with peers and “walking in their shoes” can be a powerful trigger for youngsters. When we shared at circle, all of our stories, all of our witnessing, united us, made us stronger and more confident.

Paramount in Nodding’s (1992) work is that she does not deny children their emotions—in all of
their messiness, in all their various manifestations. This is articulated daily by the youngsters in my class.

*I was sad at the slide and I don’t like the slide because a boy in this class pulled me. A boy in this class. He hit me at the heart. He didn’t say sorry. A boy in this class hit me at the fist and I cried and he didn’t say sorry. I was running and I fell down and I got a big owie and I didn’t cry. I was happy because my friend was happy too and I had fun.*

Children are constantly affected by the feelings and actions of others. Seeing ourselves in relation to one another and the range of emotions we can experience as a result, is key to the creation of understanding ourselves in the “midst of others” and developing as loving and compassionate human beings with all of our many foibles.

Over the course of this project the children came to the realization that what they say matters. The reading of the words of the page, the impact resonating, the slow emergence of regret, the getting up and placing the picture on the wall or carpet were powerful links, ways of connecting the children to the larger picture, as if to say we are all in this together, as if each of them were adding yet another texture so that together we could have a clearer understanding of the bigger canvas. There was always a hush as the children waited, anticipating the next “confession.” We were always going to be on this journey. Even the smartest and most popular children in the class were lonely, cried over fathers who had left or gotten angry, were hurt by children on the playground or were picked on by the older children.

In her discussion of collaborative communication in action in a local classroom Noddings quotes one teacher as saying “…sometimes I’d rather show them I love them than make them struggle through another reading assignment” (Noddings, 1986, 49). Learning cannot occur until our basic needs of food, safety, love and security are satisfied. To a certain extent, it is incumbent upon myself as their teacher, their caregiver, to ensure that these primary needs, of love and security, are given the same depth of devotion and value as those of food and water. For example, here is a snapshot from my classroom window.

*A boy in a different class in Grade Four. I know this person from school. I've seen him before...he pulled my hand...I said no .He tripped me down and I started to cry. Ray was helping me. These two girls. They helped me. My Dad is going to be angry. I told the supervision aide.*

From my window I could see the vast expanse of the playing field. And when I saw the scene described above part of me thought that this student always liked to blame others because he feared getting into trouble (who wouldn’t?)…but when he came back from lunch and we were sharing he understated what really happened. And the sad part is he does have a reason for being upset, as I know his family, and his dad will be very angry. His sense of security, at least in his own mind, was temporarily in jeopardy.

There were problems with loneliness which I never imagined and this sense of belonging is the very essence of self-actualization. “I am sad on the playground because no one wanted to play with me” and “I do not have any one to play with“ were fairly common refrains during sharing time and in their journals. The maternal side of me wanted to shelter them from this. Yet I couldn’t shield them from the reality that sometimes there will be “no one to play with.” How could they be so lonely in such an overcrowded school? How could I be so lonely in such an overcrowded city? And when we shared these experiences of loneliness, I had to be willing to do the very things I ask of my children. Reach out, find a friend, try something new. My vulnerability, or giving a voice to my vulnerability, surfaced ever so slowly.

*It is striving for the best in ourselves and in those with whom we interact that marks self-actualization and a community that embraces.*
Parallel journeys, parallel lives. Through the course of this journey I have not only come to discover my children, but to “undress” myself—to see myself as I really am and to hold up the mirror to all of these imperfections and the implications they hold, not only for me, but for other educators. I am reminded time and again of hooks when she said “empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging our students to take risks” (hooks, 1994, 24).

I am now taking a parallel journey with my students. Not only am I changing residences but I am changing schools, the latter having come unexpectedly. I know that to the reader, my changes may seem somewhat insignificant. I am not leaving Canada, I am not changing professions, but having taken these steps and having thrown myself open to new possibilities, maybe I too will discover new aspects of myself.

I wonder if Noddings foresaw the trend that education would be taking towards a more results-oriented model of education, and to what lengths the educational system would go in order to pursue this academic vision. Playtime and recess have become endangered subjects in many school districts, with many school superintendents choosing to eliminate it, replacing it instead with more scholarly and academic pursuits.

I know that many parts of my academic curriculum remain untapped simply because of the incredible emotional and social needs of my children, and as I have traveled on my journey, I harbour less and less guilt for this oversight, knowing fully that children being loved and cared for is more important than an understanding of rocks and plants. Academics are significant. I am not denying that. I am simply saying that love is a basic need and learning cannot occur without it. Any rubric that we might develop, if indeed we choose to create one, has to have this quality, this aspect of nurturance and love built into it, in other words—a “direction of conduct of divine service.”

Sometimes it is both exhilarating and frightening to see how many connections have been created from this one little spark of change. I am still at the beginning, learning as I go. My understandings seem to mutate, change, and alter with every new understanding. At the beginning of this project, I encouraged risks in my students and opened myself up to the possibility of change. Tomorrow, no doubt, will come a new change, a new understanding, a germ of truth, a genesis.

Could it be that maybe we need to release the divine in ourselves if we are to release the divine in the ones that we teach? And that perhaps this is the biggest risk we can take. In seeing our students stumble, fall, and then rise up, so we too must stumble, fall, and rise up. Maybe through living change through all its shapes and permutations—through all of the embarrassments, humiliations, and joy, I can serve as a catalyst of change for the students in my care—for they too need opportunities to play to discover themselves, and to discover who they are “in the midst of becoming.”

**TWO DISPARATE VOICES**

* A school superintendent: “(our aim is )…to eliminate recess in elementary schools as a waste of time that would be better spent on school work…we are intent on improving academic performance. You don’t do that by having kids hanging on the monkey bars. (Bishop & Curtis, 2001, 35)

“ If children’s free play promotes exploration, manipulation, and mastery of the social, natural and emotional worlds in which children live and leads to acquisition of important skills then logically restricting play opportunities detracts from significant learning. (Bishop & Curtis, 2001, 168)
The research of Pellegrini (1995), Blatchford (1994) and Hollingsworth (1994) told me all along that children are not getting enough opportunity to play independently and as a consequence are failing to learn the essential social and emotional skills which will prove invaluable in their adult life...to learn the give and take...to compete...to lose...in a world of their own making.

Learning this give and take is the foundation of our life and these events, from the mundane and trivial, to the life affirming and life changing are an essential cornerstone in becoming a compassionate and confident individual. When children are at play they learn about life—all the stuff of living that sitting in rows, in highly structured environments does not prepare them for. Eliminating recess eliminates the opportunity for children to better understand themselves in the context of their peers, and the possibility to develop the necessary social and emotional skills that will help them get over life’s hurdles.

There is an increasing trend in the United States and in some isolated school boards in Canada to eliminate recess. Fearing that it cuts into valuable academic learning time and seeing it as “dead” learning time, school superintendents are becoming increasingly willing to eliminate recess in favour of increasing academic pursuits. The reader may be surprised to learn that Noddings, the educator who promotes the importance of educating for a state of grace feels that playtime is an “educational dead spot when students all too often take a break from everything civilized” (Noddings, 2002, 63).

There is disturbing research coming out of Toronto which suggests that decreasing boy’s opportunities for playtime may indirectly lead to increasing rates of suicide because they have not had enough opportunity to develop the necessary social and emotional skills. This is substantiated by the work of Christine Sommers (2003) who suggests that recess provides boys with one of the few times during the school day when they can legitimately engage in rowdy play which boys absolutely need. If the time for free play in North American public schools is diminishing and if recess is indeed the time when children can learn significant social and emotional strategies for dealing with life’s challenges, then is suggesting that this might lead to corresponding increases in suicide too much of a leap to make? Youth suicide has tripled since the 1960’s (Bishop & Curtis, 2001, 160).

Instead of looking at the outward aspects of children’s behaviour, we should spend more time listening to their voices to fully comprehend the essence of playground life. Yet the very rubrics that form the basis of my student’s lives are founded on entirely contrary notions of artificial, sanitized gradients from “not yet within expectations” to “exceeds expectations” and suggest that children’s behaviour is indeed a systematic entity, created out of a series of discrete behaviors from A through Z.

When I read bell hooks, my whole understanding, my whole perspective, was turned on its head. I ventured down another path, another fork, parallel to that of my children and I was given permission to include my voice in partnership with theirs. Ultimately, form ended up mattering little. My administrator wanted a product but the process turned out to be everything.

What has struck me since the beginning of this project is how diametrically opposed the concepts of rubric and play are. One is conforming, one is liberating. Is it possible that the two could ever be linked together? Yet I embarked on a whole separate journey, carefully sidestepping my safely crafted adventure for a far more riskier one—full of a thousand awakenings where I discovered that I needed to play as much as my children did.

Reflections…

Today I sit in my classroom knowing that this will be the last May 19th I will spend here, looking out there at a vista of maple trees flanked by tired and weary apartment buildings. And that’s how I felt at the beginning of my journey, saddened in the knowledge that I may
be passing this weariness onto my kids... yet this journey is merely a stopover and it’s one that my children have to take along with me. As I grow, so do they. This was the essential truth that I gleaned from the work of hooks (1994)—that we need to be on this voyage of self-actualization together. And that this journey is fraught with the ups and downs of simply living—happiness, joy, sadness, loneliness, anger and frustration. Adding yet another layer to the canvas was the work of Noddings (2002) who understands that children must learn to cooperate in a world that will guarantee them a full banquet of emotions and experiences and that it is our responsibility as educators to prepare them to live in a “state of grace” in this collaborative community.

Resources


**About the Author**

I have worked in inner city schools for the past eleven years. At the beginning of my action research journey much of my interest focused on how to work with my students' challenges on the playground. But my path ended up venturing down the road not taken. It culminated in a different, yet at some level so intrinsically more meaningful path to both my students and myself. Several years later I am teaching children at the intermediate level.