An on-going exploration of uncertainty: Ethical identities—ours and children's

"Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in."
L. Cohen

Kim Atkinson, Enid Elliot with input from the Victoria IQ group

Six years ago Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw began a research project called *Investigating Quality Early Learning Environments Project (IQ Project)*. This project ran for five years with groups of early childhood educators meeting to discuss some of the issues and quandaries that arose in their practice. As a facilitator with some of the groups I journeyed with the educators as we explored some of our beliefs and challenged some of our common understandings of our practice. The following narrative from Kim Atkinson reflects some of our struggles.

Kim shared this narrative at the last Sharing Circle where all the groups gathered. The Victoria group asked Kim to present this narrative as reflective of our investigation of early childhood practice as a *pedagogy of uncertainty* (Britzman, 2009) and our questions about children's and educators' ethical identities. As Kim says, "we wanted to highlight the silences, the places where we are frozen (pers. com)." Within our group we had created a space that felt safe; we had worked to reserve judgment about others' difficult choices. Kim had taken a careful decision to explore the idea of listening to children and found herself in a controversial place. Standing up to share this story Kim felt vulnerable.

Four boys have stacked large blocks to create a wall and they now crouch behind it, peering

over the top now and again. A group of girls walk by and the boys spring into action. They point long narrow blocks at the passing girls and shout "Shoot the girls! Only the girls!" They make shooting noises as they train their 'guns' on the girls. The girls quickly leave the area and the boys continue the conversation:

"This is my gun"

"But they can also be skis right?"

"No we can hide here"

"This is a gun. You guys sit here"

"Shoot the girls, only the girls. Shoot the teacher!"

"Put them here. Hide them quick you guys."

"My bullet can shoot through a window."

"If someone's talking you say 'Yes Sir' (saluting) and you walk 'Huh Huh Huh!' (marching)

"What power does your gun shoot?"

"168 meters"

"Mine shoots fire"

"My gun shoots pistols"

As the boys prepare to go outside they discuss what they are going to play. They decide to play the game they have invented called Surrender Die and as soon as they are outside they begin running and shouting "Kill the girls!"

Later that week I receive an email from a parent:

I am writing to you for some advice on how to respond to (my daughter) Maria. She is still worrying about coming to school because of relationships with some of the 'bad guy' boys. Yesterday she told me that she needed to have her hair straightened before she went back to school "so Tori won't know it's me". "Or else they will kill me," she added.

The boys called themselves Bad Guy Beavers and spying, shooting girls, stockpiling weapons, fighting and being 'bad guys' was their constant occupation for the year we spent together. The beavers led me along with the other children and the parents into places of tension and discomfort, of stormy confrontations and of great silences. We were all caught up in the tales they told, some of us were frightened, some angry or appalled, some were judgmental, and others felt judged.

As the sole educator in the preschool I struggled to listen to all the voices, and to find my own voice. Uncertainty became my constant companion as I peered into "the cracks" of my practice. One question kept surfacing for me ...what is my ethical responsibility?

In the years prior to encountering the beavers I, like so many early childhood educators, adhered to a strict No Guns policy in my work with children. I routinely used phrases such as "We don't use guns, can you make that into something else?" Often the response was a pleading "But we're just pretending!" To which I replied "But we don't want to even pretend to hurt people, do we?" I neither expected nor waited for a reply.

At meetings with parents I informed them of this 'policy' and was never challenged. Either the idea was consistent with their personal philosophies, or my perceived 'authority' as early

childhood 'expert' deterred dissention.

But where had such unquestioning acceptance of this rule originated? In 25 years of working in various child care settings I had never seen a written policy instructing educators to adhere to this approach, nor were there any directives from governing bodies such as licensing regulations. As Penny Holland (2003) observes "

> …zero tolerance practices are not explicitly based on any hard evidence of a causal connection between early toy gun, weapon and super hero play and the development of aggressive behaviour, but rather on a common sense, nurture-based belief that there might well be, and that no harm could be done by acting on that assumption. While few practitioners make specific reference to theory or research supporting this assumption, many believe that such research exists and supports a zero tolerance approach. (p. 10)

The 'No Guns' rule fit with my feminist perspective; by disrupting gendered stereotyped violent play with proactive interventions I could do my part to create a new generation of non-violent boys. It was best practice.

Or was it? In 2007 I joined with a group of early childhood practitioners in the Investigating Quality Project and we began a dialogue about our practice. Tentatively at first we talked of our shared experiences and, over time as trust was built within the group, we engaged more deeply and more reflectively, allowing more of ourselves to be revealed. Slowly, we began to touch on issues we had never previously discussed, issues we thought were outside the realm of early childhood care. We opened dialogues on power, violence, gender, racialization, sexuality and

politics, reflected on our image of the child. We examined our assumptions about the ability to 'know' a child through the developmental theories that dominated our field. Within a relationship of trust we negotiated new understandings and opened ourselves to a *pedagogy of uncertainty* (Britzman, 2009).

Central to these dialogues was critical reflection. I began to ask questions of myself, examining my routines, my rules, my "daily-ness" that had become the truths of my practice. I asked myself why and how these truths had become so imbedded, so certain. How was it that I had the power to decide that these truths were privileged? And whose voices were silenced by my rules and my assumptions of what was right? My certainties were beginning to crumble.

What was it about gun play that I was afraid of? What would happen if I no longer enforced the no gun rule? These were new questions, uncomfortable questions, but once they were raised I could not ignore them. I began to consider my role as an educator, the choices I made and the effects those choices had on children and myself. As MacNaughton (2005) notes

> Education is about choices – for example, choices to 'do' curriculum in particular ways, choices to prioritize one set of goals over another and choices to address an issue or not. Each of these choices is linked to a set of meanings about who a child is, what education is for and who should take decisions about what the child needs. (p. 105)

By critically reflecting on my practice I was becoming aware of "taken-for-granted ways of knowing and acting that remain unquestioned precisely because they seem natural to us." MacNaughton, (2005, p. 10).

The conversations in our IQ group became more intense as we stripped away layers of meanings around gun play, violence, aggression, power, real and pretend. We examined how the image of the 'innocent child' played into our discomfort. We wondered for whom we imposed the rules—the children or the parents? We wondered why gun play continued despite our collective efforts to make it 'go away'. These dialogues took us to places of vulnerability, pushed us to reconsider core values, and allowed us to expose moments in our practice of which we were not proud and in which we responded to a child in anger or frustration or with silence.

As we shared of ourselves, we built a community of collegiality where determining answers was not the goal. Instead we found satisfaction and reassurance in the collaboration, the multiple perspectives enriching our understandings. Within the uncertainty, we had support, which in turn gave us the courage to experiment with change. And so I took a tentative step: a few boys made guns from a construction toy and I simply observed, saying nothing. I was beginning a process which Davies (2011) terms *open listening*: 'Such listening is not a simple extension of usual practices of listening. It involves working, to some extent, against oneself, and against those habitual practices through which one establishes ''this is who I am''" (p. 4).

I had just begun to dip my toes into "working against myself", and wondering "who I am" when the Bad Guy Beavers entered my preschool. As Carlina Rinaldi puts it "I had to decide what kind of teacher I wanted to be, what kind of human I wanted to be" (presentation at UVic July 2012)

The preschool in which I worked was a cooperative where parents participated as teacher

assistants on a rotating schedule, and attended regular parent meetings. As the only educator, I built close relationships with families. Parents felt connected to the school, knew all the children and were keen observers of all that happened in the classroom.

The class of 18 children had been with me the previous year as three year olds, and now they were four. The bad guy beavers were composed of a group of 8 boys, some were bad guys every day, others moved in and out of the play. A few boys in the group never joined in, and none of the girls participated. The bad guy beavers established themselves a couple of months into the school year with this story:

We go Cha! And then we eat some wood. This time we eat wood. We are beaver spies. When we see writing cha cha cha we want to write too. Cha cha cha. We go and fight people and then we go and get girls and then we turn them into wood and we eat them. Cha cha cha. We eat wood all the time, every night too. Cha cha cha. Birds come and eat the worms and they bring them to us and we eat them. And then they turn into wood. Then we pooed them out. And we go cheer cheer cha cha cha.
by all the spy fighting beavers

Every day the beavers would find their 'fort', create their arsenal, then begin spying and shooting at girls. There was constant conflict and hurt feelings among themselves, they hit, pinched and called each another names. Angry and tearful they accused one another of being mean. The girls were afraid to be in the same area as the boys, and parents were nervous as well, alarmed and unsure how to respond. I spent all my time monitoring and watching the boys, feeling that I was

abandoning the rest of the class.

I used strategies that many would, I negotiated conflict by having the boys talk with one another, I encouraged empathy, reminded about kindness, asked how everyone felt. But where previously I would have simply shut down the play, I now felt an ethical responsibility to listen. Davies (2011) suggests

> Open listening makes the listener vulnerable to the not-yet-known. ...On the part of the teacher, it involves the courage to let go of oneself as a figure of certainty and authority. It involves opening oneself to an ongoing process of what Deleuze (1994) named differentiation, that is, to becoming other to oneself, and to a process of evolution that takes the self beyond what it already knows. (p. 4)

These boys were giving voice to ideas, thoughts and images that were powerful and scary: what would the consequences be if I refused to listen? I needed to go "beyond what I knew".

I wanted to extend my understanding about children's conceptualization of good guys and bad guys so I asked some questions:

Kim: What is a bad guy?

Robbers and be rude and steal stuff.

Be really bad. They kiss girls!

Good guys kill bad guys in a movie.

Kim: Are bad guys bad all the time?

Yes, bad guys are bad all the time.

Can be both. Bad guys can be good.

Kim: Do your families like this game? 12 children say No

1 child says Yes

Mary: Sometimes I like to play Batman, I like to play bad guys in Batman. I only play bad guys with a friend or by myself. I could be a mermaid bad guy.

Nina: I like to play good guy as long there's no bad guy.

Thomas: A bad guy you chase around and you go to jail. Bad Guy Beavers just fight and eat girls.

Kim: Why do they fight?

Thomas: 'Cause they eat girl food.

Nina: I don't really like that part of the story. Everything Thomas says is about dying.

Freddie: They kind of do bad stuff like hurt people. They really hurt people. Really hurt. I know, I play it.

Kim: Is it pretend or real?

Pretend game.

This conversation revealed some nuances in the children's thinking that was not apparent in their play, such as the idea that bad guys could sometimes be good, and that some girls were not entirely opposed to bad guys and would, in fact, play it under certain circumstances, though Nina is clear that she doesn't like bad guys and doesn't want to 'play' death. Freddie's statement that bad guys really hurt people and he knows because he plays it suggests that he recognizes that hurting in play and hurting in real life are quite separate. The children were unanimous that the play was a pretend game, which makes me wonder if we, as adults, are the ones who are confused about pretend and real.

Despite my best efforts to engage the girls in talking about the bad guys, this was the first time they had spoken of their concerns. I felt I needed to give them greater voice, a way into the dialogue, so I wrote a story that incorporated elements of stories they had previously dictated to me, as O'Loughlin (2009) says, "to return to the [girls] what is already theirs, but now in a manner that increases their capacity to own their own histories" (p. 19), and to negotiate their understanding.

Once upon a time there was a curious girl named Goldilocks who was walking in the jungle with her jungle cats and jungle dogs. As they walked they touched the shiny leaves and vines that hung from the trees. They listened to the thud thud thud of the buffalo running. It sounded like this:

Thud Thud Cha cha cha

Thud thud cha cha cha

The jungle cats and the jungle dogs did a jungle dance.

Goldilocks and the jungle cats and the jungle dogs kept walking. They heard some jungle birds. They looked up where the birds were flying and there was a princess sitting in a tree eating pineapple. Goldilocks said 'Come on down' so the princess jumped but she didn't fall because she had wings and she could fly. They kept walking together in the jungle and suddenly they heard a terrible sound, terrible hissing, terrible gnashing of teeth. It was snakes having a wild rumpus. 'Let's get out of here' said Goldilocks. So the princess and Goldilocks and the jungle cats and the jungle dogs ran and ran. Then they saw a puff of smoke. It was a little dragon. 'Hello, my name is Puff' said the dragon. 'Do you want to go to a land named Honilee?' 'Yes'

said Goldilocks and the princess. The jungle cats and and the jungle dogs did another jungle

dance.

Thud thud cha cha cha

Thud thud cha cha cha

That meant yes.

So they all got on a boat and they crossed the ocean that was full of sharks. They came to a land

called Honilee and they went to a house and had some tea and went to sleep.

Everyone sings Puff the Magic Dragon

The girls enthusiastically embraced the story and act it out, with the boys taking on the roles of

the snakes and the sharks. But the girls remain in control of the narrative and keep the sharks and

snakes at a distance. As Rinaldi (2006) notes: "metaphorical language, precisely because it is

more undefined, allusive and sometimes ambiguous, but at the same time open to new concepts,

becomes the only tool available to the new understanding that is seeking to emerge..." (p. 76).

Brian Edmiston (2008) agrees, asserting that children interpret play events metaphorically, as a

means of inquiry into "possible ways that people can relate to each other" (p. 68). He proposes

that within this play children are involved in complex ethical situations, taking on the perspective

of other identities, evaluating them, and by doing so begin 'authoring' their own identities. He

says

> By projecting into the viewpoints and actions of the heroes, monsters, and people in
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> whatever narratives engage them, children inquire about those aspects of life that are
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> difficult to examine in the every day world. How do you experience and contemplate the

power to kill, the power to heal, or the power to love? How do you discover what might happen if you really hurt someone without actually hurting? How do you know how to respond to violence without being in danger? (p. 75)

Re-conceptualizing bad guy play as a metaphor, as a tool to explore themes of power, courage, fear, and compassion allowed me to re-imagine my role. These children needed to investigate difficult, frightening narratives and they needed to be heard. They trusted me to listen, felt safe enough within our preschool community, within our relationship, that I would serve as the "receiver of (their) unconscious knowledge" ((O'Loughlin, 2009, p. 30). Just as within our IQ group we created a place of trust in which we could reveal our difficult stories, so to the children trusted me and revealed their difficult stories. Having someone listen to us gives us meaning, identity, value. Rinaldi (2006) tells us "Listening legitimizes the other person, because communication is one of the fundamental means of giving form to thought. The communicative act that takes place through listening produces meanings and reciprocal modifications that enrich all the participants in this type of exchange" (p. 126).

But it is not enough to simply listen passively, I needed to be prepared to move into what Davies calls 'ethical teaching' which involves relinquishing the status quo and opening up " to a more multiple and fluid reality'. She calls on us to "listen without judgment, and with an openness of mind that does not rest on the fixing of one's own, or the other's identity. It involves abandoning the demands of ego and resisting the ''allure of seemingly neutral and reasonable normalizing discourses…'' (Davies, 2011, p. 15).

The "normalizing discourse" here may be that these are 'challenging behaviours' that need to be 'fixed'. This discourse assumes that children who behave in a 'socially unacceptable ways' are too immature to find solutions and should be 'taught how to behave'. My role as teacher would be to decide on some guiding rules, explain to children why these rules are important, and enforce them (MacNaughton, 2007).

But I could not ignore the refrain of 'ethical teaching' that had lodged itself in my mind. I knew that creating and enforcing my rules would be disrespectful, a misuse of power, would diminish the agency of children, and likely wouldn't work anyway. The simplistic act of creating a rule would deny the complexity of life in our preschool. Davies (2011) tells us that ″ethical teaching involves ''living in the complexity of one's life and adhering to the truth of that complexity, a truth that involves assuming responsibility for the way one's desires and psychic investments conjure and inform that irreducible complexity'' (p 15).

I had a close and very affectionate relationship with each of the bad guy beavers, and I could catch glimpses of what might lie behind the play. They each had their own uncertainties, about who they were in the preschool, about who they might become. I sensed that some boys carried the persona of the bad guy beaver as a shield, to guard against vulnerability, others found in it a way to experiment with power and courage, others wanted the camaraderie, the mutual narrative. These were my musings, my hunches, certainly incomplete for we will never truly know another's full story. But I was aware that each bad guy beaver had a story; I was not willing to make rule that told them their story was wrong.

As the school year went on the play continued unchanged as the boys yell "get the girls!" and argue and fight among themselves. I continue to ask questions, to talk to the boys of respect, empathy, kindness, to listen to one another, to think of how the girls might feel. Parents take me aside to express their concerns with the bad guy play, tell me their children are afraid, that they themselves are afraid to be in the area where the boys play. Another parent approaches me upset and frustrated at being judged as the parent of a 'bad guy'.

As with the boys, I had close relationships with the parents, so as they shared their concerns, I could also share my thinking. I talked about how I saw the bad guy beavers as exploring themes of good and evil, power and courage, and how I could not ethically ask them to stop. We talked of the fears of the other children, and what we could do to create spaces for their voices to be heard alongside the beavers. We all felt uncomfortable with the gendered aspect of the play but had no clear solution. Within our relationships of trust these dialogues between the parents and I were emotional, but respectful. No one hinted they might withdraw their child from the program, and if they disagreed with my approach, they didn't say so.

The girls act out their story but cannot find their voice to directly address the boys. It is clear they do not like the play but months go by before they finally speak:

Maria: I don't think you can trap us, not kill us or anything. I want them to have happy things and have a nice time. I want the bad guy to not put us in jail. I want to get them to be kind. I want to get them to be nice.
Mary: I don't want them to fight us and chase us.

Cara: They can't run and catch me and put you in jail.

Freddie: They don't like us chopping them up for eating.

Marc: And definitely not with real knives.

Neil: They probably don't like playing that game.

The boys listen, but as soon as they go outside Thomas and Casey shout, "Let's get the girls!" I remind them of what the girls have said and ask them what we should do. They decide to stop playing this game until they go to kindergarten. They tell me they need a note that they will keep in their pockets as a reminder:

I want to remember that we can play the star wars game and Surrender Die game when we are in kindergarten.
And the Surrender Die game we have to remember.

A few days later Thomas tells me that they will only kill pretend bad guys. This comes at the beginning of the play without any previous conversation from me. Later Jona points to Thomas and says "He's using a gun." I ask "Did you decide not to use guns today?' Jona replies yes.

These boys are wrestling with ethical issues, about what it is to be right or good. They are choosing their own responses, not adhering to an imposed response. As Edmiston (2008) says, "We want children, as ethical beings, both to take responsibility for their actions and to be ready to question other people's actions, in particular events and specific relationships" (p .177) He also says that "when children have the opportunity to experiment with multiple identities in their

play (not just identities adults approve of) they can test actions, evaluate characters and begin authoring their own ethical identities" (p. 19).

As I struggled with my uncertainty and the bad guy beavers, I knew that within the Investigating Quality group I would be listened to, heard, and not judged. Our conversations went to difficult places, but we felt safe going there together, we had cohesion in the uncertainty. The ongoing dialogue reframed our image of ourselves from educator as expert to educator as co-learner, and gave us a voice to begin to talk with children and parents about the difficult issues, the places of silence. From the safety of IQ we could begin to see beyond the bounds of 'the good teacher' and were liberated to explore possibilities (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 59).

With that liberation came the courage to take risks, to try new approaches to "provide space to move through different terrains" ((MacNaughton, 2005, p. 59). I felt safe to move through "different terrains" in IQ, thus I could in turn create a safe space for children to move through their difficult issues and terrains. The bad guy beavers needed a place of safety and trust where they could explore their story, just as I needed a place of safety and trust to explore mine.

Kim's story highlights some of the struggles that face many educators. Early childhood educators are tempted to present children with a picture of life as safe, trustworthy and reasonable, while too often our lives are complex full of ambiguity, chaos and uncertainties.

Seeing children as 'innocent' and in need of protection the bad guy beavers challenge that belief. Our desire to simplify and protect children and children's active explorations of the darker side of life can create tensions for educators. Children struggle with issues of power, control and relationship and so do educators. These are legitimate concerns and questions and we have a responsibility to think about them.

In their daily work situations early childhood practitioners can find themselves in places of ambivalence and experience longings, desires and conflicts (Elliot, 2013); at times they can be overwhelmed by the tensions they find in their work. Hoffman (2004) writes, "It is ambiguity, not certainty that poses a threat to our convictions and forces us into harder positions. But it is ambiguity that can—or should be—a provocation to thought" (p. 143). A chance to name and think about the ambiguities and difficulties that face us as educators can provide us with a path to deeper understanding and perhaps more authentic action.

Educators need time and space to share their doubts, their discomfort and their fears. But often there is no space for sharing, for listening and thinking through the complexities of practice. In the education to become an early childhood educator students are encouraged to see children's strengths, to leave their issues outside the door and to empathize with parents (Langford, 2008). Seeing children as capable, being present to their practice and understanding parents' positions are certainly important, but this is only part of the work of an early childhood educator. Focusing solely on children and families leaves little room for educators to focus on their own questions, shifts and movement when there are moments of insecurity, of anger and

of sadness. These moments are often repressed or ignored as not "appropriate" for the work.

The pressure to be so sympathetic and empathetic comes at a psychic price (Lear, 1990). Acknowledging our less capable selves, our uncertain and fearful selves, takes courage and a trust in yourself, as well as in your audience. Writing about the image of the early childhood educator as reflected in students' perceptions and textbook portrayals, Langford (2008) writes "the discourses of the good ECE focus primarily on the personal qualities of passion, happiness, inner strength, caring, and alertness to an individual child's needs and interests" (p. 82). There is little room for uncertainty, indecisiveness or discomfort. Focusing on happiness, caring for the other and calling on one's inner strength can mute the voices of doubt, fear and insecurity—and yet those voices are still there.

Children don't have such restrictions on their play and their questioning. As Edmiston (2008) says of what he calls mythic play where children can "not only speak what adults often leave 'unspoken' they can also act out and reflect on what is often regarded as 'unactable'—death, birth, hatred, injury and violence" (p. 112). Children wonder about the power of *bad guy beavers* and trouble the gendered waters. Their play and conversations can range widely and touch upon issues that have no comfortable answers. Often our response is to repress this play.

Adults are also faced with questions and situations that are ambiguous, fraught with layers of emotions and difficult to resolve. There is often not a place for reflecting on feelings, fears and concerns and they remain unacknowledged. Exploring these emotions, not wallowing in them

and not allowing them to imprison us. Sharing our narratives and our questions can open up a valuable dialogue that can uncover emotional layers. As Bakhtin suggested, we learn of ourselves through engagement with the other; "the two languages frankly and intensely peered into each other's faces, and each became more aware of itself, of its potentialities and limitations, in the light of the other" (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 465). To invite someone to join you in a dialogue, to listen and to be heard, is to be vulnerable within that encounter. Becoming vulnerable we open to our own possibilities and growth; we also must come face to face with our own ghosts and fears. As the dialogue deepens and each starts to learn the other's language it is possible to face some of the uncertainty of practice and perhaps engage with children's deep and searching questions.

In our *Investigating Quality* group in Victoria we shared stories like Kim's narrative, which allowed our group to explore the "cracks" in our practice and ourselves--places of discomfort and uncertainty. If we are going to listen fully to children's struggles with unspoken issues then we must have space to listen to our own. We too have ghosts in our background narratives (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1975; O'Loughlin, 2009) which can influence our responses and feelings. We can share stories and find new perspectives and in the sharing become more comfortable with the uncertainty and unknowing we face as we engage with children and families. Becoming aware of our darker emotions and how they might structure our responses to children and families can deepen our practice and help us listen more carefully to the feelings with which children struggle.

Within our group we tried to listen to each other closely and to think beyond the story we were

hearing. These difficult places became our curriculum and focus as we made deeper meaning of

the work in which we were all engaged. As Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman (1995)

suggest, "curriculum is an extraordinarily complicated conversation. Curriculum as

institutionalized text is a formalized and abstract version of conversation, a term we usually use

to refer to those open-ended, highly personal, and interest-driven events in which persons

encounter each other" (p. 848). MacNaughton (MacNaughton, 2005) suggests that educators

need the time and space to grow into an understanding of the "messiness, uncertainties and

ethical dilemmas of relationships in teaching" (p. 193).

Tensions existed in our discussions. Educators brought their beliefs and understandings to the

group; through sharing narratives and questioning those narratives they came to question

previously held values or beliefs. Within the group we grew accustomed to living with a level of

tension and an uncertainty. Creating dynamics that challenge assumptions and encourage

reflection calls for a trust and openness within the group. Aldo Fortunati (2006) argues, the

educators' role is to be "more attentive to creating possibilities than pursuing predefined

goals…[to be] removed from the fallacy of certainties, [assuming instead] responsibility to

choose, experiment, discuss, reflect and change, focusing on the organisation of opportunities

rather than the anxiety of pursuing outcomes, and maintaining in her work the pleasure of

amazement and wonder." (p??)

As the facilitator of our group I was committed to following the interests of the educators and

believing that within the group process pedagogical issues would surface. Trying to listen closely I was not always sure as to how we would proceed. We usually started with narratives of practice. Some of these narratives were simple while others uncovered tensions in someone's practice which often reflected wider tensions within the early childhood field or the dominant discourses found all around us. Once we found the place where uncertainty and dis-comfort resided we struggled with naming the issues that were provoked. Like the bad guy beavers we found ourselves returning to the topic from different angles and perspectives.

Sharing stories and selves is challenging; putting words to emotions is uncomfortable. As we grew to trust and respect each other we shared more difficult narratives. It took some courage for a participant to share her anger at having a pretend gun pointed at her as she made room for the exploration of gunplay. Telling the story she re-lived the anger and shared her discomfort at realizing how intensely she reacted. Holding her narrative gently other educators began to share moments of confusion and intense emotion. Finding theoretical structures, which could hold these narratives helped contain the emotional responses and began to give us language to discuss them.

In our reading of Edmiston's work (2008) we tried to understand children's play as explorations of how to be in relationship in meaningful and ethical ways. As we support children's pretend play Edmiston argues that children create "space-times where through evaluation of the deeds of possible selves they form and shape their ethical identities" (p. 23). Children explore different issues and ideas in their intense play; they bring up topics with which we are

uncomfortable. We had to recognize that children want to explore areas that are disquieting and part of our discomfort comes from a dissonance that comes from the widespread discourse of children's innocence and ignorance.

Children's moments of fear and anger, their uncertainties and their intense desires are not so different from our own. How we manage our own longings and terrors that lurk beneath the surface depends on our own histories, our own values and beliefs. Finding a path through the powerful emotions elicited by children and their families and sharing narratives that make sense of those emotions can be a comfort and allow caregivers to continue to be present for the children in their care. This path is not easy or untangled, "the intention to understand is already an emotionally wrought experience, for it returns us to times when we cannot understand and when we ourselves feel misunderstood " (Britzman, 2009, p. 95).

There was a need to widen the discourses of the "good early childhood educator". Paying attention to the places of discomfort led us to reading other theorists who made us question, modify or move to deeper thinking. Britzman says,

> … development is uneven because we are born too soon and become responsible for a world we have not made. If we have the strange work of trying to understand the minds of others and still keep our own mind, if we have the work of welcoming what cannot be understood and the responsibility for a hospitality without reserve, if we confront a world that is wearing out, and if we must work from all this ignorance, teacher education may begin. (p. 44)

Once a year during this project all the groups met to discuss their work and listen to a guest speaker who shared their work. Sharing this narrative within this Sharing Circle Kim was unsettled by the reactions that it provoked. Afterwards she reflected on the tension she felt in the room. While some educators in the group had understood the value of opening up a crack in our practice, others judged her as irresponsible for not stopping this play. One participant extended the dialogue by sharing a story of having had a child whose father was in jail for murder and her centre had chosen to be open about this child's reality and encouraged the child along with the other children to draw pictures to send to her father and another wondered how she could have allowed the play to continue.

Having found the process valuable the group in Victoria continues to meet. We discussed Kim's narrative, the ideas within this chapter and the Sharing Circle. Many in our group wondered if they would have been able to stand up and share a narrative like Kim's in the more public venue of the Sharing circle. Fearing judgment silences many of us. Feeling that Kim's story was powerful the group agreed that it had impacted their practice and encouraged them to be more open to children's play and to think of it differently. One person said she had thought about the narrative "a lot" and without this particular story she might "have shut it [the play] down without thinking." Like the girls who eventually found their voice to tell the boys they didn't like the play the group had created a space for uncomfortable stories to be shared. If Kim had not allowed the play and the bad guy beavers to explore their "badness" the girls might not have had the opportunity to go through a process of finding their voice.

Kim's story provides a space for educators to take up a dialogue about children's play, children's philosophizing and how we respond in a meaningful manner. It is through discussing narratives such as these that we can provoke thinking about our own beliefs and understandings about these issues. Where are we in response to children's questions about violence, gender and power? Thinking together with children about these questions would connect us to ancient quests to understand life and its meaning more deeply. Our own personal story will impact our response; our image of ourselves as educators will influence our replies. Together we can find space for dialogue and reflections and begin to open places of tension and ambiguity.

Acknowledging and articulating the darker aspects of our work with children can provoke others to attend to the places which are uneasy or uncomfortable. Listening deeply to children to hear their underlying questions and fears we may find some of our own reflected. How can we pay proper attention to these places of un-ease? It is through welcoming dialogue and listening closely that we begin to disclose the complexity of children's play and our own responses to that play. Farquhar (2010) reminds us that by "using a narrative, dialogical approach to recover memory, to understand systems of reasoning and categories of inclusion is a challenge for all involved in early childhood education" (p. 8). And Elie Wiesel (1989) says, " a primary difference between an immoral society and moral society is that in an immoral society, people don't listen, know everything, know the question, know the answer to the question. Cliches are used, but in a moral society, there is a sense of wonder, at the presence of someone

else. I am free because others are free." (p. 3).

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