

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: STARTING OUR DAY THE ROOM 119 WAY: A
 QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM
 COMMUNITY AND ITS ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL
 MORNING WORK

Aimee Domire, Master of Arts, 2009

Thesis directed by: Professor Steven Selden
 Department of Education and Policy Studies

This study explores the experiences of multicultural, Title I second-grade students as they experience a daily “Soft Landing,” the time and space set aside for the first thirty minutes each morning for students to make choices about what activities to engage in. The portraiture methodology as outlined by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) establishes the framework for this narrative inquiry. I address four questions: What is “Soft Landing;” How do students choose to use their “Soft Landing” time and how do these choices change over time; What does “Soft Landing” mean to students; What have I learned about myself as a teacher during “Soft Landing?” By observing and interviewing nine second-grade students over three months, I learn that when children are in charge of their own learning and thinking, they actually know how to structure their academic lives without waiting for someone else to do it for them.

STARTING OUR DAY THE ROOM 119 WAY:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AN ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM COMMUNITY
AND ITS ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL MORNING WORK

By

Aimee Domire

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Steven Selden, Chair
Professor Francine Hultgren
Associate Professor John O'Flahavan

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Jo Anne Moyer

For giving me my own “Soft Landing” right from the start

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PREFACE

Second Grade, The First Year

Right from the very start of my teaching career, second grade was my home. Perhaps I ended up in second grade by chance the first year, but the fact that I remained for the eight years that followed was not by chance at all. And although I have always loved and appreciated the seven-year-old child as much as I do now, my second grade space did not always look and feel the way it does today. In fact, my teaching is so different now that it is almost hard to remember who I was in the beginning. And when I look back, I realize that even I did not know my identity as a teacher during the early days of my career. Even though I put endless hours into my work, I know now that it was not completely mine, as many of the practices that found their way through my classroom door were borrowed from the veteran teachers that lined the hallway. That year, when my students entered the classroom, they got right to work. “Morning Work” was just an accepted part of the school day much like lunch or recess. And so each day I made sure fresh packets of worksheets were neatly placed on each child’s desk. At that time, I did not know I had the power to question the way things were done. And so I did not question. I just copied packets and the children wasted no time getting to work.

The “Soft Landing” Second Grade

Throughout that first year, I continued to educate myself by reading professional literature and I was surrounded by tales of teachers who imagined that things could be different in schools and in classrooms. As I, too, started to gain the confidence to think for myself and make my own decisions about what was best for my students and our classroom, I realized that the “Morning Work” tradition did not fit with my beliefs as a

teacher. Was a packet of busy-work really what I wanted students to be greeting with as soon as they walked in the door? Was this the tone I wanted to set for the day?

Like the teachers I read about, I started to imagine the classroom and the school day as something different, as something designed with the children in mind. And so I developed “Soft Landing,” the time and space set aside for the first thirty minutes each morning for students to make their own choices about what activities to engage in as they make the transition from home to school. Key principles of “Soft Landing” include trusting children by opening space for *culture* – creating a caring, respectful, and empathetic climate for learning and teaching; *conversation* – respecting students’ ideas, opinions, and decisions by giving their voices sincere consideration as they engage in meaningful discussions with peers and adults; *care* – promoting the growth of students as healthy, competent, moral, happy people; *time* – opening time for students to think for themselves, interact with peers, and establish relationships; and *choice* – allowing students to make informed decisions about their own learning while providing space for students to pose and solve personally meaningful problems.

I initially developed “Soft Landing” in an effort to combat the forces of the skill-and-drill based pedagogical practices and contrived thinking that somehow found their way into my classroom. And at first, that is all I thought “Soft Landing” was – a time for students to choose activities and subject matter that suited their interests. But I watched over eight years as something very different unfolded. I watched as imagination began to take root in our classroom and as children experienced more vibrant ways of being in the world. I watched as students began to have their own purpose and direction for their

learning activities – not just during “Soft Landing,” but during the rest of the school day, too.

“Soft Landing” is a time for challenging play that develops children’s powers of concentration and sustained involvement. During “Soft Landing,” children engage deeply in self-selected, self-initiated play-like activities. Children engage so deeply that they experience a rhythm of involvement that resembles an improvisational invention cycle, as children make and create in the moment in response to the stimulus of their environment. I create the “Soft Landing” ritual as an intentional effort to grow and mold creativity, to develop and strengthen goodness, and to release and reenergize imagination. It was created as a way to encourage a yearning inside children to want to define and discover themselves, each other, and our world. When provided with an atmosphere of challenge and concentration, a predictable structure for intensified and strategic play, and time and space for freedom and choice, the children turn their predictable environment into something unpredictable.

A Necessary Story

Taylor (1989) posits that, “We must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a ‘quest’” (p. 52). I embark on this particular quest with a hope for more vibrant ways of living classroom life, with a desire to help create more humane and liberating classrooms. I believe there are pathways toward better ways of teaching and better ways of life. I hope to speak in the language of story, a language that is not coded or exclusive, a language that may address wider, more eclectic audiences. I developed a research story that calls readers to think more deeply about issues that concern them. As I engage in narrative and storytelling as a way of knowing (Bruner, 1986), my hope is that the story I

tell will move readers to think about their own classroom identities, as well as the identities that their students create within their classroom space. I hope I will move readers to join my mission to help immigrant children rise above the limitations that they were born into. I write to inform and inspire readers. I write to deepen the conversation.

Travel to Room 119

I invite you to take a journey into Room 119, a diverse second-grade classroom in a Title I early childhood primary school, in one of the largest public school districts in the United States. I invite you to experience a Room 119 “Soft Landing” in an effort to understand the lived experiences of multicultural, Title I students who begin their day with “Soft Landing” each morning. Throughout this journey I discover:

1. What is “Soft Landing?”
2. How do students choose to use their “Soft Landing” time? How do these choices change over time?
3. What does “Soft Landing” mean to students?
4. What have I learned about myself as a teacher during “Soft Landing?”

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Opening Space for Jason

It is the end of what feels like an endless third day of school. My feet are dying to have a break from the wedge sandals that seemed like a smart shoe choice eight hours earlier. Without trying to talk myself out of it, I make a mental note to replace my after-school trip to the gym with a much-needed nap. After just a few short summer weeks, I clearly have forgotten the rigors of the job. “Did I always have to talk so much at the beginning of the year?” I wonder. “Did last year’s group seem this dependent in August? Am I always this tired?” My head continues to spin with questions as I begin to sift through a laundry basket piled high with school supplies. Just as I make a dreaded glance at the guided reading table, which is piled high with registration forms, emergency cards, and memos about bus routes, lunch money and fire drills, the secretary’s voice filters into my room through the loudspeaker and requests my presence in the office. For a moment I consider walking to the office barefoot, but quickly reconsider and decide to squeeze my aching feet back into their source of torture instead. While I trudge up the steps for what seems like the hundredth time that day, I pass colleagues who look as tired as I feel.

My uncertainty about the purpose of my office visit is erased when I see the unfamiliar boy sitting on the over-sized chair that seems to swallow him whole. I learn that the tiny boy, Jason¹, will be my student, the newest member of Room 119. I kneel down beside him, smile, and introduce myself. Jason’s lack of response coupled with the scared look on his face tells me that school is not a comfortable place for him. The

¹ All names of the children in this study are pseudonyms

visibly hard outer shell that Jason wears causes me to wonder about the ghosts that haunt him. I look into his eyes as I ask him if he would like to visit our classroom. I think I see a tiny sparkle gleaming deep within his eyes. As I reach for his hand and feel him clench mine, I instantly forget all about my fatigue, my aching feet, and the stacks of papers looming on my table. I think about the spark of life that is lying dormant within Jason. The life that has been squelched perhaps by too many responsibilities, by too many worries, the life that is desperate to be released, the life that beckons me. “Help me...listen to me...” And with these thoughts I remember this is what my job is all about. This is why I am a teacher.

As the days pass, I gain small doses of Jason’s trust. With each smile, gentle shoulder squeeze, and genuine attempt to just listen that I offer, Jason begins to emerge from his shell. I use “Soft Landing,” the time I set aside at the beginning of each day for my students to choose how they ease into the transition from home life to school culture, to be present and available for Jason and his stories. Bit by bit, story by story, Jason begins to let me into his world. I learn about his seven brothers and sisters who share the second room of their two-bedroom apartment. I learn about a stepfather who expects perfection and handles accidentally dropped cereal bowls with his fist. I learn about a mother whose body is tired from fighting battle after battle with illness. With each story, I remind myself that before Jason comes to me each day to be a student he is someone else. He has a different identity and a different reality. He is a son and an older brother. He is a son and an older brother with a burdening amount of home responsibility. He is a son and an older brother whose family circumstances have forced, not asked, him to grow

up too quickly. Even so, he is still a child, still a seven-year-old, second-grade child, a child who is now partially mine.

Opening Space for Culture

When I think back to my conversations with Jason and remember the urgency in his stories, the need for someone to just listen, I wonder why he waited so long to talk. Clearly, Jason had a need to share the stories woven together to create his life. Had he already shared them with some other teacher at some other school, or was something different this time that caused the opening in Jason's shell? What allowed him to let down his physical barrier? In the midst of these questions, I wonder if I am the first person who felt something while looking into Jason's eyes. Am I the first person to look deeply enough?

As I search for answers to my many questions, I begin to reflect on the space my second grade students and I have created within the walls of our classroom. Room 119 is more than an ordinary classroom filled with tables, chairs, and chalkboards. The cozy corners piled with pillows, the colorful curtains dancing in the breeze behind the plush couch, and the warm, glowing lamps tell the story of Room 119 as a joyful place. The artwork and anchor charts designed, created, and authored by children tell the story of Room 119 as a place where kids live, a place where kids are valued and honored. I believe that classrooms need to be interesting, joyful, beckoning, and welcoming so that they invite curiosity, exploration, collaboration, and conversation. Even so, the more I consider our joyful place, I conclude that real classroom communities are more than just a "look." Real classroom communities, at all levels, are like happy families and secure homes, the kind in which all family members can tell their private stories, knowing they

will be listened to with affection and respect. Real classroom communities honor students' voices and enhance student's ownership of learning.

I realize that tossing a few pillows in a corner and securing curtains to the window frames do not replace careful and deliberate efforts to build relationships, establish trust, and get to know children as learners and as people. I think about the reality that once our room is beautifully and thoughtfully arranged, and the brand-new supplies are sorted and stored, our work has just begun. Keeping the deliberate efforts I make to create culture in mind, I reflect deeper on our Room 119 space. I think about the many strands of being that my students and I weave together to create our classroom culture, the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and patterns of everyday life that characterize our room. I think about how we take the time to listen to each other as we create a vision for our Room 119 space, the ways we want our class to be. I think about how we believe goodness is inherent in everyone and show this by including others and living by the motto "You can't say, 'You can't play'" (Paley, 1992). I think about how we coax out independence, self-determination, and exploration by showing each other wonderful ways to use classroom supplies and then giving each other room to "have at it." It is because of these efforts that Room 119 is a place where individual and unique qualities, interests, and feelings flourish. It is because of these shared values that Room 119 is a home where children experience the kind of liberation that allows their individual voices to sing out. At the same time, these liberated children remain fully committed to weaving their individual voices together to create a shared learning experience.

Johnston (2004) reminds us that the social relationships within which children learn are part of their learning. Children, just like adults, learn better in a supportive

environment in which they can risk trying out new strategies and concepts while stretching themselves intellectually. This is not just because a supportive community enables individuals to extend their minds beyond themselves without risk, but also because the relationship associated with learning is an inextricable part of what is learned. Children must have the experience of being a part of learning communities in which individuals feel valued and supported, and that sustain productive and critical learning.

Johnston (2004) says teachers can use language to build caring and respectful learning communities, communities that are playful, but in which participants take each other's ideas seriously in the process of getting things done. This does not mean that all the participants agree, but that they all agree to try to understand each other and to become mutually involved. Students and teachers essentially agree to be parts of the same social mind for a period of time in a classroom place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a classroom place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership (hooks, 2003). Indeed, schools should be places in which teachers and children live together, talk to each other, reason together, and take delight in each other's company (Noddings, 1992).

Opening Space for Conversation

Like the other members of Room 119, Jason begins each day with a "Soft Landing." Instead of following a plan that I lay out, Jason chooses his own activities. Many days Jason chooses to cuddle into the black saucer chair with the class rain-stick in hand. I watch him as he turns the stick over and over again to listen to the beads as they pour from one side to the other. I can tell the rain-like sound is soothing and I do not

interrupt Jason's ritual. Other days Jason sits next to me and shares stories that make my eyes fill with tears and my stomach churn with hurt. He tells me how the grownups in his home life tell him he is stupid and that he cannot do anything right.

Perhaps as a mission to prove these grownups wrong, one morning during "Soft Landing," Jason decides to see how high he can count. He develops the counting strip, a system for recording his counting. I watch without intervening as Jason's counting strip continues to grow each day. When numbers fill all the space that one strip offers, Jason solves the problem by taping additional strips together. Each day as Soft Landing comes to an end, Jason rolls his strip and stores it in his cubby. Each morning, Jason smiles as he brings his strip to a table and begins working diligently. "I wonder how high I'll get today!" he says. Soon many children sit with Jason at the table with their own versions of the counting strip that he invented weeks earlier. Chatter bounces from one child to the next. "I never thought I could count this high," says one child. "I'm going to use a different color marker for every group of ten," says another. "Does anyone know how to write one hundred ten? I'm stuck," asks another. Soon even the largest rubber band we can find will not fit around Jason's strip. And so the days, weeks, and months pass. And so in the company of peers, Jason continues to count and tape, count and tape, count and tape.

One morning in June, Jason heaves his ball of numbers over to me and proclaims, "Look! I did it! I finally got to ten thousand!" While offering my congratulations and reassurance of how smart I know he is, I say, "Wow! You really like to count." Jason's reaction is not what I expect. "Not really," he responds. "If you don't like to count, why do you work on your counting strip every morning?" I wonder aloud. "Do you know

what I do before I come here?” Jason responds. Because I am unaware, Jason fills me in.

In Room 119, children and adults engage in ongoing conversations about things that matter to them. In many ways, “Soft Landing” is a time for talk – talk that is student sponsored, talk that is academically focused, and talk that is conversational. The talk during “Soft Landing” is unprompted and children use the words they find in the air to make plans for how they will use their time; to act upon and adjust those plans by recruiting participants, establishing guidelines, and handling any disagreements that may occur; and to learn from one another as they engage in joyful and authentic childlike play, work and discovery. “Let’s look at the crickets to see if they have spiracles like our caterpillars,” Charles says to Pablo during “Soft Landing” one day. “Okay,” replies Pablo. “I’ll get magnifying glasses so we can see close.” As Pablo walks away Charles says, “Hey, Pablo, can you get me a square magnifying glass instead of a round one? I want the *polygon* magnifying glass.” Children say so many smart things every day.

In Room 119, children and adults can trust that their voices will be heard. I believe this kind of trust begins with adults who model engaged listening. Because I am able to say, “I never interrupt you when you talk to me” since I live by those words, I am able to expect the same kind of listening in return. When children experience the reality of being listened to without interruption, they start to consider their own purpose for listening to others and they start to develop listening as a practice of self (Levin, 1989). I often ask children to reflect on what it means to listen to someone and to consider the multitude of purposes surrounding the act of listening. When they begin to describe listening as “a gift” and as a “schema builder,” I get a sense that they value talk for

reasons other than pure social gratification. When they are able to say things like, “You know when you listen to someone else, you get their ideas – a little bit of their schema rubs off onto you.” “Yeah, then you can use what they know in your own thinking.” “It’s kind of like you’re renting their schema.” I can tell that they have formed their own meaningful purposes for listening.

When children develop their own meaningful purpose for listening and trust that they will be heard, they begin to feel free to talk. Just like that, the words start flowing because children know that someone will listen and someone will care. And when the words start flowing and teachers start listening, we learn a lot about our students. Levin (1989) reminds us that, “To listen to another is to learn what the world is like from a position that is not one’s own; to listen is to reverse position, role, and experience” (p. 193). “Soft Landing” gives time for students to talk, and it gives time for teachers to listen, to experience life from their students’ positions. Through their talk, children let us into their worlds. I listen, pay attention, and continue to carve out a “Soft Landing” space each morning where children can talk their way into stories in the company of an audience who values what they have to say. Inviting children to talk about themselves and about what they know honors them for who they are.

Opening Space for Care

During “Soft Landing,” I develop my own listening self and I make an honest effort to hear every student’s voice. By listening, I learn that Jason, a seven-year-old child, is responsible for making sure he and his four school-aged siblings get to school each day. I learn that responsibility proves to be an enormous burden for Jason who experiences many sleepless nights, as he is overcome with anxiety. “I worry that the

alarm will not go off. Then I will be in trouble,” he tells me. I learn that after waking his brothers and sisters, Jason makes breakfast, supervises showers and teeth brushing sessions, and makes sure everyone is dressed appropriately. I learn that Jason uses his key to lock his sleeping mom, stepfather, and three small siblings into the apartment and then walks his family across the street to school. I learn that Jason arrives at our school a half hour early each morning, “Just in case. It’s better to be safe,” he says. Then Jason offers the most profound explanation. “Mrs. Domire you don’t understand. I *need* ‘Soft Landing.’ I need time. I worry so much every morning. My stomach is hurting and my heart is beating. My head is not ready for learning when I come here. So I count. It is easy to write numbers. And I don’t have to think about anything. My head gets empty and ready. When ‘Soft Landing’ is done, I am ready for learning.”

“You’re right Jason,” I think to myself. “I didn’t understand. But now, thanks to you, I finally get it.” It has nothing to do with the counting. Instead, it has everything to do with the *time* and *space* to just do, to just be². It has everything to do with the *time* and *space* to forget about all that came, all that happened before stepping into our classroom doors. It has everything to do with the local culture that “Soft Landing” offers.

I take time to reflect on the stories Jason shared with me. I reflect on his openness. I arrive at an understanding of Room 119 as more than a home in its physical sense that houses children as they spend their days within its walls. Instead, Room 119 is a place that offers time for real, genuine human contact. It is a place where children learn how to build and maintain lasting relationships with both adults and peers. It is a place

² I use the phrase “to be” to refer to “being” in a natural form. When students are able “to just be,” they can be themselves fully without trying to fit into someone else’s mold of what is “right.”

where the “little things” do not go unnoticed. By noticing Jaime’s washable Spiderman tattoos and Isabel’s sparkly blue nail polish, by asking about Adriana’s new baby brother and Ana’s visiting grandma, a space for kindness, care, and trust opens. By giving Fernando my old Sony walkman so he can listen to books on tape at home, buying a bird book to encourage Antonio’s talent for identifying the feathered creatures on the playground, and even putting a band-aid on Katie’s nearly invisible paper cut, I show the children in Room 119 that I love being their teacher. All the while I am modeling for children how to show someone you care about them. I am modeling how to listen and respond to each other in respectful, thoughtful ways. I am modeling how to create lasting relationships...lasting friendships.

According to Noddings (2005), “To listen attentively and to respond as positively as possible are the very hallmarks of caring” (p. xiv). For the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962), care is inevitable; all aware human beings care. But perhaps not everyone develops the capacity to care for others in the way described above. I feel responsible to not only create caring relations with my students in which I am the caregiver, but also to help my students develop the capacity to care. I believe that the adult companionship I offer to any child who enters Room 119’s doors feeds children’s spirits and fuels children’s hopes while increasing their own ability to care for others in return.

Just as the children of Room 119 are engaged in their self-directed work and play during “Soft Landing,” I am engaged in watching their interactions. I do not see “Soft Landing” as time to gather last minute supplies for my reading groups or as a spare moment to cut out lamination. Rather, “Soft Landing” is a time to watch and learn, a

time to be present for my students. I realize that children have a need to be seen. They need the validation and encouragement that comes from my best attention to their efforts. They need the safety that comes from the belief that their teacher sees them, knows them, and cares for them. Mutual trust and care grow from feelings of safety and security. And when all children feel seen, they are released to work. Charney (1991) offers affirmation. She tells us that children need to be seen so they can venture off, leaving the enclosure of the teacher for new experiences with work and play.

Opening Space for Time

In the midst of a growing trend to push scripted programs and prepackaged materials into classroom doors I have not given up the good fight of thinking for myself and motivating my students to do the same. Real life is not scripted and neither is real teaching. With the reality of mandated curriculum, however, it may seem risky to step back, open up, and give time for something to happen. Living between worlds of standardization and individuality seems profoundly challenging. I maintain that providing time for spaces that can be filled with academic choices affords students the opportunity to take their learning to further levels than students in a classroom where standards are simply being checked off a list in the midst of a skills-based curriculum. The alternative to these spaces, namely, the force of standardization, silences the voices of teachers' creativity and humanness, as well as the voice of any child including those who stand beyond the parameters of the mainstream culture. Miller (2002) reminds us that children everywhere know that the secret of wisdom is to be curious about the world. True, children have a special talent to open up their senses and see, hear, taste, touch, and smell life's treasures. I believe that giving children time to explore their world, ask

questions, and pursue those questions lets them know that I value their curiosity outside the classroom as well as inside.

I have always valued the empty spaces found in classroom life, the time that is not filled with an overflowing agenda of tasks. I believe that the act of providing time for something to open up and happen often times leads to the most profound kind of learning and perhaps the most personally relevant and meaningful kind too. This core belief about providing time in coordination with an effort to combat the forces of the skill-and-drill-based pedagogical practices that have found their way back into the school day while sadly replacing more engaging and effective instructional strategies, inspired me to create “Soft Landing,” an intentional gift of time given to my students during the first thirty minutes of their school day as they make the transition from home to school, an intentional gift of time for kids to have organic, adult-free interactions with each other.

“Soft Landing” helps create a luscious feeling of endless time in our Room 119 space. During “Soft Landing” we experience the gift of slowing down, being present, and living in the moment. We do not hurry to finish one project so we can quickly move on to the next task. We do not try to squeeze in one more objective into an already jam-packed day. We do not watch the clock, wondering how we will manage to get everything accomplished before the little hand reaches the three. During “Soft Landing,” it feels as though we have endless amounts of time. And when “Soft Landing” does come to an end for the day, we know there will always be more time for “Soft Landing” tomorrow.

Time is golden. How we use our precious classroom time defines our priorities. After all, as Calkins (2001) often writes, choosing to include something in our daily

schedule is, by necessity, a choice to reject something else. In the midst of a battle for time, Charney (1991) reminds us that we need to remember that academics and social behavior are profoundly intertwined. The more children care about school because of friendly feelings and the chance to be heard, the more likely they are to grow academically as well as socially (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). Without time in our day to talk to children and to allow children to talk to each other, friendly feelings toward school may be slow to develop.

Opening Space for Choice

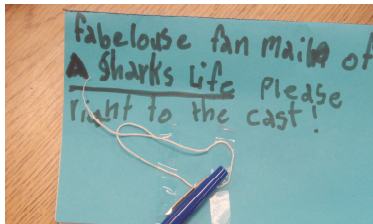


Figure 1. Katherine's fan mail booklet

Each morning for the past eight years I have given my students the gifts of time and choice by opening space for “Soft Landing,” and each morning I watched as their choices about what to pursue during this empty time have evolved from September to June. I watched as Katherine recruited fellow second grade comrades to star in A Shark's Life her Broadway-caliber production. The group cooperated seamlessly while using fabric, thread, needles, paper, staplers, scissors, markers, and glue to create costumes, props, tickets, scripts, programs, signs, and fan mail booklets (see Figure 1). I watched as Matthew perfected Zimeato (pronounced Zim-toe), his own language. Once he put the finishing touches on his dictionary and translation guide, he held seminars for any who cared to try to speak in his new tongue. In no time our entire class was fluent in Zimeato. I watched as Connor mastered his paper laptop design and invited a few especially crafty friends to step on his factory-based assembly line to speed up production. I remember thinking the “Employee of the

Day” award badges, proudly worn by employees who made the most laptops, were an especially clever touch. I watched as Natalie, Emilie, Isabel, and Ashley wrote their very own reader’s theatre script to help others learn about space exploration in as much detail as they had during their self-directed research venture. I watched as plays, dictionaries, laptop businesses, and reader’s theatre performances replaced earlier choices to play with play dough, build with Legos®, and paint with watercolors. I watched as children began to live their learning.

According to Denton (2005), when students have choices in their learning, they become highly engaged and productive. They are excited about learning and sharing their knowledge. They are likely to think more deeply and creatively, work with more persistence, and willingly use a range of academic skills and strategies. When teachers give students permission to make choices about the tasks they will pursue and the freedom to act upon those choices, they introduce students to their own capacity to go beyond created structures in order to create other, more meaningful experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1967). Children’s imaginations alone enlarge any experience (Greene, 1995). By allowing imagination to take root in the classroom, children experience “more vibrant ways of being in the world” (Greene, p. 5) and the classroom becomes more humane and liberating as a result. Dewey (1916) may say this is because teachers open pathways toward better ways of life when they allow students to have their own purpose and direction for their learning activities.

Opening Space for Research

It is with the spirit of opening pathways toward better ways of classroom life that I turn to research. By engaging in qualitative inquiry, I learn more about students’

experiences when they have their own purpose and direction for their learning activities. I learn about how they choose to engage with “Soft Landing” each day.

Purpose

It seems as though in the incessant push for higher test scores, and in the face of endless editorials about the demise of public schools, many schools are missing the bigger picture by filling every moment with “stuff,” which is often fragmented and meaningless. Rather than capitalizing on student curiosity, schools tend to stifle it or suffocate it completely. “Children enter the still-19th-century institution of school and immediately become ‘students’ who are handed the menu, not the feast of real learning” (Clifford & Friesen, 2003, p. 93). Too many of us rarely invite meaningful child-developed experiences inside our classroom doors. Indeed, children have an almost infinite ability to discover, to understand, and to discuss even the most abstract ideas, ideas that sadly have been tucked away in many classrooms to make room for contrived thinking. In my experience, the best classroom moments happen in those in-between spaces, those instances that are void of teacher scripted lines and that haven’t been planned down to the tiniest detail. It is when children are given the space to just think, to just be, that their ideas become so profound.

Through the years, I have collected anecdotes and artifacts that tell the story of “Soft Landing” as a time for building relationships and enhancing community, a time for playing together and making new friends, a time for practicing being thoughtful and respectful to each other, and a time for learning the art of sharing a room and everything in it with many other people. These artifacts tell the story of “Soft Landing” as a time to explore children’s interests, as a place where children’s voices are heard. When I reflect

on my experience as a teacher in a “Soft Landing” place, I realize that when I trust children by giving them the gifts of space, time, and choice, they are able to develop stronger relationships with teachers and peers. They are able to take their own learning to deeper levels. They are more motivated to work during the rest of the day when it is time for me to have a bit more control over the classroom agenda, all because they are ready, all because they had time, all because they had a “Soft Landing.”

As a teacher in a “Soft Landing” classroom, I observe “Soft Landing’s” power year after year. From these observations, I know why “Soft Landing” is valuable to me, a teacher and child advocate. I am less clear, however, about what “Soft Landing” means to my students, to their identities, and to their social and academic learning. How do students experience the “Soft Landing” phenomenon? What does “Soft Landing” mean to the students who experience it? It is time to engage in a careful analysis of “Soft Landing,” the time and space that I carve out at the beginning of each day for students to have control over their own learning.

“Soft Landing” Defined

For the purpose of this research project, “Soft Landing” will be defined as the time and space set aside each morning for students to make their own choices about what activities to engage in as they make the transition from home to school. “Soft Landing” makes up the first thirty minutes of the students’ school day. Key principles of “Soft Landing” include trusting children by opening space for *culture* – creating a caring, respectful, and empathetic climate for learning and teaching; *conversation* – respecting students’ ideas, opinions, and decisions by giving their voices sincere consideration as they engage in meaningful discussions with peers and adults; *care* – promoting the

growth of students as healthy, competent, moral, happy people; *time* – opening time for students to think for themselves, interact with peers, and establish relationships; and *choice* – allowing students to make informed decisions about their own learning while providing space for students to pose and solve personally meaningful problems.

Research Questions

Through qualitative inquiry, I strive to create a unique portrait of the “Soft Landing” classroom, using the methodological framework of Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997). To do this, I will use a portraiture methodology to develop a narrative about the lived experiences of multicultural, Title I students who begin their day with “Soft Landing” each morning. I ask:

1. What is “Soft Landing?”
2. How do students choose to use their “Soft Landing” time? How do these choices change over time?
3. What does “Soft Landing” mean to students?
4. What have I learned about myself as a teacher during “Soft Landing?”

By asking these questions and learning about my students’ experiences I learn more about the conditions that lead to the sort of highly engaged, childlike play and work that occur during “Soft Landing.” I wonder, can we formalize and then spread the child-initiated, joyful, authentic learning that occurs during “Soft Landing” in order to extend the learning opportunities “Soft Landing” affords to many students in many classrooms?

Rationale

Through the years, I listened as students opened up, shared their stories, and revealed a bit about who they are. These students and their lived experiences taught me

to value “Soft Landing” for many reasons. They taught me to wonder if “Soft Landing” means something different (something more?) to my Title I students. Does the safety that “Soft Landing” provides allow these students to neglect their “deficit” identities? Does “Soft Landing” give these students permission to just be seven-year-old children instead of carrying the burden of so much more? Does “Soft Landing” give these students time, much needed time, to forget painful realities, and to make newer, better memories? Does “Soft Landing” provide a temporary, local culture for a home culture that may be fragmented? These wonderings combined with my own lived experiences as a teacher in a “Soft Landing” classroom have helped me to reflect on the significance of my proposed study.

As an educator in a Title I school, I have the privilege of spending each day caring for a room full of “Jasons,” individuals who are filled with enormous potential - seven-year-olds who are just beginning to grow into the people they will become. Because these “Jasons” stand beyond the parameters of the mainstream culture, some have replaced their potential with labels of deficits: lazy, asleep, unmotivated, unfocused, ambitionless – the list continues. Are they tagged so harshly because their immigrant parents face the reality of working as painters, maids, mechanics, and babysitters? Because they live in too small apartments with too many people? Because they are different?

Imagine if I, their teacher, joined in such name-calling behavior. If I accepted their labels, would my students grow to their fullest potential? When given the opportunity to show what they really know, I have seen that my Title I students from marginalized families are not shy of brilliant. So how am I, their teacher, able to awaken these very

same “disadvantaged,” children who are saddled with “deficits” and help them to rise above their labels?

Vygotsky (1978) posits that children grow into the intellectual life around them. If I commit to developing a classroom where teachers and children are passionate, robust learners, as well as develop a curriculum that acknowledges the importance of the lived experiences of children and teachers, then students will really rise to the occasion. Instead of viewing my children as “disadvantaged” and lowering my expectations, I hold them up as examples of courage and resilience and expect their assets to lead them to academic success. Instead of defining my immigrant children as “academically deficient,” I view them as world travelers and experts on their home cultures. I am continuously awed by their growing bilingualism. I realize that children from low-income homes and children of immigrants, who also may live in poverty, straddle at least two cultures every day. This feat is impressive for anyone, and especially for children.

All too often our Title I learners are assigned deficit identities. Research warns that these students are left behind other students even before they walk through the school doors (Hart & Risley, 1995). All hope is not lost, however, especially if we facilitate the replacement of a deficit identity with a resilience identity. Masten, Best, and Garmenzy (1990) define resilience as the “capacity for or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (p. 425). My research shows that “Soft Landing” is a successful resilience-builder. That is, students who have the time and space to make choices at the beginning of the school day are better able to adapt, despite their challenging and sometimes threatening home circumstances. If “Soft Landing” is in fact a method of adaptation, my students’ experiences will have significance for fragile students in general, their teachers, and their administrators, as it

could positively influence culturally-based pedagogical practices.

Opening Space to Look Forward

First impressions count. Classroom environments need to be welcoming places: interesting, joyful places that beckon kids and teachers to actively participate in the pursuit of knowledge; places that invite curiosity, exploration, collaboration, and conversation; places that make us want to come in and stay, day after day after day. “Soft Landing” is the kind of first impression kids should have. I created “Soft Landing,” an intentional gift of culture, conversation, care, time, and choice, to help fuel my students at the beginning of each school day. The students of Room 119 can trust that they will be greeted with a “Soft Landing” and its predictable structure every morning. And I, their teacher, can trust that over time “Soft Landing” will begin to shape my students, our classroom, and our learning. “Soft Landing” is a transformative, liberating classroom practice. By studying how my students experience “Soft Landing,” I hope to be able to better understand and describe the child-initiated, joyful, authentic learning that occurs during “Soft Landing” in order to extend the learning opportunities “Soft Landing” affords to many students in many classrooms.

In an effort to better understand the “Soft Landing” opportunity and the opportunities it offers, I turn to research literature. I use the following chapter to explore themes of safety, predictability, focus, solitude, and play since I believe “Soft Landing” paves the way for these necessary structures, giving them a home within classroom life.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Necessity of Safe Surroundings

“Does anyone mind if I go first?” Jocelyn asks. “We’d be honored!” her Room 119 peers respond in unison. “Today when I was reading I learned that bats are nocturnal just like our hamster, Pumpkin.” Jocelyn slowly walks around the circle of second graders to show them the page she marked with a sticky note earlier that morning. “Hey, I read about a nocturnal animal too!” Brian adds to connect to Jocelyn’s sharing. “The raccoon is nocturnal!” he says while pointing to the cover of his book. “We know a lot of nocturnal animals,” Isabel states with pride. “You’re right! I am so impressed that you are learning so much from the books you choose to read during ‘Soft Landing,’” I respond. “Do you have something to add?” Adriana asks Matthew. “It looks like you are thinking about something good,” she continues. “Yeah, tell us your idea! We want to hear!” chimes a chorus of second grade voices. “Well, I was just thinking...if an animal who is awake in the night is called nocturnal, then is an animal who is awake in the day called dayturnal?” Matthew asks with seriousness. “Wow, smart thinking Matthew!” I say. “I really like how you played with words and took a risk to share your idea. You’re right, it would make sense to call animals who are active during the day dayturnal animals! But, in actuality, scientists refer to those creatures as diurnal,” I explain. “But really good idea, Matthew!” Adriana adds while patting him on the back. “Yeah, smart thinking!” Fernando says. He gives Matthew two thumbs up and almost instantly, the whole circle of children mimics Fernando’s supportive gesture.

Trusting Classroom Communities

There is a magical power found within a collaborative classroom community where everyone's ideas are valued and respected. There is a spirit that permeates the air. I think of Room 119 as a climate where children's voices have a place and where there is time to explore children's wonderings. I believe that children in such classrooms take their learning to further levels than students in classrooms where standards are simply being checked off a list. That is, I trust students to be able to make their own decisions about their classroom and their learning. Foucault (1995), however, said that many teachers are technicians of discipline, as they manage children, controlling them in time and space. After all, don't many teachers arrange their students in rows facing the teacher's desk? Just like the panopticon, such a classroom design allows continuous surveillance to take place. And perhaps after years of continued surveillance, students subconsciously learn to internalize the "gaze." Where is the trust in such classrooms? To me, there is no trust, as the teacher's gaze almost seems to say, "I don't trust you to do the right thing on your own, so I'm going to watch you."

To the contrary, I do not identify as a technician of discipline or a controller of time and space. In fact, a visitor in my classroom probably would have to step over a few students just to get in the door, as my second graders are allowed to sit, stand, or lie wherever they are most comfortable and most focused. Our classroom is a calm, orderly, safe place where children learn and teachers teach. We co-craft a classroom climate based on rules, which build mutual trust. Instead of believing that children need to be controlled by adults through the use of external motivators such as punishments or rewards or "gazes," I believe in children's intrinsic desire to do the right thing. I see my

role as helping children learn to self-manage themselves and their learning. That means, when children ignore, forget, or intentionally break our rules, I see these moments as opportunities for learning and I respond in this spirit. “I know you probably did not mean to hurt Alex’s feelings, but you see, you actually did,” I tell Miguel after I overhear a confrontation between the two boys. “Since that is not the kind of person you are, I know you can try telling him that same thing in a different way. And this time, think about Alex’s feelings before you start talking,” I continue with a calm, even voice. I linger for a few more moments to offer support. Miguel thinks for a bit and then begins, “Alex, I do not think it is a good idea for me to work with you today. I think I will do better work with someone else.” Miguel pauses, then adds, “But let’s sit together at lunch!” I smile as I walk away. And Miguel smiles too. He knows he did the right thing – it feels good for Alex, for him, and for me. When adults provide meaning, children can reach, stretch, and exert themselves beyond their initial impulses. They can figure out issues of fairness, safety, inclusion, harmony, and justice (Charney, 1997). They can find a space at the table for an “outsider,” pass the ball to an unequal player, give a compliment that counts, and make a piece of beautiful work. But for all of this, they need the careful guidance of adults.

Developing Habits of Goodness

Room 119 is a place full of fairness, safety, inclusion, harmony, and justice. Children can trust that I will take care of them and that they will take care of each other. When they first walk into our Room 119 space, my students are no different than any other class of students at our school. Most children who enter our school doors come from the same countries, speak the same languages, are members of the same socio-

economic class, and have similar home-lives. But the more time we spend together, Room 119 students start to form different habits, different ways of being than some of their peers from other classrooms. When a student asks, “Is there room for me here?” a Room 119 child answers, “Sure! I’ll move over to make room for you!” When a particular student receives a special recognition, a Room 119 child responds with a high-five and words of praise, “Congratulations, man!” When a student says, “Please stop!” a Room 119 child answers, “Okay,” and then stops. Student acts of concerned devotion to their peers do not grow from a sudden or unfamiliar demand for action, but rather they come from the entrenched habits of our shared classroom life...from the entrenched habits of goodness that permeate our Room 119 space. These habits of goodness come from repeated exposure to my efforts to pay compliments, to share and notice what others do, and to offer constructive feedback. These habits of goodness come from my intentional efforts to develop the social and ethical capacities of each individual while building a respectful, inclusive, and safe community life. These rituals are repeated day after day to give voice and inclination to behavior that then transfers out onto the playing field where no teacher watches.

When we establish a social curriculum, when we make an effort to integrate ethical practice into our daily fare, we try to set down habits that we want children to carry from their tables to the pencil sharpeners, out into the halls, the playground, and even the world (Charney, 1997). And we dare to envision that world as one filled with civility and honesty, with community and nonviolence. Our vision starts with our own classrooms and our own schools.

Safety Offers Nourishment

We all have a basic human need to feel a sense of belonging (Deci & Flaste, 1995). For children in a classroom, this feeling is critical if they are to be motivated from within to learn. When they feel safe and valued, children are more willing to do the risk-taking and the cooperative give-and-take that lead to greater learning (Jensen, 1998). Casto (2008) agrees that children learn best in caring communities where they feel safe and significant. Children who feel known and cared for at school are free to focus on learning. “They are more able to face challenges with confidence. With the support of a school community, students are motivated to do their best, and teachers and curriculum become even more effective” (Casto, 2008, p. 10). Similarly, Montessori demonstrated that children who were deprived and poor could thrive and grow under the right set of conditions (Vardin, 2003). Montessori (1995) strongly believed that the child’s mind absorbs the environment, leaving lasting impressions upon it, forming it, and providing nourishment for it. She warned that the quality of the environment greatly enhances a child’s life or seriously diminishes it. According to Montessori, educators need to provide children with the right environment to encourage their natural talents to evolve. Gardner (1997), too, emphasizes the importance of the environment on the development of human capabilities. Gardner believes that smart and safe environments help nurture more competent individuals despite their particular genetic inheritance. Safety is like nourishment for children’s minds, hearts, and souls.

Safety Leads to Learning

In his affective filter hypothesis, Professor Stephen Krashen relates learning acquisition to environmental conditions. Krashen (1981) says the affective filter is an

impediment to learning or acquisition that results from negative emotional responses to environmental conditions. According to the affective filter hypothesis, certain emotions such as anxiety and self-doubt interfere with the learning process. Such negative emotions function as a filter between the speaker and the listener, preventing efficient processing of the language input (Krashen, 2003). Krashen's hypothesis further states that the affective filter can be reduced when educators provide low anxiety environments and strive to bolster the learners' self-esteem. That is, when students feel safe, they experience less stress to their affective filter. The more students are "off the defensive," the better their learning acquisition (Stevick, 1976). Further, in order for learning to occur at all, the learner needs to be in a state of anxiety-free relaxation (Schinke-Llano & Vicars, 1993). Safe structures like "Soft Landing" provide such relaxation.

During "Soft Landing" children experience equal footing. Children are not grouped or labeled. They are not expected to meet a list of teacher expectations. They are not asked to perform beyond their capabilities. During "Soft Landing," children are not rushed. Every child can take a deep breath, relax, and perform. During "Soft Landing" every child is successful. Affective filters are lowered and learning penetrates. During "Soft Landing," the children of Room 119 know they can be successful and it shows!

The Necessity of Predictable Structures

"Soft Landing" is a predictable classroom structure. Students already know what to expect when they enter their Room 119 space each morning; no surprises lurk. Day after day students can count on being greeted with a "Soft Landing," their gift of time. It is important for children to be able to count on "Soft Landing" because predictability and

structure provide the very consistencies for which children hunger. Calkins (1983) posits that structures encourage, nurture, and allow teachers and learners significant time to commit to thoughtful teaching and learning, to engage fully, and to thrive. “It is significant to realize that the most creative environments in our society are not the ever-changing ones. The artist's studio, the researcher's laboratory, the scholar's library are each kept deliberately simple so as to support the complexities of the work in progress. They are deliberately kept predictable so the unpredictable can happen” (Calkins, 1983, p. 32). Greene (1995) agrees. She believes when adults provide created structures for children to live in, children begin to realize their capacity to create their own structures. They begin to let their imaginations take over.

I admit that January 4th was a pretty restless night. It is hard to reenter the work routine after enjoying a winter break free from schedules, deadlines, and timeframes. While I played the agenda for the upcoming week over and over in my mind, I began to worry a bit about what the next day would bring. After twelve long days away from our Room 119 space, would my second graders remember the plan we co-crafted to outline our vision for our class community? Would they remember how to interact with each other, handle disagreements, and mend hurt feelings? I worried that somewhere in the midst of the twelve-day winter break new habits replaced our nearly eighty days of hard work. If I was feeling tentative about returning to school, how were they feeling? Of course Monday morning came too soon as Monday mornings tend to do. A trip to Starbucks® was a personal bribe to help me get back into the groove. When my last sip of warm gingerbread was gone and the morning bell rang to signal my Room 119 friends’

arrival, I stepped into the hallway to offer a warm smile. I wondered if my smile was enough to hide my own anxiety.

As second graders trickled down the hallway, I heard echoes of “Soft Landing” plans being made. “I have some new ideas for our restaurant menu. Do you want to help?” Jocelyn asked. “Sure! Did you already think of prices?” Adriana responded. “Can you show me how to fold those origami ornaments that you were making before break?” Ana asked Leslie. “Yeah. I got some books for Christmas, so I practiced a lot,” Leslie answered. “I can make some new things too.” One after the other, second graders entered the room, hung up their coats and bags, made their lunch choices, and “got right to it!” They said a quick hello to me as they passed by on their way to the supply shelf. It was clear that they, the kids, were very much in charge. They did not wait for my directions or suggestions. They did not need me. After making a brief stop to collect a few materials, children immediately recruited friends to join Connect Four tournaments, origami-folding tutorials, and restaurant businesses (see Figure 2). While I watched my



Figure 2. “Homemade” restaurant offerings

self-determining learners begin their day, my heart swelled to nearly twice its normal size. And then it became quite evident that I nothing to worry about. These Room 119 friends did not forget who they were! To the contrary, they picked up right where they left off. They were back where they belonged. They were home. I let out a long sigh and stepped back to watch the magic unfold.

The Predictable Leads to the Unpredictable

More than ever before, I realize that somewhere in the midst of our nearly eighty days together these children, my children, developed a sense of agency (Johnston, 2004). It is evident that they have the capacity to roll up their sleeves, take action, and get things done! They are kids with a purpose and I continuously see their purpose in their actions, words, and work. It is important to realize that these kids did not develop a sense of purpose by accident. To the contrary, they are kids with a purpose because they have “Soft Landing,” a daily predictable structure that allows them to create their own agendas. They are kids with a purpose because they have a daily structure that allows them to identify as writers, researchers, artists, scientists, architects, engineers, and entrepreneurs. Their identities become viable because they are able to convince themselves and others that they are in fact all of these things (and more). To do this, they convincingly engage in the behaviors of writers, researchers, artists, scientists, architects, engineers, and entrepreneurs on a daily basis. “Come look at my domino building. It’s taller than ever because I really worked on making a strong base. Look how wide it is at the bottom. I think that was the trick,” Brian says. “Here’s your very own credit card! Now, which one would you like to rent?” Matthew asks while he hands me a perfectly sized paper version of an American Express card. As if anticipating my confusion, Matthew begins to clarify his question. “Don’t you see? I’ve started a map-making business. I have continents, countries, and states! Now, which one would you like to rent for today?” I select Antarctica and marvel at its accuracy while Matthew snatches back my credit card and prepares my receipt. “Welcome to our restaurant! Would you like to order something from our menu (see Figure 3) for your breakfast?” Maria asks

Of course on the very first August day we spent together I did not imagine origami businesses, four-star restaurants, and domino construction companies. I did not imagine Connect Four tournaments, Battle Ship strategy seminars, and map-making industries. But I was confident that my second graders would create something. I knew that if I provided an atmosphere of challenge and concentration, a predictable structure for intensified and strategic play, and time and space for student freedom and choice, then they would turn their predictable environment into something unpredictable.

The Unpredictable is Full of Choice

Choice is central to agency (Johnston, 2004). Experiences of choice can play a central role in enhancing a student's perceptions of control, involvement, and challenge (Whalen & Csíkszentmihályi, 1991). These are important reasons to build opportunities for choice into the school day, especially in the light of their absence from so much school learning. While having choices is almost always desirable, actually making choices can be exceedingly difficult. Choice evokes effort and demands skill in the process of posing, focusing, and acting upon the question, "What do I really want to do?" In particular, it requires the ability to select, constrain, and prioritize the criteria by which to discriminate options that best match one's interests.

I think about Michael who was unable to make a choice when he first came to Room 119. Many days, he began "Soft Landing" as a quiet observer. He watched as others quickly made choices and began their "Soft Landing" work. Day after day, Michael paced the perimeter of the classroom. Day after day, Michael declined friendly invitations to join others' chosen activities. And day after day, Michael chose to observe

instead of to participate. I knew if I intervened in Michael's ritual that I would compromise the original intention of "Soft Landing." If I suggested how Michael should use his gift of time, I knew he would not experience "Soft Landing" at its fullest capacity. If I told Michael what to do, he would experience *my* "Soft Landing" instead of his own. So Michael watched and I waited. Michael paced and I believed. And one fine day Michael entered Room 119 with his own agenda. "I know what I should do during this time," he told me. "I am going to write a book about everyone in this class." And he did.

When we give the gift of choice, children experience freedom – the freedom to decide. When children experience the freedom to decide, they are allowed to follow the organic development of their own interests instead of traveling along a route predetermined by adults. Essentially, in a choice-rich environment, control shifts from adult to child. Csíkszentmihályi (1997) believes the secret to releasing control and freedom is to provide interesting options and productive materials so that the child can take more initiative and the teacher can step further into the background. "The whole ideal teaching situation is obviously one in which the child takes the initiative and the teacher becomes simply...the conductor in the orchestra" (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997, p. 28).

Montessori: A Predictable Yet Unpredictable Environment

In the Montessori model of teaching and learning, children choose what they want to do. The children are put in an environment that is so rich and so well thought-out that they are bound to learn from anything with which they interact. The specifically designed environment "becomes a kind of instructor or sentinel, so prepared that it will attract" students (Montessori, 1967, p. 103). The materials housed within the specifically

designed environment are as interesting and as intriguing as toys, but in the course of play, children learn certain things about everything from geography to botany to mathematics to biology. According to Csíkszentmihályi (1997), the Montessori system purposefully created an environment where the child cannot go wrong. “There are enough interesting, useful, growth-producing materials to catch the child’s attention so that the outcome is going to be productive whatever the child does in that setting” (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997, p. 28). Montessori purposefully developed prepared environments that encourage self-directed learners to explore important ideas with the watchful guidance of unobtrusive adults. Essentially, these living laboratories invite, welcome, and encourage child activity (Dubble, 1997).

When a rhythm of child involvement permeates the Montessori classroom, self-construction of the individual results. Children build their individual personality through interaction with their environment instead of being passively molded by others. It is not enough to prepare an environment and then place children within it. Instead, children need to be linked to their environment. According to this Montessori principle, education is primarily active rather than didactic. Therefore, emphasis is placed upon the child’s activity rather than upon the adult’s teaching (Dubble, 1997). The purpose is not to give children knowledge, but rather to give them the opportunity, the opening, to acquire knowledge for themselves. If children become intrigued, if children become self-motivated, autonomous, then their teacher has set them on the course of lifelong learning. Many educators agree that this very occurrence, motivating children to become learners for life, is the greatest service they can offer.

The Necessity of Energized Focus

Motivation is essential for every student and every classroom. Dewey (1938) posits that when children are interested in a topic of study, they become absorbed in, wrapped up in, and carried away by their learning. He believes that interested children are more careful, attentive, and engaged as a result of personal absorption in learning situations. Gardner agrees. “What we need in America is for students to get more deeply interested in things, more involved in them, more engaged in wanting to know; to have projects that they can get excited about and work on over long periods of time, to be stimulated to find things out on their own” (as cited in Brandt, 1987, p. 33). Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi (1990) supports both Dewey’s and Gardner’s assertions about motivation and engagement. In fact, he believes that people can achieve optimal happiness only when they experience deep levels of intrinsic motivation. For Csíkszentmihályi the optimal state of intrinsic motivation is called flow, a theory he architected.

Flow Theory

Flow is a state of deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically enjoyable, as when artists or athletes are focused on their play or performance (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). Individuals in this state perceive their performance to be pleasurable and successful, and the activity is perceived as worth doing for its own sake, even if no further goal is reached (Nakamura & Csíkszentmihályi, 2002). The individual functions at his or her fullest capacity, and the experience itself becomes its own reward (DeCharms, 1968; Deci, 1975). In an interview, Csíkszentmihályi describes flow as “being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time

flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost" (Geirland, 1996, p. 4). As Csíkszentmihályi describes, flow is a mental state that is realized when a person is fully immersed or absorbed in an activity. During Csíkszentmihályi's 1975 research study, several people likened their experiences in a flow state to being swept away by a current of water. The sense of being gone or losing one's self in time and space makes flow seem like an escape from reality. Attention, motivation, and the situation meet, resulting in a kind of productive harmony.

Flow theory is based on a symbiotic relationship between challenges and skills needed to meet those challenges. The flow experience is believed to occur when one's skills are neither overmatched nor underutilized to meet a given challenge. This balance of challenge and skill is fragile; when disrupted, apathy (low challenges, low skills), anxiety (high challenges, low skills), or relaxation (low challenges, high skills) are likely to be experienced (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997). Highly creative artists and scholars report the experiences of flow when engaged in their best work, characterized by appropriate challenge (Csíkszentmihályi, 1996).

Csíkszentmihályi et al. (Csíkszentmihályi, 1975; Csíkszentmihályi & Nakamura, 1989; Csíkszentmihályi et al., 1993) notice that under certain circumstances, flow is associated with a merging of action and awareness, strong concentration, and a loss of awareness of time. They explain that these flow experiences are motivating because they are enjoyable and are the best manifestation of ability and potential. Further, they argue that optimal experiences are associated with high positive affect. In addition, flow experiences are associated with feelings of high self-worth and high concentration

(Hektner & Asakawa, 2000). Accordingly, flow theory predicts that individuals will seek activities that are previously associated with states of flow in an effort to realize the feelings of enjoyment, engagement, clarity, and pride that are linked to optimal experience.

Flow Theory in the Classroom

Based on flow theory, concentration, interest and enjoyment in an activity must be experienced simultaneously in order for flow to occur (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997). Each variable is an important component of flow theory, and plays an important role in the learning environment.

Flow experiences are described as states of intense concentration or absolute absorption in an activity (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). In educational contexts, deep absorption in activities has been shown to promote optimal learning experiences. For example, Csíkszentmihályi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993) report that a sample of talented students concentrated more than their average peers during classroom and study activities, but comparatively less while they watched television or engaged in social activities. This finding suggests that the ability to harness concentration for more complex mental tasks may be one of the hallmarks of achievement and talent development.

Interest in an activity is a fundamental aspect of flow experiences, setting the foundation for continuing motivation and subsequent learning. Researchers argue that interest provides the basis for becoming engaged with a topic for its own sake (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Acting on intrinsic motivation alone, individuals seize opportunities to

learn, read, work with others, and gain feedback in a way that supports their curiosity and serves as a bridge to more complex tasks (Csíkszentmihályi et al., 1993).

Flow activities, including intellectually demanding tasks, can also be enjoyable and satisfying. They may provide a feeling of creative accomplishment and satisfaction. Such feelings may occur mainly in retrospect because all concentration is focused on the task during actual engagement (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). Individuals who develop their talent and creativity are those who continue to follow their sense of enjoyment in chosen activities (Csíkszentmihályi, 1996).

Losing Oneself in “Soft Landing”

During “Soft Landing,” children do what they want to do. Essentially, children follow their curiosities and interests. In doing so, children feel in-sync with something that attracts them, something that moves them, or something that resonates with their interests. Over time, children experience an organic development of personal interests. I remember when Liliana and Maria first realized they could match their interests and abilities. During one of their first “Soft Landings,” the two girls approached me with a box of Memory cards in tow. “How do you play this?” Liliana asked. “I think you have to remember where things are, but I’m not sure,” she continued. Together, we carefully set up a perfectly aligned six-by-ten matrix and I proceeded to demonstrate a few turns. After I finally found my first match the girls assured me they had seen enough. “We get it! We get it!” they squealed. “I’m going to be good at this!” Maria announced with confidence. “Me too!” Liliana agreed. And they were right. Both girls have remarkable visual memories. When I watch Maria and Liliana play a game of Memory together, their concentration is so deep that it appears as if they are lost in the game. It seems as

though they are in a different world because they are unaware of external stimuli from our classroom. They do not turn to respond when peers call their names. Everything disappears except for the game and the moment. During their memory game, Maria and Liliana let themselves go, they merge with the activity, and they each achieve their own personal harmony.

Children can and do use “Soft Landing” as a vehicle of escape from the time and place they are living in to enter a time and place of bliss. “Soft Landing” frees children from the need to budget their time and thoughts between home responsibilities and other worries. Instead of being overwhelmed with negative experiences that are spent in anxiety states characterized by low levels of enjoyment, happiness, strength, motivation, and self-esteem, children are released to experience enjoyable involvement in the serious play of “Soft Landing.” And when children are released from worry, they are able to escape. When children are released from their reality, they are able to *flow*. In this optimal state of immersed concentration, attention is centered, distractions are minimized, and children attain an enjoyable give-and-take with their activities. In this state, children lose track of time and their daily problems, forget about hunger and fatigue, and feel well-matched to the activity at hand (Whalen, 1999). In this state, the joy overtakes the worry.

Many people who experience flow report a sense of serenity of losing the worries of everyday life – the kind of worries that in everyday life hang on people’s consciousnesses, that slow them down and make them feel depressed (Csikszentmihályi, 1997). Those worries disappear because people do not have enough information-processing capacity both to pay attention to what they are doing and to worry. According

to Csíkszentmihályi (1997), human attention cannot be split more than a few ways. For instance, if there are four different conversations occurring simultaneously, it becomes very challenging to attend to each stream of information. Csíkszentmihályi (1997) posits that we can only process two streams of vocal input. “Usually we can process or pay attention to two streams of input and understand what people are saying. That is true of any type of information. We cannot think about how we feel – for instance, how hungry we feel – and at the same time, say, balance the checkbook or sing a song. We either do one or the other” (p. 9). When children experience flow, they become so much a part of their actions that their minds cannot have a chance to go off on tangents. Instead, all their attentional processes and capacities are concentrated solely on the flow activity. As a result, children are able to stand to the side of the routine of everyday life and experience a sense of renewed energy.

“Soft Landing” Flow

Isabel uses her best block-letter handwriting to print her announcement for all to read: Come see our reader’s theater performance about space today at Soft Landing. She stands back to admire her work and then decides to add three more words: if you want. Even in the midst of her excitement Isabel remembers that “Soft Landing” is all about making your own choices. She realizes that no one should be told they have to do something during “Soft Landing,” but of course everyone accepts the invitation. This is just too exciting to pass up! One by one students pull up chairs to create a theater-like seating structure. Isabel, Emilie, and Natalie grab their scripts and take their places. Anticipation fills the air.

“Hello and welcome. Today we are going to interview Sally Ride!” Emilie announces to her audience while Natalie, I mean “Sally,” pops her head out from behind a classroom easel to wave cheerfully. “But first with Isabel,” Emilie continues. Isabel takes the inflatable microphone with the confidence that only a seasoned news-anchor could possess. “Thank you, Emilie.” Isabel says. “I bet all of you think Pluto is a planet, but scientists say that Pluto is so small and far away that it is now considered to be a rock or dwarf planet. Now back to Emilie.” With this cue, “Sally” walks on stage, takes her place next to Emilie, her interviewer, and waits for her first question. “So Sally how do you feel about being the first American woman in space?” Emilie asks. “Well, I think it’s pretty cool and I can’t wait to go,” “Sally” answers enthusiastically. “Alright, ready for take off?” Emilie wonders aloud as “Sally” straps herself into an air tank that looks strikingly similar to a backpack. Emilie does the honor of counting down the seconds until liftoff while “Sally” stands inside her child-made spaceship. “Five, four, three, two, one, BLAST OFF!” Within moments “Sally” floats through space and is ready to discuss her experience with Emilie and the rest of the viewing audience who are quite eager to hear about life in zero gravity.

“So Sally, tell us some facts about space,” Emilie begins. “Well, this is an air tank for space because there is no air in space. Plus it’s very hard to walk in space because there is no gravity,” “Sally” explains while she demonstrates what space walking probably looks like. “Also you might have heard of the name the Milky Way for a candy bar. The candy Milky Way is named after our solar system, the Milky Way,” “Sally” continues. “The sun is actually a star. Speaking of stars, a star before it dies it gets very, very big and bright and then it blows up our explodes and that is called a supernova. And

Pluto, that rock that you heard about, is the furthest away from the sun so it is very cold and icy,” “Sally” informs us. “Thanks, Sally. So all you listeners out there, tell me what you have learned today,” Emilie says. “I learned that for a star to explode it has to get really big before it blows up,” Noah recalls. “And it’s hard to walk in space because there’s no gravity in space,” Sofia remembers. “That’s right,” “Sally” affirms. “Gravity is what keeps us on the ground. Did anyone learn something about me?” “Sally” offers as encouragement. “You were the first American woman to be launched into space,” Andy says. “That’s right!” Emilie, Isabel, and “Sally” exclaim proudly. As if their question and answer session were not enough of a “check-up” for the class, the girls created an interactive display (see Figure 5) as a follow-up to their reader’s theater performance so all of Room 119 could “test their knowledge.”



Figure 5. Emilie, Isabel, and Natalie’s interactive display

What began weeks before as a self-directed “Soft Landing” study group, turned into something much more. I remember watching as the trio poured over books from our space basket. When they had scoured all these books from cover to cover while jotting down notebook pages full of facts, they still had a hunger for more. They had a need to know. “We need more books about the solar system,” they told me. “Can we go to the library tomorrow during ‘Soft Landing?’” they asked. I remember thinking that their enjoyable involvement in the research, as well as their ability to sustain concentration for the entire “Soft Landing” session was quite remarkable. No one asked me to read words, clarify meaning, or help with spelling. They were up for this challenge because it was

their challenge. In the end, the shared interests in space of Emilie, Isabel, and Natalie blossomed into a whole class seminar about space, and according to Natalie, we all benefited from a little “schema building” (Natalie, 2008). In the end, the entire class was able to live the learning that resulted from a playful interaction.

The Necessity of One’s Own Time

I need time. I need time to wake up in the morning. I need time to make important decisions. I need time to become accustomed to new environments. In fact when I reflect on my life, I realize I have always needed time. My mom, Jo Anne Moyer, often tells the story about when she first realized just how critical the gift of time was for me. She says:

I can distinctly remember the morning when I heard sounds of play in Aimee’s room. As bells clanged and levers clacked, I walked down the hall and into her room. Because I thought she was awake and ready to begin her day, I reached down into the crib with a smile to retrieve Aimee. To my surprise, instead of returning my pleasant greeting, Aimee was visibly distraught. And although she could not yet express her feelings with words, I understood her cries of complaint quite clearly.

In an attempt to respond to her unhappiness, I sat Aimee back in her crib and watched as she immediately stopped crying and resumed play. It quickly became evident that she did not need me, so I left the room to allow Aimee to have her own *time* and *space*. Eventually, sounds of play turned into calls for me. When I heard Aimee calling my name, I returned to her room and this time her whole body shook with excitement. This time she was ready. And so a new morning routine was born. Each day as I heard Aimee’s early morning babbles, I knew she was slowly easing into her day, and I gave her this gift of time. I waited until Aimee called for me before I entered her room. I let Aimee begin her day in her *own* way (J. Moyer, personal communication, December 29, 2008).

Everyone Needs Time

I have a feeling that I am not unlike most people. I argue that everyone needs time. I think of Liz Fasulo, a colleague and friend, who talks about the deliciousness of her morning time. She wakes up an hour earlier than the rest of her family to ensure

there is time to savor the headlines of the paper, the warmth of a mug of coffee, and the beauty of the morning sunrise. “It’s my own delicious reading time,” Liz says. And I add, “It’s your own ‘Soft Landing.’” I think of Michelle, a Room 119 student, who spends many mornings looking through the class memory books. She turns the pages of these scrapbooks slowly and methodically. She must have memorized the contents long ago, yet the pages created by her classmates still hold her attention. Maybe the books filled with happy memories provide needed inspiration and hope. I think of Pablo who spends most mornings



Figure 6. Our Room 119 turtle, Baxter

with Baxter, our class turtle (see Figure 6). Pablo rests his head so close to the aquarium that it looks as if Baxter and he are looking eye-to-eye. When Baxter blows bubbles it seems like he says, “Well hello there, Pablo. It’s nice to see you this morning!” Maybe Pablo needs the calm rhythmic motion of Baxter’s swimming strokes or maybe Pablo just needs the time alone. Either way, he certainly needs the time.

Necessary Solitude

According to psychiatrist T. Byram Karasu, M.D., periods of solitude are necessary for normal human development. “Being with other people for long periods of time, no matter how loving, wonderful and interesting they may be, interferes with one’s biopsychological rhythm” (as cited in Lefkowitz, 2004, p. 1). In addition, psychologist Ester Schaler Buchholz, Ph. D. describes alone time as a basic need that is as essential and universal as the need to bond with others. Buchholz comes to this belief through a

series of infant studies and analysis of historical and anthropological data, as well as studies on how meditation, rest and relaxation bolster the immune system. When we don't get enough solitude, she says, "We get very out of touch with ourselves; we get forgetful; we get sloppy" (Buchholz, 1997, p. 97). Depending on our personalities, we can get angry, anxious and depressed as well. Modern life, filled with cell phones, e-mail, and televisions that offer 700 channels, is far more tumultuous than in the past. Buchholz believes that all of us need solitude. She prescribes alone time--defined as periods away from others, preferably unplugged and unstructured--to everyone, even those to whom it does not come naturally. Buchholz posits that even from a very young age we have both the desire and the capacity for solitude; babies stare into space when they need to disengage, and toddlers and teenagers say, "I can do it myself" or "Leave me alone." This time apart helps us to develop confidence, competence and resilience. It also allows us to exercise our imaginations and creativity, resources that all of us, not just professional artists, need in order to solve problems and navigate through life.

Alone Time Restoration

"Solitude puts the individual in touch with his or her deepest feelings and allows time for previously unrelated thoughts and feelings to interact, to regroup themselves into new formations and combinations, and thus to bring harmony to the mind," says Karasu (as cited in Lefkowitz, 2004, p. 4), who believes that solitude helps connect us to the worlds of nature and spirituality. Buchholz (1997) also discovered healing aspects of alone time. According to Buchholz, there are restorative, refreshing and recharging feelings associated with stepping back from the overwhelming stimuli of every day. There is an immeasurable delight that results from having the freedom to daydream, to

think or not think, to open the senses or close them down, to let oneself wonder and wander, to process the past or make plans for the future, or just to loll about, to simply be in the world as it is.

The Necessity of Play

From the moment Jose walks through the door, I can tell he is on a mission, a “Soft Landing” mission. He nearly runs to grab a clipboard, a stack of paper, a Sharpie® marker, and the bin of plastic animals, then heads straight for the low circular table, sits on the floor, dumps the animals, and begins a methodical organizing process. Alex is clearly intrigued. He sits on the floor, too, so he can have a closer look. “Do you want to help?” Jose asks without looking up from his sorting project. “Sure! What are you doing?” Alex wonders. “Line up all the dogs here on floor! Hurry! We’re running out of time,” Jose tells Alex. “Time for what? What *are* we doing anyway?” Alex asks. “President Obama will be here any minute with his daughters,” Jose says while placing the Dalmatian and Collie in line with the other plastic canines (see Figure 7). “But why is *he* coming *here*?” Alex persists. “He is coming to our dog shop so his daughters can choose their new pet. You know, the pet that is going to live in the *White House*!” Jose explains. “Oh,” Alex says with new enlightenment. “I’ll line them up and then I’ll brush them too.” As Alex works feverishly to make sure each dog is presentable and Jose double and triple checks his clipboard to make sure all the proper adoption papers are in place, I stand back and watch in awe as their imaginative play continues to unfold.



Figure 7. Jose and Alex’s dog adoption center

Moments later, I let my attention drift over to the play dough table. “Please pass the spatula! This tortilla (see Figure 8) is the best one I’ve made, but it’s too hot to pick up. I just burned my fingers,” Pablo says while blowing on his hands. Both Tommy and Cristian stop cutting their play dough pasta to find the spatula for Pablo. They all watch as he flips his flour pancake with the precision of a seasoned chef. “You’re right, that is



Figure 8. Pablo’s tortilla

your best tortilla yet!” they say. “It looks delicious!” In another corner Fernando, Andy, and Clara are huddled over their taped-together paper tent. “Do you think it will be strong enough to hold him?” they wonder aloud. “I hope so,” Clara says as she shoves her three-foot “pet” snake inside. “I don’t want anyone to be scared of Slinky and he also needs a place to sleep.” On the opposite side of the classroom Matthew and Katharine twist and weave pipe cleaners until they resemble dolls. “They’re Pipe Cleaner Girl Dolls!” they announce. “You know, like American Girl® Dolls but much cheaper,” they explain. “We’re even going to write a series of books to go with them. Just like the real thing!” they say while referencing the popular dolls many children long to own. I step back to watch Jose and Alex organize their dogs; Pablo, Tommy, and Cristian pat their tortillas; Fernando, Andy, and Clara construct their snake pen; and Matthew and Katharine form their dolls. And I realize that play is the language they use to communicate. I realize that play is the language of all children.

Clearly, children love to play. In fact, Paley (2004) says play is the single activity children love best. Children naturally engage the new and find ways to interact with play. They joust. They explore. They spontaneously invent. They engage the moment and it engages them. Play is a state of being that is intensely pleasurable. Play energizes

and enlivens us, eases our burdens, renews a natural sense of optimism, and opens us up to new possibilities. In fact, scientists from every point on the scientific compass including neuroscientists, developmental biologists, and psychologists recently started to view play as a profound biological process. They learned that play sculpts our brain; it makes us smarter and more adaptable (National Institute for Play, 2008). The American Academy of Pediatrics posits that “Free and unstructured play is healthy and – in fact – essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient” (2007, p. 182). Play is so important to optimal child development that the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights recognizes play as a right of every child (1989).

Let Them Play, They Will Learn

Many theorists document the importance of play in children’s development (Garvey, 1977; Paley, 1990; Sutton-Smith, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). According to many, play leads to healthy brain development (Frost, 1998; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera & Lamb, 2004). Some even believe play is an essential ingredient of any learning situation (Whalen & Csíkszentmihályi, 1991). Vygotsky (1978) saw the universal importance of play for later learning. For Vygotsky, play is not an amusement but rather one of the most critical learning experiences that shapes the mental processes of children and prepares the foundations of their successful future functioning. “In play, the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behavior; in play, he is, as it were, a head above himself. Play contains in a concentrated form, as in the focus of a magnifying glass, all developmental tendencies; it is as if the child tries to jump above his usual level” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 74). At any age, play acts to retain and enhance meaningful context, and optimizes the learning process.

Play is integral to the learning environment (Ginsburg, 2007). It helps children adjust to the school setting while enhancing learning readiness, learning behaviors, and problem-solving skills (Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez & McDermott, 2000). Play and unscheduled time that allow for peer interactions are important components of social-emotional learning (Zins, 2004). Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills (Erickson, 1985; Hurwitz, 2002; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). When play is allowed to be child-driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they which to pursue (Hurwitz, 2002).

The Creative Wisdom of Play

Vivian Gussin Paley (1990) coins fantasy play as the universal learning medium. Children know how to play. They just do. According to Paley (1990), children, at all ages, expect fantasy to generate an ongoing dialogue to which they bring a broad range of intellectual and emotional knowledge at a very early age. “In play, the child says, ‘I can *do* this well; I can *be* this effectively; I *understand* what is happening to me and to the other children” (Paley, 1990, p. 10). Children transcribe and expose the words and images that crowd their minds and place them on a stage, becoming actor, writer, critic, linguist, scientist, and philosopher all at once. And they do not need us to teach them how.

Play, that what we have forgotten how to do, children do best of all. “Pretend” often confuses adults, but it is the child’s real and serious world, the stage upon which any identity is possible and secret thoughts can be safely revealed. With ease, children

make up stories, characters, and plot structures. “Their stories may be the original model for the active, unrestrictive examination of an idea” (Paley, 1990, p. 5). In fact, “Play may well be a prototype for imaginative endeavors throughout our lives,” says Paley (1990, p. 5). Fantasy play, rather than being a distraction, helps children achieve the goal of having an open mind when faced with future learning opportunities. “The mind that has been freely associating with playful imagery is primed to tackle new ideas” (Paley, 2004, p. 26). Paley (2004) goes on to claim that good play is probably the necessary precursor for every other kind of learning in a classroom.

The Challenging Play of “Soft Landing.”

“Soft Landing” is a time for challenging play that develops children’s powers of concentration and sustained involvement. During “Soft Landing,” children engage deeply in self-selected, self-initiated play-like activities. Children engage so deeply that they experience a rhythm of involvement during “Soft Landing,” a rhythm of involvement that is almost indescribable. Such involvement best resembles an improvisational invention cycle, as children make and create in the moment in response to the stimulus of their environment. Because children become so engaged, so involved in their creative play during “Soft Landing,” they have a hunger for more “Soft Landing.” Each day when the first few notes of “You Are My Sunshine,” our transition song and signal to clean up “Soft Landing” activities, fill our classroom someone undoubtedly says, “I can’t believe it’s over already. Are you sure it’s time?” Despite their initial disappointment, children are able to shift frames of mind quickly and get ready for the rest of their day. Perhaps “Soft Landing” play is a catalyst for future learning, as it helps to keep the curious child alive (Frost, 1998). Children may have a hunger for more “Soft

Landing,” but they also have a hunger for more learning. They have a “need to know.” Is this because “Soft Landing” play allows children to create and explore a world they can master? As children master their world during “Soft Landing,” their play helps them develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resilience they will need to face future challenges during that day, and the next day, and the next day, and the next.

The Necessity of “Soft Landing”

It’s science time in Room 119 and everyone is thoroughly engaged in our new liquids unit. Groups of students huddle over tables to explore their “mystery liquid” bottles. In no time, these budding scientists think they can name each mystery liquid and nearly everyone has rationales to match their hypotheses. “This has to be soap. I just know it! Look what happens when I shake it up. See? Bubbles!” Jose says. “This one’s syrup! It has to be! It doesn’t pour fast and it’s really, really, really sticky!” Alex suggests. “I think this is water because it’s see-through and it pours like water,” Ana thinks aloud. “But it could be vinegar. Couldn’t it?” Adriana asks. “I guess vinegar looks like water.” Ana agrees. As I listen to similar debates, I glance over to the adjacent table where I see Cristian. Instead of experimenting with liquids like the others, he’s feverously writing on a pad of sticky notes. I assume Cristian is collecting field notes about his earlier discoveries and make a mental note to check-in with him in a few minutes. Just as I direct my attention back to the water and vinegar debate, which Tommy and Stephanie have since joined, I feel a tap on my shoulder. It’s Cristian with sticky note pad in tow. “What’s this?” I ask. “A shopping list for you,” he explains. “For me?” I wonder, still a bit confused. “I think you should buy these things for ‘Soft

Landing’ so we can do more tests,” he continues. “It’s the only way we’re going to know for sure if Ana has water or vinegar.”

That night, I think more about Cristian’s list and his proposition to bring our liquids unit to “Soft Landing.” Up until this point, our formal second grade curriculum has not really seeped over into “Soft Landing.” This is a first, an intriguing first. Excited by the potential of this new dimension of “Soft Landing,” I head to the grocery store to gather Cristian’s requested supplies to add to our Room 119 “Soft Landing” science lab. I add a few other provocative materials – cornstarch, liquid starch, glue and borax – to Cristian’s list. The next day, every single second grader heads right to the brand-new “Soft Landing” science table. It is as if some sort of magnetic-like force draws them in. They waste no time. In mere moments, they figure out how to make bubbling explosions of soap bubbles (see Figure 9). Ana immediately makes a connection to yesterday’s



Figure 9. Cristian’s bubbling explosion

work. “I could add baking soda to my mystery liquid to tell if it is water or vinegar,” she realizes. “Yeah. That’s what I thought,” Cristian explains. Ana heads off to retrieve her bottle from yesterday’s science experiment. Cristian looks more than satisfied.

Another team of students finds the box of cornstarch.

“What’s this?” they wonder. “Let’s mix it with water and add some food coloring,” Stephanie suggests. The girls get right to it. “This stuff is weird!” Leslie exclaims while using all the strength she can muster to stir her nearly hard-as-cement mixture. “But



Figure 10. It’s a ball

look, I can put my finger into mine. When I do this, it isn't hard at all. It's like quicksand," Stephanie demonstrates. "Look!" Jocelyn says with excitement. "When I put some in my hand and squeeze it, it turns into a ball (see Figure 10). When I let go, it melts (see Figure 11)," she continues. "So is this a liquid or not?" Adriana asks. "It



Figure 11. It melts

pours like a liquid," Leslie points out. "But when it dries it's hard," Jocelyn adds.

"Maybe it's half-liquid, half-solid," Leslie

suggests. "It's technically both. I know!" Stephanie squeals. "It's a soliquid!" The girls love Stephanie's classification and cannot wait to share their discovery with the rest of Room 119. I feel a similar sense of satisfaction as I watch my room full of second graders engage with both liquids and "Soft Landing" in new ways.

The Necessity of Understanding Identity

Before I can look ahead, it is necessary to look back, to look at the home lives of Room 119 students. In order to fully understand the "Soft Landing" research, it is necessary to understand, first, more about the background of these Spanish speaking, immigrant children of poverty and to understand what they bring to our classroom. Who are the students that participate in a Room 119 "Soft Landing" each morning?

Immigrant Children

I read to learn more about my immigrant children and families, who mostly emigrate from Central America. I learn that immigrant youth and their families migrate for a myriad of reasons. But, the countries that compose Central and South America have very different migration patterns and reasons for migration than other Latino nations

(Gugliotta, 1987). Though economic issues are frequently associated with these countries, wars or military actions in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Panama have also provided reasons to seek exile in the United States (Gugliotta, 1987). Countries with relatively stable governments, such as Costa Rica, Honduras, Belize, and most South American countries, still experience economic crises that prompt emigration to the United States in search of financial opportunities.

Despite their country of origin, immigrant children often experience a period of separation from one or both of their parents during the emigration process (Gaytan, Carhill, & Suarez-Orozco, 2007). Therefore, during reunification in the new country, family relationships need to be renegotiated. After a long period of separation, the reunited child must first get reacquainted with family members. Often, the children encounter new family members that may include stepparents, stepsiblings, and siblings they never met (Gaytan, Carhill, & Suarez-Orozco, 2007). The adaptation experience of immigrant youth can vary greatly depending upon their lives in their country of origin, the availability of internal and external resources and the welcome they receive (Gaytan, Carhill, & Suarez-Orozco, 2007). Although the prospect of a better life remains, starting over in the United States does not always prove to be struggle-free for recent immigrants. Families may face many economic hardships and often are labeled as working-class or poor families (Gaytan, Carhill, & Suarez-Orozco, 2007).

Meaningful Differences in Home Cultures

According to Lareau (2003), working-class and poor families have a primary commitment to provide comfort, food, shelter, and other basic supports for their children (Lareau, 2003). For them, sustaining children's natural growth is viewed as an accomplishment. In working-class and poor families, there is an economic strain not felt by many middle-class families. "Particularly in poor families, it takes enormous labor to get family members through the day, as mothers scrimped to make food last until they

were able to buy more, waited for buses that didn't come, and carried children's laundry to public washers" (Lareau, 2003, p. 35). Children are aware of the economic strains the family faces, as money matters are discussed frequently (Lareau, 2003). Living spaces are small, and often there is not much privacy. Children in working-class and poor families have more autonomy from adults and have long stretches of free time during which they watch television and play with relatives and friends in the neighborhood. In her study, Lareau (2003) noted that in working-class and poor families, the television was almost always on and children watched unrestricted amounts of television.

Conversely, middle-class parents are worried about how their children will get ahead and are increasingly determined to make sure their children are not excluded from any opportunity that may eventually contribute to their development (Lareau, 2003).

Middle-class parents engage in a pattern of concerted cultivation and deliberately try to stimulate their children's development while fostering cognitive and social skills.

"Middle-class families routinely spend hundreds and even thousands of dollars per year promoting children's activities" (Lareau, 2003, p. 35). Because there are so many children's activities, and because they are accorded so much importance, children's activities determine the schedule for the entire family. As a result, middle-class children spend much of their time in the company of adults or being directed by adults.

What results from these different philosophies and approaches to child rearing appears to be the transmission of different advantages to children of different socioeconomic classes (Lareau, 2003). In her study, Lareau found results to support her hypothesis. "In this study, there was quite a bit more talking in middle-class homes than in working-class and poor homes, leading to the development of greater verbal agility,

larger vocabularies, more comfort with authority figures, and more familiarity with abstract concepts” (Lareau, 2003, p. 5). Hart and Risley (1995) note similar findings. In everyday interactions at home, on average, children in middle-class families hear 2,150 words per hour compared to children in poor families who hear only 620 words per hour (Hart and Risley, 1995). Such daily interactions lead to a notable gap at age 3 when the children in middle-class families have heard more than 30 million words, whereas children in poor families heard just 10 million words (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Lareau (2003) posits that many people in the United States disagree about the importance of social class in daily life. “They believe that people who demonstrate hard work, effort, and talent are likely to achieve upward mobility. Put differently, many Americans believe in the American Dream” (Lareau, 2003, p. 235). In this view, children should have roughly equal life chances. Lareau (2003) challenges this perspective. In an effort to understand the reality of American family life, Lareau (2003) sees select aspects of family life as differentiated by social class. “I also believe that social location at birth can be very important in shaping the routines of daily life, even when family members are not particularly conscious of the existence of social classes,” says Lareau (2003, p. 236). Class positions influence critical aspects of family life including time use, language use, and family relationships (Lareau, 2003). Lareau (2003) asserts that there are signs that middle-class children benefit, in ways that are invisible to them and to their parents, from the degree of similarity between the cultural repertoires in the home and those standards adopted by institutions.

Integrating Home and School Culture

Lareau (2003) posits that working-class and poor parents in general have much more distance or separation from the school than middle-class parents. “Working-class and poor parents appeared baffled, intimidated, and subdued in parent-teacher conferences,” Lareau (2003) observes (p. 243). Despite these feelings, Lareau (2003) notes that across all social classes, parents pay close attention to their children’s education. “Working-class and poor parents are no less eager than middle-class parents to see their children succeed in school. They take a different approach to helping them reach that goal, however” (Lareau, 2003, p. 198). Lareau (2003) discovered that working-class and poor parents often fear doing “the wrong thing” in school-related matters and tend to be much more respectful of educators’ professional expertise than are their middle-class counterparts (Lareau, 2003). According to Lareau (2003), “Working-class and poor parents view education as the job of educators and thus they expect teachers and school staff to be the ones primarily responsible for seeing that their children learn all that they should learn” (p. 199).

Although parent involvement is positively linked to school success, many parents are not as involved as schools would like (Lareau, 2000). “This lack of involvement is not random: social class has a powerful influence on parent involvement patterns. For example, between forty and sixty percent of working-class and poor parents fail to attend parent-teacher conferences” (Lareau, 2000, p. 3). But, a study concluded that teacher quality, not parent involvement is the single most important school factor that affects children’s learning (Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 1998). Other work found that children who have poor teachers three years in a row sustain lasting academic damage (Viadero,

2000). This is particularly true for working-class and poor children, whose families often lack the resources to buffer school-based deficiencies (Lareau, 2000). Although we cannot change a student's previous experiences, we can affect their future.

Understanding diversity and individual differences paves the way for positive feelings associated with school.

Celebrating Diversity in Room 119

Room 119 is full of diversity or differences. Room 119 learners are different in many ways: race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, learning modalities, cognitive development, social development, and the rate in which they take in information and retrieve it. I realize that diversity may affect learning, and therefore, I work to create a classroom space in which diversity is celebrated and revered instead of avoided and ignored. I make a conscious effort to help students recognize and respect differences. We have a sense of community, a sense of togetherness despite our differences. I want children to know that they do not need to hide because there is time and space and interest for them to share their identities in our classroom community.

In reflecting on the diversity of our room, I realize the books that truly engage Room 119 second graders are those that do not view childhood as idyllic and problem-free. The children connect with books that address serious topics like unfairness, prejudice, loneliness, and emigration because they mirror the children's own experiences and struggles. I want the literature we read and discuss together to provide a vehicle for the children to talk about their own lives within a climate of tolerance and mutual respect. It is when students feel comfortable discussing issues close to their own lives, they grow to consider experiences, emotions, and predicaments of people living in vastly different

times and places. Creating a context for children's understanding by building their background knowledge of historical events and times enables the children to grapple with the stories of people who experience injustice and discrimination.

"Does anyone mind if I go first?" Leslie asks the circle of second graders. "No, we'd be honored," they all reply. "Okay, so what I really don't get is why all these people are being separated. I mean, Ruby Bridges can't go to school because of her skin color and Song-ho can't go to school because he's poor and the boy in The Harmonica (Johnston, 2004)...well he can't do *anything* that kids do because he lives in that camp just because he's Jewish. It just doesn't make sense," Leslie finishes showing her outrage. "It's all discrimination," Brian bluntly states. "But it doesn't matter what you look like," Blanca adds. "Or how much money you have," Stephanie continues. "Fighting and leaving people out don't really solve your problems. It's not worth it," Tommy notes. "Leaving people out because of how they look or how much money they have – it's just not fair!" Jose agrees. "Exactly! There's no good reason for discrimination," Brian posits. "People should be treated equally," Cristian says matter-of-factly. "You know, even though people look different or believe different things, they really are the same," Leslie claims. "Their insides are the same. Their hearts are the same. Andy, the boy from Fly Away Home (Bunting, 1991), even though he is homeless, he has the same heart as us," she continues only to be greeted by a sea of nods that seem to say, "We concur."

And when we read about the emigrants in How Many Days to America (Bunting, 1990) and The Lotus Seed (Garland, 1993) Room 119 has equally moving things to say. "When you emigrate, you have to make risky choices," Brian begins. "Yeah, you won't

know what will happen to you on the way to the new country *or* when you get there,” Blanca says. “For some people, maybe leaving is a tough decision,” Tommy speculates. “Since they might have to leave family behind and they have to leave their country too,” he adds. “Not if it isn’t safe in their country. If it isn’t safe it’s not a hard decision. I think that what makes a lot of people want to emigrate – not being safe,” Jocelyn notes. “Yeah. That’s why my mom left El Salvador,” Andy explains. “There were lots of soldiers and lots of fighting and she left because she wasn’t safe,” he continues. “Just like the family in How Many Days to America,” Adriana connects.

Transformative teaching provides the time and space for children to learn about the world that they already perceive. We may never be certain about what our children think, and White teachers looking in on Latino and African American children can never know what they feel. But when teachers remain at a far away, outside gaze, avoiding difficult topics, they cannot even glimpse the lives of their students. When we do ask, however, and when we turn to literature to be our co-teachers, we create the space for children to think and we begin to learn the power of literature, not because readers acquire information from it, but because literature provides additional experiences for our diverse learners to celebrate and appreciate differences.

The Necessity of Looking Forward

The task of creating habits of goodness inspires my work with children. I realize that I am able to teach habits of goodness most often in the way I organize the social and academic lives of my students. I realize that I am able to bring the teaching of habits of goodness into the heart of classroom activity by the rituals and structures I invent, by the way that I bring children into the regular activities and ceremony of the day. Thus, the children become a part of my rituals, and as I infuse those rituals with active, lively meaning, meaning that is constructed in collaboration with the children, my rituals

become real for them. And so the “Soft Landing” ritual was born as an intentional effort to grow and mold creativity, as an intentional effort to develop and strengthen goodness, as an intentional effort to release and reenergize imagination. It was born as an intentional effort to provide safe surroundings, predictable structure, energized focus, empty time, and play. It was born as a way to encourage a yearning inside children to want to define and discover themselves, each other, and our world.

“Soft Landing” is a community-based phenomenon that reflects the hearts, souls, and minds of the students who enjoy its structure. It is a phenomenon that is organic, growing as students grow, strengthening as student relationships strengthen. It is a phenomenon that is an alternative to the templates that increasingly find their way into teachers’ plans. It is a transformative pedagogy that breaks through frames of custom and touches the consciousness of those we teach. “Soft Landing” sustains lives and expands minds. It feeds lives and fuels hopes. “Soft Landing” allows the sounds, the light, the heads of the children, the surface sensations of school life to be re-seen, re-imaged, to bend yet again into new understandings.

In an effort to better understand the “Soft Landing” pedagogy, I turn to research. I use the following chapter to set the stage for the “Soft Landing” story. I use the portraiture methodology as described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) to frame my story and research endeavors as I attempt to paint the “Soft Landing” story.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

“Eating” Stories

I love stories. I always have. As a child I loved to sit at a table full of family and friends to listen to my mom tell stories. The rhythm of her voice, the animation of her face, and the passion of her stories were simply mesmerizing. I was hooked. My love for stories did not end at the kitchen table. I willingly went to bed each night just so I could hear a story. My dad is perhaps one of the greatest bedtime story tellers I ever met. He has a knack for changing his voice to fit each character’s persona. Of course this makes his stories even more intriguing. Similarly, my friend, Liz, says her daughter, Nina, eats stories. Stories are Nina’s nourishment. “Tell a story momma,” Nina says again and again. “Tell the story about the time when I ate pho for the first time. Or tell the story about when I used to bodysurf at the beach when I was only three. Or tell the story about when I learned to swim.” Nina is right. Stories are our nourishment. All of our happiest memories can be told through story. In fact, anything can be told through story. When I consider storytelling even further, I realize that everything I want to think about or write about makes better sense when it is turned into a story. Paley (1990) agrees. She describes her work by commenting, “I use the most reliable structure ever invented for thinking about anything: story” (Paley, 1990, p. 93).

Story, a Sibling of Talk

Story is a primary structure through which humans think, relate, and communicate. We invent stories and live stories because they are an integral part of being human (Sillick, 1997). Paley (1990) posits that children are born knowing how to put every thought and feeling into story form. Further, story is a natural part of all

learning, as it sets events in context, uses the spoken word to communicate, and incorporates the human voice as a musical instrument to “cast a spell” on anyone who cares to listen. Story teaches us about the nature of human life in all its dimensions and actively shapes and integrates our life experiences.

In many cultures, each person’s life story is thought of as a journey to and through a series of places (Greene, 1995). The story form is a cultural universal; everyone everywhere enjoys stories (Egan, 1986). “The story, then, is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience” (Egan, 1986, p. 2).

The Story Lens

Metzger (1992) calls story a lens or frame. “It gives focus, it unifies, and it organizes diverse images into a coherent meaning” (Metzger, 1992, p. 59). Without the frame or focus of story, events become random and disconnected. Story provides the relationship, the links, and the connections for random thoughts and events that come together to create a whole. And so a story develops from small moments and insights that cluster together.

Telling My Story Qualitatively

“So what are you thinking?” I ask the sea of perplexed second graders who sit around me. “Who is Grandfather Twilight?” I wonder while holding Barbara Berger’s intriguing picture book for all to see. “Well, he could be a cloud man because on this page right here it looks like you can see through him,” Cristian speculates. “Yeah, and right here on this page it looks like his hair is blowing in the wind like a cloud. It looks like his body will disappear if the wind keeps blowing,” Tommy adds. “Does anyone

mind if I change the idea?" Leslie questions. When her peers assure her that they are ready for a new strand of thought, she continues. "I'm thinking that Grandfather Twilight makes the night happen. See how his pearl floats into the sky and turns into the moon? I think he is the one who has to put the moon in the sky. He turns day into night." Leslie's theory seems to resonate with Blanca. "Oh, I get it! He's the god of the moon and the sky. When he walks to the ocean, the sky starts changing colors too," Blanca says. "That's called dusk," Pablo states. "I respectfully disagree with the god of the moon and sky theory," Alex posits. "I still think he is just a nature man. He lives in a house of trees and even the birds and wolves like him. He's a man of nature." Through their daily conversations and actions, my students constantly remind me that the world is open to many, varied interpretations. I believe the world of research is no different.

The Mind-Body Connection

According to Creswell (2007), "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of them or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 37). That is, human beings construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting. As a teacher, I always viewed my role as both educator and researcher. Through classroom-based inquiry, I make daily interpretations of what I see, hear, and understand. Such qualitative interpretations, which stem from lived experiences, inform my instructional decisions and become a natural part of my classroom life. In general, it seems that qualitative inquiry is a natural endeavor, something that comes from who we are as people, as educators, and as researchers. It is this sense of naturalness that I find appealing because I believe that

research should be a natural process, something that fits into our daily lives rather than a contrived intruder, something that offsets the rhythm of our everyday activities.

Qualitative research gives researchers permission to connect both the mind and body in a quest for knowing, allowing them to ask questions from the heart of what they want to know and from the heart of who they are. The holistic nature of qualitative research allows the researcher to develop a complex picture of the problem under study. This ability to report multiple perspectives and sketch a larger picture is appealing in the sense that it takes all possible truths into account. It allows for a complex, detailed understanding of the research question, a detailed understanding that can only be realized by talking with individuals and watching their stories unfold in their natural setting.

Many “Right” Perspectives

As Crotty (1998) explains, constructivists contend, “there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (p. 8). In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear, that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. Qualitative inquiries provide frameworks that encourage multiple answers and flexible methods, which resonates with my worldviews including who I am as a teacher, as well as who I am as a researcher. The flexibility that qualitative research allows, combined with the realization that many different perspectives work together to create a collective end meaning, is especially relevant as I study my classroom community. Although the classroom community strives to work as one seamless unit, in actuality it is made up of individuals, each with a different story, each with a different

view. It is when these unique individuals each share their own interpretations of “Soft Landing” that a complex, holistic picture is unveiled.

Context Matters

Because I presume that “Soft Landing” is contextually based, it seems natural to use a specific qualitative methodology that capitalizes on context, allowing the holistic and meaningful characteristics of this time and space to be retained. Marshall and Rossman (2006) posit that human actions are significantly influenced by the setting in which they occur, and therefore, researchers should study actions and behavior in real-life situations. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), when “thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds are involved, the researcher needs to understand the deeper perspectives that can only be captured through face-to-face interaction” (p. 53). Creswell (2007) posits that we should use qualitative research when we “cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it” (p. 40). I accept the value of the context and setting of my research, which searches for a deeper understanding of the participants’ lived experiences of the phenomenon under study.

Turning to Narrative

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) claim that research is the study of experience. Narrative is one way to experience, understand, or think about experiences. Since education and education studies are a form of experience, they should be studied narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). “To experience an experience – that is, to do research into an experience – is to experience it simultaneously in four ways: inward and outward, backward and forward” (Clandinin & Connelly, 200, p. 50). By inward, the authors pose that researchers need to look toward internal conditions such as feelings,

hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. In contrast, to look outward means to concentrate on existential or environmental conditions. The combination of backward and forward-looking encompasses temporality – past, present, and future. “Thus one asks questions, collects field notes, derives interpretations, and writes a research text that addresses both personal and social issues by looking inward and outward, and addresses temporal issues by looking not only to the event but to its past and to its future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50).

A narrative approach to inquiry allows researchers to “peer into the moment” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) using a metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space made up of personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); combined with the notion of place (situation). As researchers work within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, they learn to see themselves as always “in the midst” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63), located somewhere along the dimensions of time, place, the personal, and the social. But as narrative inquirers, we also see ourselves “in the midst” in another sense. We see ourselves as living in the middle of a nested set of stories – ours and theirs.

Walking Into Nested Stories

As researchers, we enter the field living our own stories, while participants enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their individual stories. As narrative inquirers, we work within the space not only with our participants, but also with ourselves. Working in this space, we become visible with our own lived and told stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) warn that sometimes this means that our own unnamed, perhaps secret, stories come to light as much as do those of our participants. “In narrative inquiry, it is

impossible as researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 62).

Painting a Story

Portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human life and experience. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying, “documenting their voices and their visions – their authority, knowledge, and wisdom” (p. xv). The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and is shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subjects, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image. The encounter between the portraitist and the subject is rich with meaning and is crucial to the success and authenticity of the rendered piece. Upon completion, the portrait creates a narrative that is complex, provocative, and inviting. The portrait creates a narrative that attempts to be holistic, revealing the dynamic interaction of values, personality, structure, and history. And the portrait creates a narrative that documents human behavior and experience in context. Rather than viewing context as a source of distortion, a portraitist sees it as a resource for understanding. Thus, the narrative is always embedded in a particular context, including physical settings, cultural rituals, norms, and values, and historical periods (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The context is rich in cues about how the subjects negotiate and understand their experience.

Portraitists are not only interested in producing complex descriptions in context, but they are also interested in searching for the central story in an effort to develop a convincing and authentic narrative. “This requires careful, systematic, and detailed

description through watching, listening to, and interacting with the actors over a sustained period of time” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 12). After engaging in prolonged watching, portraitists draw out emergent themes and piece together themes into an aesthetic whole as an effort to strengthen their descriptions even further. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) likens the process of creating a whole to weaving a tapestry or piecing together a quilt.

Weaving Understanding: The Portraiture Methodology

Portraiture is a research methodology that uses a form of emergent, open-ended narrative inquiry to gather and interpret data from a variety of sources necessary to explore lived experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) describes portraiture as an eclectic, interdisciplinary approach that is shaped by the lenses of history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. “It blends the curiosity and detective work of a biographer, the literary aesthetic of a novelist, and the systematic scrutiny of a researcher” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 15).

Because I seek to understand the lived experiences of students who participate in “Soft Landing,” portraiture is a fitting choice. A portrait is the narrative result of portraiture, but a portrait does not merely tell a story, it constructs a reality that invites the reader into the subject through reflections on the past, the interpretations of the present, and insights about the future (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003). The fact that portraiture considers reflections on the past as well as interpretations of the present is particularly appealing as I have eight years of anecdotal records about the evolution of “Soft Landing.” I will be able to paint a more developed, holistic view of “Soft Landing” if I reflect on the development and implementation of “Soft Landing” from its onset. The

portraiture methodology allows me to draw out crucial elements of “Soft Landing” for further analysis. The portrait reflects the type of exploratory and descriptive research studies described by Marshall and Rossman (2006) that “build rich descriptions of complex circumstances” (p. 33). Because “Soft Landing” has yet to be studied, it is important to develop a rich description of this complex phenomenon so that it can be adequately understood and applied to new settings.

Before the Story

Before a portraitist enters the field to embark on data collection, she should try to articulate the contours of a theoretical framework, discern her anticipatory schema, and register her preoccupations. “This is an early self-reflective, self-critical exercise that increases her consciousness about the lens she brings to the field and allows her to open her eyes to record the reality she encounters” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 213). Even though a portraitist enters the field with such a clear intellectual framework and guiding research questions, she should fully expect and welcome the adaptation of both her intellectual agenda and her methods to fit the context and the people she studies, warns Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997). Even so, “It is important that the portraitist record her framework *before* she enters the field, identifying the intellectual, ideological, and autobiographical themes that will shape her view” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 186). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) suggests that the more explicit the portraitist can make her “voice of preoccupation” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 186), the more open she will be to what she encounters in the field. “Making the anticipatory schema explicit allows for greater openness of mind” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 186).

The intellectual framework that I developed results from a review of related literature, prior observations of students engaged in “Soft Landing,” and general knowledge of inquiry. The framework also resonates with echoes of my autobiographical journey including aspects of my own familial, cultural, developmental, and educational background. This intellectual and experiential structure acts as a point of reference that guides my angle of vision and data collection.

Intellectual and Autobiographical Themes

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) posits that the identity, character, and history of the researcher are critical to the manner of listening, selecting, interpreting, and composing the story. “Portraiture admits the central and creative role of the *self* of the portraitist” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13). Perhaps it is true that all researchers are selective in defining and shaping the data they collect and the interpretations that flow from their findings. Even the most objective investigations reveal the hand of the researcher in shaping the inquiry. So at the center of all research, the investigator needs to manage the tension between personal predispositions and rigorous skepticism (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

With portraiture, the researcher is highly evident and highly visible (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). At all stages of the research endeavor “The self of the portraitist emerges as an instrument of inquiry, an eye on perspective-taking, an ear that discerns nuances, and a voice that speaks and offers insights” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13). Because portraitists’ voices and presences are so explicit, efforts to balance personal predispositions with disciplined critique are central to the portrait’s success.

“The researcher brings her own history – familial, cultural, ideological, and educational – to the inquiry” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 95). The portraitist’s perspective, questions, and insights are inevitably shaped by these autobiographical experiences. Although Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) suggests researchers use the knowledge and wisdom drawn from their life experiences as resources for understanding, she also warns that researchers not let their autobiography obscure their inquiries.

For nine years, I have been a teacher of second graders. Most recently, I teach at a school in a neighborhood with many recent immigrants and high poverty levels. I am a white teacher in a non-white classroom. I am different. When I first started to work with immigrant students, I was afraid of our differences. “I won’t be able to talk to their parents,” I worried. “How will I be able to develop home-school relationships?” I wondered. “How will I be able to communicate with the children if they don’t know English?” I asked again and again. This was my biggest fear. Now I realize that I can utilize unspoken questions and nonverbal cues as an aid to understand my students. With the help of “Soft Landing,” a time for play, the language of children, I can talk to my students in new ways. Now I make the effort to find ways to cultivate home-school relationships, as they are crucial to student success. When I am unable to speak to a parent, I find a translator. I realize that parents offer valuable insight into home life, something that affects every student’s school life, and something that I can not possibly know about without parents’ help. I no longer can ignore personal attributes and family circumstances that make a child different or may cause him or her anxiety at school.

Now I pay closer attention to my actions than I did before. Do I respond to each child in a similar way? What sorts of behaviors draw my negative attention? I do not care to define students as obedient or naughty, fast or slow, popular or invisible. I do not care to give students roles or be the judge of these young beings who, in the beginning, I barely know. I leave that to the children. I let them decide who they will become. I do not insist that the children pretend to be like everyone else. In Room 119, individual voices sing out.

Perhaps I am able to cultivate individuality because I come from a home where our individual talents and differences were celebrated. My parents did not insist that I follow in my older brother's footsteps, just as they did not insist that my younger sister follow in mine. They did not create our identities, rather they gave us many opportunities to create our own. My brother was a baseball player and musician, my sister, a soccer player and a singer, and I, a ballet dancer. We all were those things because we chose those paths. Is it simply coincidental that we all gravitated to different arenas? I think not. Just as we are different people, our interests differ as well. We were not forced to fit into the same mold. Why should I ask my students to do otherwise? I follow my own parents' example and decide not to ask them to squeeze into the same identity boxes.

I identify as a teacher who fosters thinking. I continually challenge students to examine their thinking, explain their thinking and revise their thinking during their workshop-based classroom experiences. I believe I raise competent, critical readers and writers who are self-determining and generative. Room 119, our classroom full of creative opportunities for students to expand their potential, serves as a model for the many teachers who join us for classroom visits and observations.

Perhaps the teacher I grew into is not accidental. Perhaps my identity stems from the person I grew into. My parents raised me to be a competent, critical person who is self-determining and generative. When I could not get a house for my Barbie™ dolls, one like all the other girls at my school had, I was not met with pity, but rather I was met with a challenge. “You can make your own house. Use your imagination. It will be so much better than any Barbie™ house found in a store,” my mom assured me. So I did. My bedroom closet had three large steps leading to the attic crawl space and I decided the steps could double as a three-story house. When I finished construction, my Barbie™ house was not just any house. It was a mansion complete with tissue box beds, cereal box kitchen counters, and strawberry container hot tubs. Our household challenge to think, to be creative, and to be flexible problem-solvers did not end here. When we could not get real squirt guns to use at the public pool, we did not complain. We just thought of another way. Our empty dish soap bottle idea worked perfectly. When we could not have plastic play food to line our pretend grocery store shelves. We just thought of another way. In a culture of thinking, there is always another way.

At home, my siblings and I were encouraged to ask “why” and “how” and we were met with answers. Our family room was lined with bookshelves full of books that housed the answers to our questions. I remember sitting on the couch with my dad as we looked through his college textbooks in an effort to better understand a geometric proof. I remember his giant book about how things work. I remember our hikes through the woods. “What kind of bones are these? Where did they come from? Why is this turtle shell white instead of green? Why?” Room 119 is full of endless “whys” and “hows”

just like my home. And instead of becoming tired of the endless questioning, my response is always, “I don’t know. Let’s find out.”

I believe in raising thoughtful, critical, independent learners. To do so, I create a context for learning in which each child develops his or her own voice, opinions, and ideas while at the same time honors the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of peers. I know that establishing a sense of community where children value and respect each other as learners and teachers is essential to the success of any kind of instruction. Creating common ground is critical, especially in a classroom where children are encouraged to honestly share their thinking and respond to one another. Is it accidental that I believe in the same things for my students that my parents believe in for me? I think not.

Personal Investment

My level of investment and belief in “Soft Landing” is both a potential advantage and disadvantage for this research endeavor. Since I created “Soft Landing” eight years ago, I have had an intimate relationship with the phenomenon. Year after year, I witness my students growing together both academically and socially as they experience their “Soft Landing” gifts of time, space, and choice. My passion about the benefits of the “Soft Landing” ritual is a benefit in the sense that I am completely wedded to my research topic. I look forward to collecting and analyzing “Soft Landing” data with the hope that my findings may have positive implications for other Title I students in other schools. On the contrary, my passion for “Soft Landing” may carry a certain level of research bias. Clearly, I believe “Soft Landing” time is beneficial for my students, and because of that, I enter the research with some preconceived notions about the phenomenon. Despite my opinions about “Soft Landing,” as a researcher, I will need to

remain open to possible critiques and skepticisms that may surround the “Soft Landing” ritual and give them equal attention during data collection and analysis. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) sees the portraitist’s stance as vigilantly counterintuitive, working against the grain of formerly held presuppositions, always alert and responsive to surprise.

The Story Setting

Meaning in Context

Portraitists find context crucial to their documentation of human experience. Context becomes a framework that places people and action in time and space and acts as a resource for understanding what people say and do (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). “The context is rich in clues for interpreting the experience of the actors in the setting. We have no idea how to decipher or decode an action, a gesture, a conversation, or an exclamation unless we see it embedded in context” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41).

Context is a rich resource for examining and interpreting behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. A portraitist believes that human experience has meaning in a particular social, cultural, and historical context (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In such a context, relationships are real, the participants are familiar with the setting, their activity has purpose, and nothing is contrived. Because the research participants remain in their typical context, the comfort-level contributes to more complete, natural, and authentic responses and actions. “Surrounded by the familiar, they can reveal their knowledge, their insights, and their wisdom through action, reflection, and interpretation” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 43).

A Rationale for Room 119

Since my study is of a specific program, “Soft Landing,” I need to select a classroom setting that uses this pedagogical strategy. Clearly, I will not be able to randomly select a site for my research. Because I developed the concept of starting the student day with “Soft Landing,” it seems that my own classroom, Room 119, has compelling characteristics to make it a logical site selection. Although a few other teachers in my building recently decided to start using a version of the “Soft Landing” ritual in their own classrooms, my level of experience may offer a truer picture of the workings of this phenomenon, while providing an accurate reflection of my original design of and intentions for “Soft Landing.” My research questions include:

1. What is “Soft Landing?”
2. How do students choose to use their “Soft Landing” time? How do these choices change over time?
3. What does “Soft Landing” mean to students?
4. What have I learned about myself as a teacher during “Soft Landing?”

By asking these questions and learning about my students’ experiences I hope to learn more about the conditions that lead to the sort of highly engaged, childlike play and work that occurs during “Soft Landing.” I wonder, can we formalize and then spread the child-initiated, joyful, authentic learning that occurs during “Soft Landing” in order to extend the learning opportunities “Soft Landing” affords to many students in many classrooms?

Welcome to Room 119

Room 119 is one of six second-grade classrooms in a Title I early childhood primary school, in one of the largest public school districts in the United States. Nearly 80% of students who attend our school are eligible for free and reduced lunch, making our poverty rate one of the highest in this Mid-Atlantic school district. Situated within a large metropolitan area, our school identifies as diverse and multicultural. Almost 86% of families are immigrants to the United States. 60% of students are Latino, 26% are African or African American, 8% are Asian, and 6% are White. Almost all of our students speak English as their second language, and 65% of students still receive English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services.

During the 2009-2010 school year, 16 students call Room 119 their home. Our Room 119 community is made up of 8 boys and 8 girls. Eleven students identify as Latino, 3 students identify as African or African American, and 2 students identify as multiracial. Of our 16 students, 9 received parental consent to participate in this study.

Gathering the Story

Data Collection

Metzger (1992) encourages writers to imagine that their daily life occurs in a foreign country. In doing so, she says, “We will be like travelers, exceedingly attentive to every detail, curious about the meaning of everything, and enthusiastic about any experience” (Metzger, 1992, p. 10). When we learn to see in the way Metzger suggests, life becomes the story we wish to write.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) describes the portraitist as a “boundary sitter” (p. 87) who scans the action while systematically gathering the details of behavior, expression,

and talk, yet remaining open and receptive to all stimuli. In an attempt to provide a panoramic view of the research participants and their actions, I will collect data from multiple sources.

Observational Data

Metzger (1992) believes that a story is enlivened by the details, insights, and associations that flesh it out, take it deeper, give it a larger perspective, put it in another context, and relate it to other experiences. To do this, portraitists strive to record subtle details of human experience. “They want to capture the specifics, the nuance, the detailed description of a thing, a gesture, a voice, an attitude as a way of illuminating more universal patterns” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14). Observational data collected in my “Soft Landing” classroom will play a particularly significant role in my study. Such observations will provide the opportunity for me to watch how students choose to fill the empty time and space that “Soft Landing” provides, as well as to see how our community develops during this time and space. According to Davis (1997), a sure intention in the methodology of portraiture is to capture an insider’s understanding of the research scene. “Portraitists try to feel as the subject feels and to represent that understanding in a portrayal that exceeds the level of literal depiction found in a map or a plan” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 25).

In an attempt to deepen my own understanding of “Soft Landing,” my observations centered on the following questions:

- How do students choose to fill the empty time and space that “Soft Landing” provides?
- What motivates them to engage in certain activities?

- Are students able to sustain long-term engagement (over sessions, days, and weeks) in one activity?
- Are their choices related to other classroom activities such as our current science unit, or are they completely independent?
- Do students always choose the same activity each day?
- Are certain students influenced by others' choices?
- Who do students interact with during this time? How do students come to understand each other?
- What are children talking about during “Soft Landing” and to what end?
- How does their talk increase (or decrease?) the richness of the situation?

As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) suggests, it is important to record all that I hear in an effort to document the words, the gestures, and the tone, as I witness voices in context and seek to understand the students' interpretations of their talk.

Student Interview Data

In addition to observational data, I conducted two small group interviews with students in an effort to understand students' “Soft Landing” experience. Students responded to open-ended questions like the following to expose their own beliefs, opinions, and understanding of the act of living and experience of “Soft Landing” time each morning:

- What is “Soft Landing?”
- What does “Soft Landing” mean to you?
- Why do we have “Soft Landing?”
- What would your day be like if we didn't have “Soft Landing?”

- What do you look forward to doing during “Soft Landing?” Why?
- How do you decide what to do during “Soft Landing?”
- Do you choose the same activity every day? Why?
- Has “Soft Landing” helped you discover your strengths as a student? How?
- Has “Soft Landing” helped you become more aware of your personal interests?
How?
- Do you prefer making choices or having a teacher tell you what to do?
- How do you decide whom to work with during “Soft Landing?” Do you work
with the same friends each day? Do you ever choose to work by yourself? Why?

Personal Reflection Data

Metzger (1992) encourages writers to travel to their inner realm in an effort to know oneself deeply. Such inner exploration helps our true identity emerge. Our identity as writers materializes through images, memories, and events (Metzger, 1992). When we write, we select images, memories, and events that are essential to us. When we reflect, we think about the events that formed us. In the process of writing, of discovering our story, we are altered. “We re-store, re-member, re-vitalize, re-juvenate, rescue, re-cover, re-claim, re-new” (Metzger, 1992, p. 71). Warnock (1978) believes our own experiences are not only significant for us, but are also worth understanding.

Understanding the Story

As portraitists attempt to search for meaning, their work is inevitably interpretive (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Geertz (1973) claims the researcher traces a path through a dense thicket of interpretations, through piled-up structures of inference and implication. Within this thicket of interpretation, the portraitist finds herself asking

questions like, “What is the meaning of this action, gesture, or communication?” and “What is the meaning of this to me?” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) claims that when making an interpretation, the portraitist must be vigilant about providing enough descriptive evidence in the text so the reader might be able to offer an alternative hypothesis or different interpretation of the data. Data analysis is a process of description, interpretation, analysis and synthesis in an attempt to bring aesthetic order to the collection of data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Selecting Quotations

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) posits that when portraitists listen for voice, they seek it out, trying to capture its texture and cadence. Portraitists explore the meaning of voice by transporting its sound and message into text through carefully selected quotations (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In doing so, the portraitist is able to discover the nuanced connections among themes by looking for subtle changes over time. When looking for themes, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) urges the portraitist to maintain the integrity and complexity of human thought, feeling, and action.

Uncovering Emergent Themes

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) warns that the data must be scrutinized carefully in a search for the story line that emerges from the material. Because there could be many stories that are told instead of a single one, the portraitist actively selects the themes that will be used to tell the story, strategically decides on the points of focus and emphasis, and creatively defines the sequence and rhythm of the narrative. What gets left out is often as important as what is included. The blank spaces and silences also shape the form of the story. “For the portraitist, then, there is a crucial dynamic between documenting

and creating the narrative, between receiving and shaping, reflecting and imposing, mirroring and improvising” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 12).

The effort to reach an authentic and complete story must flow organically from the data and from the interpretive witness of the portraitist. Lawrence-Lightfoot posits that themes emerge from the data and give data shape and form. “The development of emergent themes reflects the portraitist’s first efforts to bring interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and aesthetic order to the collection of data. This is an iterative *and* generative process” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 185). Emergent themes grow out of data gathering and synthesis, accompanied by generative reflection and interpretive insights (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Generating Reflections

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) encourages portraitists to document their reflections in “Impressionistic Records” (p. 188) or thoughtful written pieces that identify emerging hypotheses, interpretations, shifts in perspective, and potential dilemmas. Such daily reflections allow portraitists to become increasingly focused and discerned in their work to discover patterns or themes. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) suggests that the act of writing moves the researcher’s thinking to a deeper level while helping to connect field notes to conceptual ideas. “Hearing the stories and witnessing the action, then reflecting on their meaning and relationship to one another, the researcher begins to see patterns” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 210). Davis (1997) posits that the researchers’ day-to-day process of listening for emergent themes functions as a sort of on-site hypothesis of finding and testing data. Davis (1997) suggests that at the end of the day,

portraitists review field notes, log observations while they are fresh in their minds, and begin to reflect on the emergence of possible themes.

Listening for a Harmony of Voices

The portraitist draws out and constructs emergent themes using multiple modes of synthesis, convergence, and contrast (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The most easily recognizable emergent themes are the ones that are clearly and persistently articulated by the research participants. Lawrence-Lightfoot calls these themes “repetitive refrains” (p. 193). The portraitist hears the same refrain over and over again, from a variety of people in a variety of settings. “The refrains, audible and visible, proclaim: ‘This is who we are. This is what we believe. This is how we see ourselves’” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 193). These repetitive refrains (Lawrence-Lightfoot) are the driving currents that flow through the participants’ journey.

In addition to repetitive refrains, the portraitist is often able to identify emergent themes in the metaphors, symbols, and vernacular of the participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). “These words or phrases resonate with meaning and symbolism, sometimes representing the central core of institutional culture or the dominant dimension of a life story” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 198). Similar to poetry, resonant metaphors (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997) embody values and perspectives while giving them shape and meaning.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) suggests that emergent themes may be expressed through cultural rituals. Rituals, or opportunities for building community, reflect the group’s purpose and shed insight into community life (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). “We witness the ritual and we see values revealed, priorities named, and stories

told that symbolize the institution's culture" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 201). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) encourages the portraitist to examine the emergent themes that may be embedded in these rituals.

Finally, when portraitists document the convergence of perspectives from various sources, they hear the harmony of voices (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Such layering of data helps scattered pieces come together to form a whole. With some distance, the researcher may be able to see the pattern that eludes the participants' view. "She can see the forest; they can only see the trees" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 210).

Weaving the Story

When developing the aesthetic whole, portraitists come face to face with the tensions inherent in blending art and science, analysis and narrative. "We are reminded of the dual motivations guiding portraiture: to inform and inspire, to document and transform, to speak to the head and to the heart" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 243). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) challenges researchers to create a document that is both authentic and colorful.

Like Pieces of a Puzzle

"The piecing together of the portrait has elements of puzzle building and quilt making. A tapestry emerges, a textured piece with shapes and colors that create moments of interest and emphasis" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 16). The portraitist chooses words that create sensations and evoke visions for the reader. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) claim the portrayal of a complex phenomenon is analogous to assembling a jigsaw puzzle. "The edge pieces are located first and assembled to provide a frame of reference.

Then attention is devoted to those more striking aspects of the puzzle picture that can be identified readily from the mass of puzzle pieces” (p. 191). In an effort to develop a credible and believable story, portraitists must consider the whole, not just the pieces of the puzzle (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) posits that when portraitists begin to shape the aesthetic whole, they attend to four dimensions.

The Overarching Whole

From the multitude of individual and collective data comes the conception of an overarching whole. The conception both embraces and shapes the development of the final narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Madden (1980) argues that a writer needs a conception to move from raw materials to the whole. “An intuitive fusion of emotion and idea produces a conception. A conception is a total, gestalt-like grasp of the story that enables the author to control the development of a situation, so that in the end, everything coheres in a single charged image” (p. 104). Like novelists, portraitists search for an overarching vision or conception that will give their narrative focus and meaning. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) warns that such a conception must “reflect the weight of empirical evidence, the infusion of emotional meaning, and the aesthetic of narrative development” (p. 248).

The Organized Whole

With a vision in mind, the portraitist seeks structure and organization. “The structure serves as a scaffold for the narrative – the themes that give the piece a frame, a stability, and an organization” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 252). Unlike a building’s structure, the portrait’s structure is visible and evident. Usually in the form of

headings and subheadings, the structure reflects the emergent themes. The structure of a portrait is formalistic and mechanical, yet necessary (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

The Organic Whole

To balance the formality of structure, the form of the written narrative is more organic and fluid (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Madden (1980) refers to form as a kind of mysterious phenomenon that captures emotion and movement. He sees the crucial interaction of form and structure. Together, form and structure “generate energy, life, emotion, and they shape meaning” (Madden, 1980, p. 183). Standing alone, the structure is unwelcoming, stark, and bare, but form, expressed in stories, examples, illustrations, and illusions gives life and movement to the narrative, providing complexity, and subtlety, while offering the reader opportunities to feel drawn into the piece (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

The Coherent Whole

“Finally, the aesthetic whole emerges through the development of coherence – when there is an orderly, logical, and aesthetically consistent relation of parts, when all the pieces fall into place and we can see the pattern clearly” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 255). To achieve such unity, the portraitist identifies an overarching vision for the portrait, utilizes emergent themes to create a scaffold for the portrait, and gives insight, aesthetic, and emotion to the structure by including texture from stories, illustrations, and examples. In doing so, the narrative has unity because there is a building of experiences, emotions, and behaviors that allows the reader to understand the research setting and research participants.

Implications

“The portraitist seeks to document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it, trusting that the readers will feel identified” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14). I hope readers will feel the familiarity of the experience as they connect and identify with the story I tell. Like an archeologist, I hope to convey the richness of the layers of human experience while uncovering universal themes. In portraiture, the medium is an agent of discovery. “Uniquely negotiated by the individual voice of the researcher, aesthetic expressions of vision and understanding entitle readers to new ways of seeing and thinking” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 36).

I seek to document and reflect on my work in a diverse community of young learners as I analyze the impact of my “Soft Landing” ritual. I seek to inform and inspire, illustrate and teach, discover and transform. I hope to provide an alternative to the stories that currently shape lives, pedagogy, and school communities, an alternative that resonates with many.

The Story Continues

In an effort to better understand the “Soft Landing” opportunity and the opportunities it offers, I turn to my classroom, my students, and myself. I use the following chapter to document the lived experiences of my Room 119 second graders as they engage in “Soft Landing” during the first three months of the school year. As I develop my own “listening self” (Levin, 1989), I also use the next chapter to share my own reflections about what I learn about myself as a teacher during “Soft Landing.”

CHAPTER FOUR: A PORTRAIT OF “SOFT LANDING”

If You Are a Dreamer, Come In, Come In...

It is the first day of school. As I drive to school, I pass through quiet neighborhood streets crowded with apartment buildings. The community center playground is empty. No one stands in the corner convenient store parking lot. The pupusa truck is closed for business. After school, just eight hours from now, this street will tell a different story. I will have to be a much more cautious driver then, watching for small children, stray balls, and speeding skateboards. But for now, the neighborhood sleeps, dreaming of carefree summer days.

I approach the nearly empty school parking lot, situated in the heart of the neighborhood. Its central location makes the walk to school an easy commute for nearly all of our students. But for now, the crosswalks and sidewalks are empty. They are not the only things that are empty at this hour. The waxed hallways are empty, too. The school building always looks different during the hours before children flood through its doors. It seems too big, too quiet, and too lonely especially in the basement where Room 119 is nestled. I unlock the door and take a moment to enjoy the sunlight streaming through the sparkly curtains. It looks magical. With that thought, I turn to read the invitation that hangs on Room 119's door. "If you are a dreamer come in. If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar, a hopper, a pray-er, a magic-bean-buyer...If you're a pretender come sit by my fire for we have some flax golden tales to spin. Come in! Come in" (Silverstein, 1974, p. 1). "Yes," I think to myself. "This is a place where dreams come true." I take a moment to sit on the classroom couch and wonder about the kinds of

dreams the new friends of Room 119 will dream. “Who will we become?” I wonder. Only time will tell the story that we will weave together.

Painting the “Soft Landing” Portrait

I use this chapter as a space to tell the story that we, the members of Room 119 during the 2009-2010 school year, weave together. I take the time to paint the portrait of the “Soft Landing” classroom. To do so, I use my field notes from daily classroom observations and tape recordings of student interviews to write a detailed account of the stories that unfold during the first three months of “Soft Landing.” This is the portrait rendering. In the final chapter, I will engage in sense-making. I will uncover thematic understandings as I synthesize what it means to teach and learn in a “Soft Landing” space.

Becoming Room 119

Any new school year brings a degree of uncertainty for teachers and for students. “What will this place be like?” children wonder as they walk through their new classroom door for the first time. “Will I have friends? Will I be safe? How will we all share this space? Will we argue? Get along?” The unknown is full of questions.

In Room 119, we take time in the beginning of the year to get to know each other in an effort to build relationships and to define our shared identity. We take time to share our stories. By sharing our stories, we have the potential of forging new relationships including local classroom cultures in which individuals are interconnected and new “we’s” are formed (Dyson, 1994). Individual lives start to weave together. New language and experiences enter the classroom. The children gain opportunities to “try on” the language and experiences of others while infusing themselves into new ways of

being. Paley (1990) claims, “Children adapt best to school through the culture they themselves invent” (p. 112), an invented culture that is a common culture, but not a controlled one, an invented culture that is dynamic, rooted in experiences shared by the members of the group.

Our Invented Culture

Each day, I continue to make small forays into my new students’ world of play and story. And we all continue to meet at an increasing number of intersections. Through play and story, I learn about children’s home cultures, their diverse experiences, and their connections to family and friends. I learn about both group and individual identities as I use “Soft Landing” time to lean in, listen, and watch. By sharing play and stories, the children and I create the potential for new connections that link us inside a new tale, the tale of Room 119.

The Helper Protectors

On the third day of school, September 2, 2009, it is the group of five boys who huddle over the boxes of Legos® that grabs my attention. “Can I tell you something? Can you just listen?” David asks his fellow builders. “Let’s be helper protectors,” he states. “Well, do you think I’m a repairer or a destroyer?” William wonders aloud to this new group of friends. “We’re all repairers. We are helper protectors,” David reassures

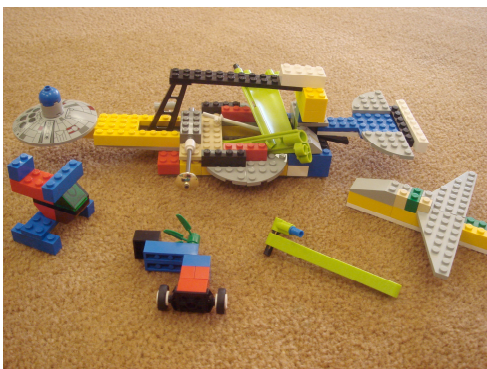


Figure 12. The Helper Protectors’ vehicles: rescue plane, rescue helicopter, protector robot, police ship, and rocket

William and the others while assigning a helpful identity to the group. “When there’s a tragic moment, we will be there to help!” Jacob agrees. “It’s called Danger, Fire!” Javier suggests. “And I’m going to build a

rescue plane that will be looking out for danger,” he adds. “Looking out for danger! Looking out for danger!” Dominic and William chant in agreement. “Okay. I will build a protector robot. It will detect anyone who needs help,” David says. Dominic, William, and Jacob decide to make a police ship, rescue helicopter, and rocket ship (see Figure 12) to help the cause. “Hurry! The protector robot senses danger!” David squeals with urgency. “We’re the good guys, right?” William asks this new group of friends. “Of course! Who else would we be?” David responds.

“Pancakes...Coming Right Up!”

On the seventh day of school, the bin of store supplies makes its debut. Just moments before the sound of footsteps tumble down the hallway, I place the brand-new bin (see Figure 13) in the middle of the large meeting rug. I am confident the stacks of order tablets, the brightly colored price tags, and the piles of crisp green fives, tens, and twenties will nearly call out to the children of Room 119 as soon as they walked through

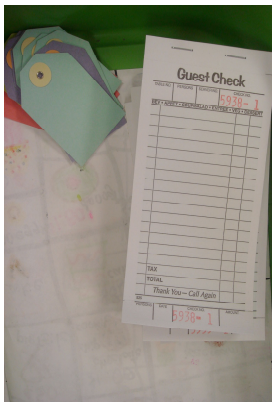


Figure 13. Store Supplies

the door. “Play with us! Touch us! Look! There’s something new to explore!” Second graders nearly trip over the bin to get to the other “Soft Landing” supplies, but still no one reaches in. “This is unbelievable,” I think to myself. No one notices, touches, or even questions. Despite the disappointing debut, I keep my faith and on the ninth day of school, just two days later, a full-blown restaurant is up and running. “We’re doing food service today!” a group of children tells me as they gather items from the bin of store supplies. Alexis sorts the play money while Jacob arranges the cooking utensils. Kayla does not waste any time. She

ties an apron around her waist, grabs an authentic order tablet, clicks the top of a ballpoint pen, makes sure the point is at the ready, and heads out into the sea of second graders. Clearly Kayla is the waitress today. “Would you like breakfast?” Kayla asks David. “What do you have?” David wonders. “Well, we have pancakes and bagels,” Kayla responds cheerfully. “Nah. I’ll just have a hot dog,” David decides. “A hot dog for *breakfast*?” Kayla says puzzled by the seemingly odd breakfast food request. “Something else?” Kayla asks. “That’s it,” David answers. “Okay, coming right up!” Kayla assures David while she writes his order on her tablet. On her way back to the “kitchen,” Kayla collects two more breakfast orders, this time for pancakes with bacon and spaghetti with meatballs. The latter order is met with another questioning look from Kayla. By the time Kayla rejoins the rest of the group, the kitchen crew is hard at work. “I need a hot dog, two pancakes, bacon, and spaghetti with meatballs on the double!” she tells the line of chefs. “More bacon? I’m on it!” Jacob shouts. “Did they order the *perfect* pancake?” William asks Kayla. “Yeah, I think so,” she answers. “Well that’s my specialty! Two perfect pancakes coming right up!” William says with enthusiasm. “And I’ll make the ‘On top of spaghetti, all covered with cheese’” (see Figure 14), Dominic sings, referencing the classic children’s song that we learned at yesterday’s Morning



Figure 14. Dominic’s plate of “On top of spaghetti”

Meeting. “Where’s the meatball?” Dominic asks as he shoves the play dough pasta maker full of yellow dough. “It rolled off the table...and onto the floor. And then your poor meatball rolled out the front door,” Jacob and William barely spit out in between fits of laughter. In no

time, the whole table is full of singing and giggling children. They think they are pretty clever. And I know they are.

“Take Two..Action!”

It’s day twelve. Until today, the puppets and puppet stage were left untouched. “What are those for?” Javier asks. “What are you referring to?” I wonder aloud. “Those,” he says motioning in the direction of the brightly colored puppets perched on the ledge of the heating and air conditioning unit. “And that,” he says while pointing to the lonely looking puppet stage. “Well, those puppets and that puppet stage are available for you to use,” I answer with intentional vagueness. “But what should we *do* with them?” Javier persists. “That’s for you to decide. And I just *know* you’ll think of something brilliant!” I say with reassurance before I walk away, giving Javier some space to “have at it.” Within seconds, Javier picks up two puppets, slides his hands into their mouths, and begins a two-way dialogue. Although I cannot hear what he is saying, I can tell by Javier’s expressions that the talk must be animated. The gathering crowd of interested second graders provides further proof. “What are you doing?” Alexis asks. “I’m doing a show,” Javier responds. “Can we do it too?” Angelina wonders. “Sure!” Javier and his two puppets reply. While Alexis and Angelina select their puppets, Javier finds chalk to write a message on the chalkboard front of the puppet stage (see Figure 15). I take the opportunity to move a little closer before the show begins.



Figure 15. “Hey everybody, get ready for the show!” Javier writes on the front of the newly discovered puppet stage.

With the precision of seasoned puppeteers, Javier, Alexis, and Angelina hide behind the stage, slide open the curtains, and begin. “Dum, dum. Dum, dum. Dum, dum, dum, dum...dum, dum, dum, dum, dum...dum, dum, dum, dum.” Javier chants, mimicking the beginning notes of many popular movies. “Take one...action!” Angelina shouts just as three puppets pop into view and the show begins. “Hi. Can I play with you guys?” Alexis’ puppet asks the others. “No! Only we can play!” Javier’s puppet responds with attitude. “I’m going to tell Mr. Martinez,” Alexis’ puppet whines in response before dropping out of sight. In the foreground, Angelina and Javier’s puppets continue to play. In the background, I hear Alexis talking to a pretend Mr. Martinez. “The other kids won’t let me play with them,” Alexis explains. “And what did you say?” ‘Mr. Martinez’s’ deep voice asks. “I said I was going to tell you,” Alexis answers. “Well I think you can handle this problem on your own. Why don’t you try again and I’ll watch?” ‘Mr. Martinez’ suggests. Just then all sounds and movements stop. All the puppets disappear except for Angelina’s who says, “Take two...action!” Again, three puppets pop into view and the show begins. “Hi. Can I play with you guys?” Alexis’ puppet asks the others. “No! Only we can play!” Javier’s puppet responds with attitude. Just as I start to experience déjà vu, Alexis says, “But you can’t say, you can’t play!” With that, Javier and Angelina’s puppets look at each other, look back at Alexis’ puppet, and say, “Okay. Let’s play.” And they do.

“Okay, that was good, but let’s do another show,” Angelina says just seconds later. “Okay, but this time, let’s be nice. Let’s just all be friends,” Javier suggests. “Yeah, just like we really are!” Alexis adds. By now, the three puppeteers are deep into their next masterpiece, but my attention wanes. I keep replaying the first show over and

over again in my mind. When I told Javier that I knew he would think of something brilliant to do with the puppets, I spoke with sincerity, but I never really imagined anything this brilliant. I begin to wonder if Javier, Angelina, and Alexis realize the amount of social teaching that was packed into their play. With a little expansion, they could take their show on the road to classrooms all over the country in an effort to teach other kids about conflict resolution, empathy, and being assertive. While I like to dream big, we decide to start with Room 119. That very day at our Morning Meeting, Javier, Angelina, and Alexis showcase an encore performance for our entire class. And as I suspect, the puppet role-play phenomenon instantly becomes a new class obsession.

“This is Your Control Tower Speaking. Is Everyone Ready for Takeoff?”

An airport graces our large meeting carpet on day fourteen and it is not just any airport. It is a handcrafted block airport complete with runways, fuel pads, terminals, and one very, very, very tall control tower. “Mrs. Domire, come here please!” the airport boys call. “We need you so we can do a comparison!” they continue with urgency. Of course I know exactly what they are referring to, as we noticed and named the comparison text feature the day before in the butterfly text we read. After seeing a photograph of the Western Pygmy Blue butterfly next to an adult’s thumb and realizing they are actually the same size, everyone gave comparisons an instant seal of approval. “This is the coolest text feature yet! Let’s find more of these!” a sea of Room 119 second graders chorused. “Yeah, they really help us understand how big things are!” In an effort to keep the comparison excitement brewing, I quickly make my way past puppet shows, painting lessons, and an authentic pupuseria and arrive at the transit hub.

“How can I help you?” I ask. “We need you to stand next to the control tower (see Figure 16),” William explains. “We’re comparing it to *you!*” Jacob and David



Figure 16.
A very tall
control
tower of
blocks

continue. The moment I oblige, the trio stands back to get a good look.

“Whoooooaa! It’s bigger than Mrs. Domire,” they say with awe. “I guess our design was a success,” Jacob comments with pride. “We’ve been working on it for two days!” David adds. “And we finally got it right!” William says with pleasure. “Now let’s get started!”

“*Infinity... You’re all set to go! Infinity?*” Jacob tries one more time. “Roger that, flight command,” William finally replies. “Just having a little technical difficulty,” he explains. “All fueled up and ready for takeoff!” William begins to taxi his plane down the runway of blocks.

Just when William reaches the end of blocks, Jacob frantically returns to the microphone.

“*Infinity! We have a small situation here! You can’t go! Abort! Abort!*” Jacob chants.

It is a good thing that William responds quickly to the control tower’s warning, as he is able to put on the brakes in enough time to avoid a collision with David’s plane.

Apparently that is the small situation Jacob warned about. “I’m imbalanced! I’m imbalanced!” David squeals while flying his plane haphazardly. “May day! May day! Ahhhhh! I’m going down!” David warns as he crashes his plane into the control tower, knocking the very tall stack of blocks to the ground.

I cringe when I see the tower of tumbling blocks. “Plane crashes? I don’t know about this. It’s getting a bit violent. Someone could get hurt,” I think to myself. Feeling a bit bad about my unsupportive thoughts, I remind myself that this is the children’s time to create their own curriculum in its natural form. I remind myself that there is no

activity for which children are better prepared than fantasy play. Nothing is more dependable and risk-free, and the dangers are only pretend. I remind myself that in the development of their fantasy play themes, characters, and plots, children explain their thinking. In this spirit, I decide to watch for a bit longer to see how the airport scenario develops.

“Okay, let’s rebuild the control tower,” David suggests as he starts gathering the fallen blocks. “But how about only four floors this time?” William asks, looking for consensus from the group. “You mean stories. Four stories,” Jacob corrects. “*Stories?*” William questions. As if Jacob knew William would confuse his intended use of the word, he begins to clarify immediately. “Not stories like books. Stories like floors. If a building has four floors, you can say it’s four stories high,” Jacob explains. “Look at David. He’s about a quarter of a story,” Jacob continues. “Oh. Yeah, that’s what I meant,” William decides. “And let’s design it so there’s space for an elevator shaft,” David suggests. “That’s going to be tricky, but we can definitely do it,” Jacob says with encouragement. “This is going to be our best control tower yet!” David decides. “Even if it isn’t the tallest one!” William agrees. “Maybe you shouldn’t use the big, heavy blocks on top. That’s what makes it fall,” Jacob suggests. “Yeah, let’s put those big blocks on the bottom. If you put the big blocks on top, the little blocks can’t take it,” David says. “Yeah, good idea,” Jacob and William agree. “What about this for the base?” Jacob asks while holding a very wide rectangular prism. “Sure!” William and David say. “I think I want to play this tomorrow,” David states. “How about you guys?” David’s question is met with nods all around.

As I listen to William, David, and Jacob share suggestions for potential building designs and watch Jacob walk over to the paper shelf to gather a few blank pieces of blue construction paper for their “blueprints,” I decide I am glad that I did not intervene to stop their play when it appeared to be getting a little rough. Perhaps David crashed his plane into the control tower on purpose so the group would have an excuse to start building all over again. Or maybe David just was in a destructive mood. Whatever the case, the boys were certainly busy making up their own work assignments with intensity and intentionality. I am glad I watched long enough to notice.

“Oh Mailman, Mailman!”

“Do you have envelopes?” Kayla asks on day seventeen. “I sure do. Would you like some?” I respond. “Yes, thank you! I’m making a post office,” Kayla answers with excitement. “Oh, what fun! I think I may have a few other supplies for your post office.



Figure 17. William, the mailman

You can get started and I’ll take a quick look in the closet,” I say while handing Kayla a stack of legal-sized envelopes. A few minutes later, my hands are full of goodies. I walk over to the writing table, which has been transformed into a letter writing station, to drop off an authentic mail shirt, a drawstring bag that is

perfect for toting mail, stickers, stamps, and stationary. Of course Kayla’s post office idea gains momentum immediately. “I’ll be the mailman!” William volunteers (see Figure 17). He wastes no time buttoning his shirt and hoisting his “mailbag” over his shoulder. “I’m ready! Who needs me?” William asks. “Oh mailman, mailman!” Kayla calls. “I have a letter for you to deliver.” William offers his

open sack to Kayla who drops a letter in with a smile. “Thank you, mailman!” Kayla says. “Oh mailman, mailman! I have a letter for you too!” Jacob calls. “Me too! Over here!” Javier says. Within moments, William is certainly the busiest member of Room 119. When his “mailbag” is stuffed full of letters, William announces that mail service is closed for the day. “Time to make deliveries!” William sings as he heads to the class cubbies to begin the mail sorting process. Just because the mailman is off-duty, does not mean the table full of mail-makers are finished with their work. “I am going to write a letter to everyone in our class. I already wrote two, so I have fourteen more to write,” Kayla says. “I think I’ll write a letter to every teacher in our school. I wonder if they’ll write back!” Javier adds. “Is this how you spell *from*?” Juliana asks while looking back and forth from her envelope to the strip of alphabet stickers. “It’s on the Word Wall. You can take it off and use it,” Kayla suggests. “Hey! Do you know there are other ways to say *from*?” Javier asks. “Yeah, I know. You mean like *love* or *your friend*?” Juliana half asks, half tells. “Yeah, like that, but there’s tons more. Let’s ask Mrs. Domire to write them all down so we have a resource!” Javier suggests. And they do. And I do.

“It’s Trick Protection!”

On the twentieth day of school, Room 119 receives its own “special delivery.” Our room is now full of live caterpillars, some from our science kit and some from the National Audubon Society. Our curiosity is out in full-force too. For weeks, magnifying glasses seem to be attached our hands. We do not want to miss any action! We look at everything! “Look! The caterpillar ate this whole leaf! I think this is Eric Carle’s (1969) *Very Hungry Caterpillar*,” Angelina says referencing the popular children’s author. With

that, Angelina heads off to borrow a container of play-dough from the “food service” crew. As I wonder what she has planned, I continue to watch and listen to the other caterpillar observers. “This caterpillar moves when I move! Look! If I move my head, he moves his head. He’s following me!” David says with excitement. “You should see this one! I can’t tell where his head is. Is his head on this end or on this end?” Alexis wonders. “And what are those spikes all over his body?” Jacob adds. “They look like they are sharp!” Alexis speculates. “Let’s ask if we can touch them to find out!” David suggests.

Soon, the trio stands by my side. I can tell they are on a serious mission. “How can I help you?” I ask. David speaks for the group. “We’re thinking the spikes on the caterpillar are sharp and we want to know for sure,” he explains. “Yeah, and the best way to find out is to touch it. So, can we?” Alexis continues. “I like your theory about the caterpillar’s covering. Why might a caterpillar have something that looks like spikes on its back?” I wonder aloud. “Hmmm...for protection!” the trio chants. “You know, from birds,” Jacobs adds with confidence. “I think you’re on to something! Let’s test your thinking,” I respond. In no time, the trio points out the caterpillar that has captured their interest. “It’s in there!” they say in unison.

I waste no time and remove the lid (see Figure 18). I quickly model how to touch the caterpillar with a gentle finger and one by one,

Alexis, David, and Jacob follow my lead. “It’s just tickly!” they all squeal. “The spikes aren’t really sharp,” David states. “It’s like trick protection!” We all want to hear more



Figure 18. Alexis, David, and Jacob’s “spiky” caterpillar

about David’s interesting idea. “What do you mean?” we ask. “Well, birds probably stay away from this caterpillar because it looks sharp, but it’s not really that sharp,” David explains. “So you’re saying that the caterpillar’s bristles are effective?” I ask to clarify my understanding of David’s trick protection theory. “You mean the spikes?” David wonders. “Well, yes, but technically they are called bristles,” I answer. “Like on a toothbrush?” Jacob questions. “Exactly! Toothbrushes and brooms have bristles too,” I respond, impressed by Jacob’s connection. “But my toothbrush bristles aren’t really sharp either,” Jacob continues. “That’s what I’m trying to say!” David persists. “This caterpillar isn’t really sharp, but still, birds probably don’t want to eat it. It’s TRICK PROTECTION!” David emphasizes one final time. Our nods and smiles show that we are both satisfied with and impressed by David’s theory.

Just then Angelina returns with a holey play-dough creation in hand (see Figure 19). “See *that guy there* is the very hungry caterpillar. His leaf looks just like *this*,” she says as she holds up a blue play-dough model that looks strikingly similar to the illustrations in Eric Carle’s



Figure 19. Angelina’s holey caterpillar leaf

(1969) picture book. Although Angelina’s theory is on a different scale than David’s, it certainly isn’t any less brilliant. I just stand and smile at my smart caterpillar observers.

“I Have to Write This Down!”

It is Monday. The students of Room 119 return from a three-day weekend. It seems as though it was torture to be away from their caterpillars for three days. A herd of second graders marches through the door and heads straight to the caterpillar shelf,

backpacks and all. “Look how big it got!” Kayla announces. “Yeah, mine is huge,” Alexis agrees. “Mine is so fat!” Juliana chimes in. “I think mine is in a J-shape!” Jacob offers the most exciting news yet. He holds his caterpillar cup up so all can see the progress his caterpillar made (see Figure 20). “So many changes happened while we were gone,” Alexis realizes. “I have to write this down!” She flips through the lab



Figure 20. Jacob holds his caterpillar cup for everyone to see

notebooks until she finds her own. Without being told what to do, she turns to a page headed with the word “observations,” grabs a pen, magnifying glass, and her caterpillar, and begins to document the changes that occurred over the long weekend (see Figure 21).

Like most good ideas in Room 119, Alexis’ choice to use “Soft Landing” to record scientific observations catches on quickly.

Soon children, their yellow lab notebooks, caterpillar cups, and magnifying glasses

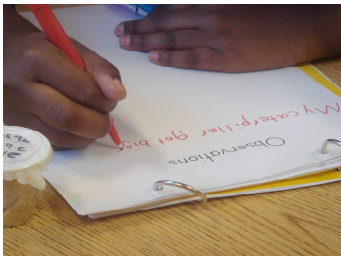


Figure 21. Alexis documents caterpillar changes in her lab notebook

sprawl all over our carpet. I take the time to scan the room. Where are the Legos® and the blocks? Where are the plastic animals and play dough? They are replaced with lab notebooks and pens. Fantasy play is

replaced by scientific observation, research, and writing. Pretending is replaced by doing.

“So That’s Why it Ate So Much!”

“It’s making a chrysalis! Everyone come quick!” William and Kayla nearly shout with excitement. We all literally drop what we are doing to join William and Kayla at the monarch flight cage, which Javier and Angelina lovingly labeled just a few days earlier

so we wouldn't get confused (see Figure 22). I am amazed by the miracle in front of me and judging from their open mouths, it is evident that the rest of Room 119 feels the same. In just seconds, the beautiful green casing works its way up the caterpillar's back.

What was a caterpillar just a moment before is now something completely different. A new creation is born right in front of our eyes. Alexis breaks the silence. "So

that's why it ate so much!" she says. "It needed enough energy to make *that*," Alexis continues pointing to the

brand new chrysalis. "Yeah and when they're in the chrysalises, they can't eat," Javier continues. "It's like hibernation!" William adds. We all decide we are glad we had the chance to watch the "hibernation" process begin.

"It's Hatching...I Mean Emerging!"

By the thirtieth day of school, all of our caterpillars are tucked safely inside their chrysalises. The waiting begins. "How long will they be in there?" Jacob asks referring to the transforming caterpillars. "The metamorphosis process usually takes about ten days for the monarch caterpillars," I answer. Jacob heads right for the calendar and begins counting. Clearly, he needs to know the exact day when he can expect a butterfly arrival. "Well, they can't be ready yet," William says. "The chrysalises are still green and gold," he continues. "Do you know it's called a gold thread?" Angelina adds. "I read that in a book during reading workshop," she explains. "Cool!" William says, acknowledging his appreciation of learning this new fact. "I'm going to look at the painted ladies," William decides aloud. "They've been in their chrysalises much longer

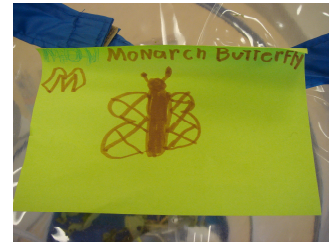


Figure 22. Angelina and Javier's flight cage label

than the monarchs.” Angelina and Kayla support William’s reasoning and join him at the other flight cage.

Magnifying glasses at the ready, the three young scientists smash their heads against the flight cage observation window. They remain perfectly still and quiet for many minutes. This is serious work. They are all on the lookout for any sign of life. “Look! Look at this one!” Kayla finally whispers moments later. “It’s wiggling!” Angelina and William take turns holding their magnifying glasses next to the chrysalis that Kayla identified. “It’s going to hatch...I mean emerge today,” William states confidently. “Let’s go tell everyone!” he suggests. As if any sudden movements will startle the forming butterfly and ruin the promise of an appearance, Kayla, William, and Angelina tiptoe away from the flight cage. Angelina uses our “freeze” signal to quickly gain everyone’s attention. She motions for everyone to gather closely so she can whisper the exciting news. “Guys, we just saw a painted lady chrysalis wiggle. We think it’s going to emerge today. Come look, but be quiet! We don’t want to scare it,” Angelina says while holding a single finger to her mouth to emphasize her point.

Angelina’s endorsement is all it takes to get the whole class over to the flight cage. It’s a good thing too because just as we arrive, Jacob says, “Look! It’s about to come out!” William leans in for a closer look. “Yep! It’s hatching...I mean emerging!” he confirms. “Antennae! Antennae!” Dominic shouts with enthusiasm. Angelina’s whispering mandate is officially broken. This is just too exciting for whispering! “I see the proboscis,” Javier points out. “It’s totally out now and it’s moving!” he adds. It only takes seconds for the rest of the butterfly to emerge. Like a well-choreographed dance, the painted lady shakes off the empty chrysalis shell. “How can something so big fit into

something so small?” Jacob wonders. Of course, his question is valid. The butterfly appears to be nearly ten times the size of its chrysalis. “Well that’s why it’s all shriveled up,” Angelina explains. Jacob nods and it is evident that he accepts Angelina’s explanation.

“Can I Make a Book, Too?”

It is a sad day in Room 119 when only the memory of caterpillars and butterflies remains. “I miss the butterflies!” Angelina announces. “I think I’ll write a book about them today.” She walks over to the bin that houses pre-made blank board books, sifts through the pile, holds up one or two, and walks back empty-handed. “Couldn’t you find what you were looking for?” I wonder aloud. “No. I think I’ll just sew my own book instead. Can you help with the sewing machine?” Angelina asks. “Certainly! Gather your supplies and pick your stitch. I’ll be back there in a minute,” I say. It is as if the hum of the sewing machine beckons to the others. It does not take long for a crowd to gather. “Can I make a book too?” Juliana asks. “Of course!” I say, pleased that book making is the latest “Soft Landing” trend. “I’ll get paper,” Juliana responds as she flits off to the trays of construction paper. “I’m going to make one too!” David shares. “But mine is going to be about space,” he adds. “That’s okay,” Angelina assures him. “You can make a book about anything.”

The bookmakers get right to it. They head straight for the nonfiction section of the classroom library. It is clear they are after research resources. Angelina carries an armload of butterfly books and dumps them on the table with her freshly sewn book. “I am going to write about monarchs because I liked them the best. Are you writing a nonfiction book too?” Angelina asks David who joins her at the table with his own pile of

books. “Yep! This book is going to be full of facts. I might do a question and answer book,” David replies. “Well, then don’t forget to add some nonfiction text features,” Angelina reminds David. “You know, like what we learned about when we studied butterflies. All those nonfiction books we read had text features,” she continues. “I know, I know! I’m doing a table of contents right now,” David assures Angelina.

“Okay. I’m going to do a diagram of the monarch life cycle” (see Figure 23)! Angelina



Figure 23. Angelina’s diagram of the monarch life cycle

says. “That should be easy because you just watched it happen,” David adds. “I know. I’m not even going to look inside this Gail Gibbons book,” Angelina responds. “I can do it from memory!”

David, Juliana, and Angelina are hard at work for only a few minutes before a crowd of children begins to gather. “What are you doing?” the others ask. “We’re writing books,” David replies. “*Nonfiction* books,” Angelina adds in an effort to be more exact. “Why?” the others wonder. “Because I miss the butterflies,” Angelina explains. “And I love space,” David adds. “You know, you could just write those books during Writing Workshop,” the others point out. Angelina, Juliana, and David stop their work to look at each other for a moment. They seriously ponder this suggestion. “Well, we *could*,” David begins. “But we don’t want to wait for Writing Workshop. We want to do it now,” Angelina continues. “And besides, we love to make books. It’s fun!” Juliana exclaims. “Can we do it too?” the others ask, totally convinced by Angelina, Juliana, and David’s argument. “Sure! It will be like a bookstore!” Angelina squeals. “When we’re finished, we can get everyone else to read our books,” David suggests. Immediately, Angelina starts moving

her piles of stuff. “Come on! You guys can sit here! I made space for you,” she says. Feeling included, the others accept David, Juliana, and Angelina’s invitation and join their bookstore. “Now, what are you going to write about?” Angelina begins.

“I Want to See if He’s Slithery.”

“My mom is bringing a surprise today!” Jacob announces as he enters Room 119 on the forty-first day of school. “And it’s alive,” he adds with excitement. Jacob’s later announcement is all it takes. Everyone is instantly hooked. “What is it?” some ask. “Tell us, please!” others plead. Just when we cannot take the suspense any longer, Jacob’s mom arrives with an animal habitat full of dirt, leaves, and grass. She can barely make her way through the sea of eager second graders to place the mystery creature on the low table. When the terrarium is finally in place, a circle of second grade heads suction to its sides. “It’s a tiny snake!” Jacob finally reveals proudly.

“He keeps burying himself under the dirt and leaves,” Kayla says. “Yeah, so we can’t really see him,” Alexis adds with a hint of worry. Jacob’s mom is well prepared. She places the small garter snake in an empty plastic box that serves as a temporary observation lab. “Look! He’s all curled up,” Javier observes. “Look now! He turned into a W,” William notices. “And now he’s a C!” Angelina squeals. “I think he’s spelling a secret message,” David suggests. “Maybe he’s trying to tell us that he’s hungry,” Javier suggests. “Let’s try to feed it. I want to watch it eat,” he continues. Almost immediately, Alexis and Jacob use spoons to dig in the dirt in the other habitat. “What are you doing?” William asks. “Looking for ants!” Alexis and Jacob say in unison. “Good idea!” David adds. “I saw at least two ants in there. Maybe we can save

one and put it on the Venus Flytrap,” he suggests, pointing to the intriguing plant sitting by the windowsill. “We still haven’t seen that eat either,” he reminds everyone.

While the ant-hunters are hard at work, William, David, Angelina, Javier, and Kayla continue to study Nakey, the snake. “Oh look!” Angelina shouts with excitement. “I see his tongue!” she exclaims, pointing to the tiny, forked tongue as it darts in and out of Nakey’s mouth. “It’s black!” Kayla notices. “Can he bite us?” Javier wonders. “No. Garter snakes don’t bite. They’re harmless,” David assures Javier and the others. “Look! His stomach moves in and out. I think he’s breathing,” Kayla observes. “Do snakes have lungs like us?” William wonders. “Well, they definitely don’t have gills,” David thinks aloud. “Yeah, then they would have to live in water like sharks or fish,” William agrees. “But some snakes live in water,” Angelina interjects. “They’re called water snakes,” she adds. Before the snake observers can solve their lung mystery, Alexis and Jacob interrupt with cries of glory. “We got one!” they exclaim while pointing to the tiny ant on their spoon. “Hurry! Put it in the box with Nakey!” David instructs.

“Shake it! Just shake it!” Angelina advises when Alexis struggles to get the ant off her spoon. Angelina’s right. All it takes is two quick shakes before the ant lands in the middle of the temporary snake habitat. The waiting begins. “He’s probably waiting for the right time to strike,” William explains. “Maybe he’s nervous with all these people around,” Jacob suggests. A few minutes later, it seems as though Angelina is tired of waiting. “Let’s touch him! I want to see if he’s slithery,” she says. “Do you mean slippery?” David asks. “You know, slithery, like if he’ll feel slimy,” Angelina adds. “Yeah, go ahead!” Javier says. “I want to know what it feels like too!” he explains. This is all the approval Angelina needs. She reaches her hand in the container and gently

strokes Nakey's back. "Ooooh!" she squeals. "He feels like a rubber band!" With this, Javier gets up and leaves the group. He returns before anyone seems to notice that he is gone. "You mean he feels like this?" Javier asks holding the container of rubber bands from our supply shelf. "Let me see," Angelina says. She simultaneously uses one finger to rub the rubber band and one finger to rub Nakey. "Yep! They feel the same!" she states. With that, Javier takes one rubber band and heads back to the supply shelf. He staples the rubber band to a large piece of construction paper, grabs a Sharpie®, and quickly begins to write. He finishes just as the first few notes of our clean up song pour from the stereo.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. You'll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away," Room 119 sings along with Elizabeth Mitchell's voice playing over the stereo. This is our signal. It is time to clean up. "Soft Landing" is over for today. Since the snake observers do not have much to clean up, they use the next three minutes to make plans for Reading and Writing Workshop. "Let's read about snakes today," Alexis suggests. "You mean, like do research?" William asks. "Yes!" Alexis says as she heads over to the class library. Angelina grabs the basket of snake books. "We can read these and we can use the computer too," she explains. Just then Javier joins them. "Look what I did!" he says proudly as he holds up his construction paper creation. The rest of the snake group reads in unison, "Garter snakes feel like rubber bands. Have you felt one? If not, touch here." Javier points to the arrow he drew to connect his last sentence to the stapled rubber band. "That's really good!" David exclaims. "We can add to it today during Workshop. Put it here with our books." As he follows David's request, Javier

says, “Maybe we can make more posters and then we can hang them up when we’re finished.” Everyone likes this idea. “Then more people will be able to read what we did and learn about snakes,” Alexis adds. “We’re going to be snake experts in no time!” William decides. “Aren’t you glad we have ‘Soft Landing?’” Javier asks his snake buddies. They shake their heads in agreement, then join-in for the last few measures of singing. “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away,” they sing. “I think that song was written about ‘Soft Landing.’” Javier decides. “Don’t you think so, Mrs. Domire?” he asks. “I think this song means different things to different people. If ‘Soft Landing’ is your sunshine, then I think yes,” I reply. “Well it is,” Javier says. “So please don’t take my sunshine away.” I take a moment to think about what Javier’s comments mean to him and to me before I say, “Oh, there’s no need to worry. I will never take your sunshine away.”

Please Don’t Take My Sunshine Away

If “Soft Landing” is Javier’s sunshine, then what is “Soft Landing” to the others? It is time to talk formally with everyone to learn more about their perspective of the “Soft Landing” time and space. So on a sunny and seasonably warm November afternoon, we take our lunches outside, sit in a circle under a shady tree, and enjoy each other’s company and conversation.

A Time to Settle In

“So, tell me about ‘Soft Landing,’” I begin. “Since we have ‘Soft Landing,’ we don’t have to come in and work, work, work. Then all day would just be work, work, work. It would feel weird to come in and work, work, work,” Jacob explains. “Yeah, we

need some free time to play for a while,” Angelina adds. “We need some time to play, so we don’t play later,” David continues. “And, we just need time to settle in,” Jacob emphasizes. “What does *time to settle in* mean?” I wonder aloud. “It means come in and get ready for the day,” Jacob states. “It’s like we have our own stuff to do too. And we actually get to do that when we come to school,” Alexis explains. “It makes me want to come to school. I think about what I’m going to do when I’m on the bus,” she continues. “So ‘Soft Landing’ makes you want to come to school?” I ask in an effort to make sure I fully understand Alexis’ statement. “Yes!” all nine children say together. “Why?” I ask. “Because it’s fun!” Kayla answers. “Because we get to play and don’t you know, that’s what kids do best,” William expertly states.

A Time to Play

“If you didn’t have ‘Soft Landing,’ then you wouldn’t play,” David explains. “And if we didn’t have time to play, kids wouldn’t want to come to this class,” William adds. “Yeah, when I get home and my mom says it’s time to do my homework, it’s okay because I already had time to play. I can wait to play more until after I do my homework,” David says. “Besides, playing is like important because it’s like exercise for your brain,” Kayla suggests.

A Time to Learn

“So, ‘Soft Landing’ is about playing?” I wonder to make sure I understand their thoughts. “It’s not just playing. There is learning in ‘Soft Landing’ too because you’re learning how to connect stuff to real life. Let’s say you’re building. It helps you find strategies to keep stuff steady,” Jacob decides. “If you’re doing any job and you do it in school, you might get the hang of it to do it as your job when you grow up,” William

adds. “For instance what?” I ask. “Like you could be a builder. If you didn’t know how to, like building houses, you could practice techniques during ‘Soft Landing,’” William explains. “And the restaurant could help us be an actual waitress when we get older even though you will still have to go through training,” Alexis continues. “You might remember everything that you did during ‘Soft Landing’ when you get older and you get out of school and it will help you,” William states. “Let’s say you’re building during ‘Soft Landing,’ it shows if you’re a good builder. If you like it, you can keep doing it. Then you might decide to be a construction worker when you grow up,” Jacob suggests.

“It’s already going on with Alexis,” Jacob explains. “She says she knows how to cook and I’m guessing it’s because she plays with the restaurant every single day. When she works with clay, it’s almost like she’s working with real food,” he continues. “Yeah, she practices cooking techniques during ‘Soft Landing.’ I bet she’ll know how to make a real pizza if she works at any pizza place like Papa Johns or Pizza Hut™,” William adds. “Yep. I think I might want to be a restaurant owner when I grow,” Alexis confirms.

“If you’ve never had ‘Soft Landing’ then you’ll never learn what you’re good at. You might not know what you want to do when you grow up,” William thinks. “We learn how to count money, give change, help customers, and stuff like that,” Angelina explains. “It’s fun and it’s learning,” David sums up. “I think ‘Soft Landing’ is fun games that help you learn,” Jacob adds. “And I’m thinking that’s why we have it.”

A Time to Inspire

“What would our day be like if we didn’t have ‘Soft Landing?’” I ask. “It would be boring,” Kayla answers. “It would be dull,” Jacob adds. “We probably wouldn’t like it here as much,” Alexis hypothesizes. “If we just keep working instead of having fun, it

would be boring,” William explains. “If we didn’t have ‘Soft Landing,’ we wouldn’t be inspired to do anything,” Jacob posits. “We probably would be in a bad mood all day,” he continues. “So how does ‘Soft Landing’ inspire you?” I ask. “It inspires you to be able to work later on in the day...” Jacob begins before William jumps in. “Because it makes school fun,” he finishes. Jacob nods in agreement. So do David, Kayla, Angelina, Dominic, Javier, Juliana, and Alexis.

A Time to Choose

“So how do you decide what to do each day during ‘Soft Landing?’” I wonder. “You just choose what you like,” Jacob says matter-of-factly. “You pick what you really enjoy,” Kayla explains. “Like if you’re really interested in space, then you can read about space and make a book about it,” Angelina says. “And if you’re making a book, you probably will have to keep reading, and reading, and reading,” William adds. “For research,” Angelina continues. “But if you want to do something more active, that’s okay too,” David reminds us. “Yeah, only we get to pick. No one picks for you,” Javier says. “And that’s why it’s my sunshine,” he adds. “...My only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. You never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away,” the rest of the group sings in an effort to finish Javier’s thought before they all run off to recess. And just like that, they are gone, leaving me to wonder about what their words mean.

Learning to See, Learning to Listen

I leave our conversation feeling reassured that because I am able to release my students to find their own ways of being children and of existing in the world each day during “Soft Landing,” they feel happy and inspired. It seems as though, in their minds,

“Soft Landing” helps them create an identity of self. They do identify as builders, restaurant owners, readers, writers, researchers, and so much more. Through play, they create their own sophisticated identities. Through play, the children systematically build individual and collaborative independence. I know I did not always see such value in the activities we call play. In fact, during my first year of teaching I didn’t even have “Soft Landing.” I wonder what altered my thinking. I wonder what changed my perspective. Some reflection is in order. I am eager to look back upon my role as a teacher and discover my own identity in the process.

Ignoring Imagination

When I was a beginning teacher, I paid little attention to the children’s play. I did not listen closely enough to actually hear their stories. I had a tendency to look upon the repetitious fantasies of children as non-educational, something that there surely was not room for in school. Because I sought the principal’s approval and not the children’s, I overlooked their important curricular agendas in an effort to conform. I did not know I could question how things were done. I did not know I could imagine school being otherwise. I realize now, that in the beginning, what I ignored was the most powerful tool for learning that children bring with them to school – their imagination. And although my plan book was full of the “right” district objectives that met the “right” state standards, I certainly did not cultivate an organic development of student interests. I certainly did not step back to give students room to figure themselves out. And I certainly did not help students learn to balance responsibility and freedom, individual interests and collective needs, work and fun.

The Teacher Knows Best

At first, I adopted the conventional wisdom that I, the teacher, knew best and I fashioned my classroom that year like the teachers who came before me. Students started to work from the moment they entered the door. There was no time for transitions or easing into the day. That was the way things were done and so I did it too. My classroom that year was a quiet classroom where children complied and teachers taught. It was an orderly classroom where children stayed in their seats and asked for permission to get up. It was a classroom of control and my principal approved. But I wonder now about the children's approval. Did they approve of the classroom in which we lived? Was the classroom in which we lived a fair place for every child who entered? Perhaps they did not know any different. Perhaps they did not know they could question this way, for this was the way it was always done. School was done *to* them, not *with* them.

But the Children Know More

The classroom is no longer mine. It is ours. And that is why we call it Room 119 instead of Mrs. Domire's class. When someone asks my students, "Whose class are you in?" they answer, "Our class. Room 119." Now, we are a community created, built, and run by the children. Now, there is time for play and talk and choice at the beginning of the day. No one feels rushed and no one feels forced. Friendship and fantasy form the natural path that leads children into a new world of other voices, other views, and other ways of expressing ideas and feelings.

Now I understand that children are surging, creative, and energetic people who spend many hours of their lives in classrooms, classrooms that have the power to shape children into who they will become in their adult life. I listen every year as certain

phrases are planted and take root during “Soft Landing.” The shoots of language continually come up in stories and in play. Right now “epic failure” and “epic disaster” are favorites. “That building was definitely an epic failure,” David says one day during “Soft Landing.” “Did you see how it fell down almost immediately?” Later that day, Jacob tries the phrase during our read aloud. “That’s an epic storm and it will definitely be an epic disaster if Greyling doesn’t save his dad. He can’t let him drown!” Another year it was “the happiness of sadness.” Connor called the watercolor masterpiece he created one morning during “Soft Landing” *The Happiness of Sadness*. Everyone approved of his title and took any opportunity to use this now-popular phrase. “Leaving for winter break is like the happiness of sadness, you know, like Connor’s painting?” Katherine said. “I’m happy because I love Christmastime, but I’m sad to leave school,” she explained. “Releasing our butterflies is like the happiness of sadness. We know they’ll be happy when they can fly and drink nectar, but we’re sad to let them go,” Ruby stated.

You know, when I stop to think about my early years in the classroom, I cannot remember my students saying such profound things as David or Ruby. And now I wonder if this is because I did not listen carefully enough to hear the statements or if I did not provide enough space to nurture a culture of thinking. Perhaps it is a little bit of both. Whatever the case, it is certainly not because they were any less brilliant than the children I teach today. However hard it is to admit, I know that it is because of me, because of my actions. For I am the one who fosters the growing.

The Shift?

So what accounts for the shift in my teaching? Or is it a shift in my listening? Or is it both? I think this shift or change has a lot to do with vision and values. Now, I start the school year with a vision of what I want for my kids in the weeks and months that lie ahead. I have a vision of how I want them to talk to each other and to me. I have a vision of the kind of thinking that I want to take place. And I have a vision of the curiosity and confidence that I want to nurture. Because I have a clear vision, I am able to make conscious decisions and take deliberate actions to get my students to the places where I want them to be. When I know what I want for my kids in March, April, and May, I can set about getting them there starting in September.

Likewise, because I have a set of beliefs and values that guides my work, I know the path that I want to take with my kids. I know where we are headed. Of course, there still may be twists and turns along the way and the kids may decide to lead us along a different path, but in the end, I know where we want to end up. Paley (1973) says that teachers teach the things that they value or believe. If I believe in curiosity, then I teach curiosity. If I believe in conversation, then I teach conversation. If I believe in thinking, then I teach thinking. Teachers talk about the things that they value (Paley, 1973). The difference now is that I decide what those things are. Before, somebody else did that for me. But now, I know enough to realize that I am the one in the unique and wonderful position to know where my kids have been, where they are now, and where it makes the most sense to take them next. I know enough to realize that the kids and I are the only ones who should do the deciding.

A New Vision

As I revisit Levin (1989), I remember that he calls individuals to take the responsibility for the continued development of their listening capacity. Levin (1989) gives weight to the work of ‘practices of the Self’ that involve individuals in processes of personal growth and have the effect of making individuals less susceptible to social control and more capable of authentic social living. “The art of skillful hearing, a practical wisdom, a phronesis, is our response-ability in relation to the original gift of nature” (Levin, 1989, p. 2). I take this call to develop my gift of listening seriously. I challenge myself to find new ways of listening and to cultivate my own skill of listening. As Levin (1989) suggests, I decide to sharpen and heighten my sensitivity to listening and seeing in an effort to work on myself. And now I reflect. What am I being called to see, recognize, and listen to now that I didn’t see before?

I see imagination in a new light. Imagination isn’t just a silly, trivial facet of childhood. Now I realize that through their imaginations, children can and do construct meaningful worlds for themselves. Imagination enlarges any experience for both students and teachers. I learn about imagination from Greene (1995) who notes that imagination enables teachers to cross the spaces between themselves and their students. Through imagination, students give teachers clues so that they can look in some manner through strangers’ eyes and hear through their ears (Greene, 1995). “That is because, of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (Green, 1995, p. 3).

I used to fall guilty to Green's (1995) charge that "at best, children were thought of as incomplete adults foraging in a world that did not 'make sense' to them" (p. 3). Now, I realize that children are not incomplete. When I enter children's reality by listening to their stories, poems, and play, I realize they really are not so different from adults. When I think about myself, I realize that I always have better days when I do not feel rushed. I like to wake up a bit earlier than necessary so I can run on the treadmill or take my dogs for a walk before I get my shower. And because I can get ready for school at a leisurely pace, by the time I get there, I am ready to go. Over time, I have come to realize that children are not much different than adults. They need time too. Time to get ready for the learning they are about to face. Time to forget about what happened on the bus ride. Time to say hello to their old friends. Time to build relationships with new friends. When I give kids this time, when I do not rush them into starting a day full of learning, it pays off. If I want to challenge children's imagination, promote their love of learning and inquiry, and encourage them to become independent, self-determining learners and thinkers, I now realize that they need time to make choices about how they will ease into their day.

I open my eyes and ears to a new me, a teacher who provokes learners to pose their own questions, to teach themselves, to go at their own pace, and to name their own worlds. I learned that young learners have to be noticed. They have to be consulted. And they have to be encouraged to question why things are the way they are.

Looking Forward

I use the final chapter to apply my students' "Soft Landing" experiences and my own reflections to address the research questions I introduced in Chapter 1:

1. What is “Soft Landing?”
2. How do students choose to use their “Soft Landing” time? How do these choices change over time?
3. What does “Soft Landing” mean to students?
4. What have I learned about myself as a teacher during “Soft Landing?”

I hope to draw conclusions that may have impact on current practice in education.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The Guiding Principles of “Soft Landing”

“Soft Landing” is the physical time and space set aside each morning for students to make their own choices about what activities to engage in as they make the transition from home to school. “Soft Landing” makes up the first thirty minutes of the students’ school day. Key principles of “Soft Landing” include trusting children by opening space for *culture* – creating a caring, respectful, and empathetic climate for learning and teaching; *conversation* – respecting students’ ideas, opinions, and decisions by giving their voices sincere consideration, engaging in meaningful discussions with peers and adults; *care* – promoting the growth of students as healthy, competent, moral, happy people; *time* – opening time for students to think for themselves, interact with peers, and establish relationships; and *choice* – allowing students to make informed decisions about their own learning and providing space for students to pose and solve personally meaningful problems.

“Soft Landing” Is...

What is “Soft Landing”? I met with a group of Kindergarten teachers at the beginning of the school year to talk about cultivating nurturing, responsive classroom communities. During our conversation, one of them asked for a specific definition of “Soft Landing.” “I’ve heard a lot of people talk about ‘Soft Landing’ and some say they’ve tried it or are doing it, but I’m not really sure what it is. Can you tell us what ‘Soft Landing’ is?” she asked. And I have to admit that I did not have an easy answer. Half-jokingly, I told her that I would print a copy of my writing surrounding “Soft

Landing.” “Somewhere in the midst of all the pages of words you’ll find the answer,” I said with a smile.

Maybe I was hesitant to commit to an answer because I did not yet know the answer myself. Of course, anytime I am confronted with a question about “Soft Landing,” it would be easiest to grab the person by the hand and pull him or her into Room 119 during “Soft Landing” and say, “This. See this right here? This is ‘Soft Landing.’” But even so, I am not sure that a one-time visitor would be able to step back and see all the things that I see when I look at “Soft Landing” in action. I am not sure that a one-time visitor would be able to walk away with a complete understanding of “Soft Landing.” So, what is “Soft Landing?” I still do not have a simple, one sentence answer, but I do have an answer. “Soft Landing” is a transformative, liberating classroom practice that helps mold students into the people they will grow up to be. It is a time to carve out new orders of identity, to provoke a heightened sense of agency, to find bliss in work, and to activate passions. “Soft Landing” is all of these things.

...A Time to Carve Out New Orders of Identity

“Soft Landing” is a time when students engage deeply in something they choose. For some, “Soft Landing” may be the first time they were asked to take part in writing their own school curriculum. For some, “Soft Landing” may the first time they were asked, What do you want to learn? What interests you? What do you want to do today? “Soft Landing” allows students to work, first, with their existing intrinsic interests, while in the process opening opportunities for students to discover new areas of personal motivation. Children are able to figure themselves out as they develop their personal interests organically. Among other things, “Soft Landing” is an invitation for students to

engage in new orders of experience that give shape to new identities, making students more self-aware.

Socrates advised us to “Know thyself,” and he claimed that the unexamined life is not worth living. Noddings (2006) comments on Socrates’ claim. “We may feel that Socrates went too far on this...Unexamined lives may well be valuable and worth living, but an education that does not invite such examination may not be worthy of the label education” (p.10). “Soft Landing” helps students strive for a deeper understanding of their true selves. During “Soft Landing” students learn to ask questions like, What should I do? Why? What do I feel? Why? Which interests are helpful to pursue? Does this activity speak to me?

When Liliana and Maria discovered, on their own, their remarkable visual memories during their “Soft Landing” play, they created new identities and became more self-aware in the process. I watched as they transferred this identity, as someone who can remember what she sees, to other parts of their academic life. “You can remember eight plus seven equals fifteen. Just look at it like you do during Memory and you’ll remember,” Liliana tells Maria one day during math. “You can remember how to spell this word. Just look at it and remember,” Maria coaches Liliana. Over and over and over again, the Memory girls bring their own identity to life.

When Katherine, Natalie, Emilie, Isabel, and Ashley discovered, on their own, their fine talent for writing original scripts for class plays and reader’s theatre performances, they too created new identities and became more self-aware in the process. “Do you need help with that?” they would ask classmates during writing time. “I’m a playwright so I probably have some good ideas to help you out,” they said. Matthew did

the same as a linguist. “Does anyone need help thinking of words for their books? I know all about words. Remember I made my own language and my own dictionary?!”

Building an identity means coming to see characteristics of particular categories and roles in ourselves (Johnston, 2004). It means developing a sense of what it feels like to be a certain sort of person and belong in certain arenas. As children are involved in classroom interactions during “Soft Landing,” they build and try on different identities. The children narrate their lives, identifying themselves and the circumstances, acting and explaining events in ways they see as consistent with the person they take themselves to be. “Soft Landing” provides a time and a place for students to expand their identities as they realize new facets to their being.

...A Time to Provoke a Heightened Sense of Agency

If nothing else, children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals. When kids are given time to puzzle through something that is challenging, they are not only learning about the task at hand, but they are also learning about who they are and how they go about figuring things out. Most importantly, they are developing those can-do, let-me-have-at-it attitudes that we want so much for them.

During “Soft Landing,” students seem to say, “Here we come!” They are vibrant and wide-awake. Children are busy doing, creating, and enjoying. In the midst of all their doing, the children begin to write their own life stories. They experience themselves in narrative form. The children become the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives. “I can do this!” becomes the story children tell, which often replaces tales of previous failures. Javier, Alexis, and Angelina tell the story of

puppeteers who create on-the-spot role-play scenarios that investigate serious themes present in nearly everyone's childhood. They feel confident enough to hold a whole class seminar to introduce the puppets, puppet stage, and their new idea for how to use these open-ended materials. Jacob, David, and William tell the story of control tower operators and master builders who manage to turn a plane disaster into something wonderfully positive. Juliana and Kayla tell the story of letter writers, writers who are motivated to write to every teacher in the school and every child in our class. "I can do this!" becomes the story children tell.

It is important to remember researchers discovered that children with a strong belief in their own agency work harder, focus their attention better, are more interested in their work, and are less likely to give up when they encounter difficulties (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998). Feeling competent, these children plan well, choose challenging tasks, and set higher goals (Johnston, Bennett, & Cronin, 2002). Teachers' conversations with children help build their identity as someone who is "agentive." Over and over again our words and actions say, "You are the kind of people who accomplish things. I know this and because I know this I am going to give you time to accomplish these things." And over and over again, the children respond, "You're right, we can do this! Here's how!" Once students gain insight into who they are and what they can do from their experiences during "Soft Landing," I hope they carry this vision with them to the next class, and the next, and the next. I hope their visions act as portals to remember all that can be. I hope the power does not die when they leave Room 119.

.. *A Time to Find Bliss in Your Work*

Children can and do use “Soft Landing” as a vehicle of escape from the time and place they are living in to enter a time and place of bliss. “Soft Landing” frees children from the need to budget their time and thoughts between home responsibilities and other worries. Instead of being overwhelmed with negative experiences that are spent in anxiety states characterized by low levels of enjoyment, happiness, strength, motivation, and self-esteem, children are released to experience enjoyable involvement in the serious play of “Soft Landing.” And when children are released from worry, they are able to escape. When children are released from their reality, they are able to *flow*. In this optimal state of immersed concentration, attention is centered, distractions are minimized, and children attain an enjoyable give-and-take with their activities. In this state, children lose track of time and their daily problems, forget about hunger and fatigue, and feel well-matched to the activity at hand (Whalen, 1999). In this state, the joy overtakes the worry.

Many days, Kayla enters Room 119 with the school counselor. I do not have to be told anymore what this means. Something happened at Kayla’s home the night before. Kayla always checks in with the counselor on days like this. Right away, I notice the solemn look on Kayla’s face. Her head is a bit more droopy than usual too. The counselor pats Kayla on the back and makes sure I notice that she has arrived. I walk over to greet Kayla and offer an encouraging hand. But I quickly realize that Kayla does not need me, she needs “Soft Landing.” As soon as she steps out of the cubbies, she’s off to find the food service friends. “Oh Kayla!” they all shout. “We’re so glad you’re here! We thought you weren’t going to come today and we didn’t know who was going to take

the orders!” they say with relief. “Let me just grab my apron and my pen!” Kayla responds cheerfully. The transformation is nearly instantaneous and nothing shy of remarkable. The once depressed girl, full of the worries she carried with her to school is now cheerful.

With a little help from “Soft Landing,” Kayla pushed her worries aside. There is no room to think about home when the restaurant is open and the customers are hungry. Discovering and using the essence of any part of us is the most euphoric experience of all, as it opens the blocked passages and establishes new routes. Children, like adults, use narrative to shape and reshape their lives, imagining what could happen, what should happen, and what will happen.

..A Time to Activate Passions

When we give the gift of choice, children experience freedom – the freedom to decide. When children experience the freedom to decide, they are allowed to follow the organic development of their own interests instead of traveling along a route predetermined by adults. Essentially, in a choice-rich environment, control shifts from adult to child. Csíkszentmihályi (1997) believes the secret to releasing control and freedom is to provide interesting options and productive materials so that the child can take more initiative and the teacher can step further into the background. “The whole ideal teaching situation is obviously one in which the child takes the initiative and the teacher becomes simply...the conductor in the orchestra” (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997, p. 28).

“Soft Landing” activates and validates students’ passions for seeing things up close and living large. Their newly found passions are the doorway for imagination and

the opening for a vision of all they will become, offering a new lens to look at and interpret the kinds of things that keep their spirits alive. “It’s already going on with Alexis,” Jacob explains. “She says she knows how to cook and I’m guessing it’s because she plays with the restaurant every single day. When she works with clay, it’s almost like she’s working with real food,” he continues. “Yeah, she practices cooking techniques during ‘Soft Landing.’ I bet she’ll know how to make a real pizza if she works at any pizza place like Papa Johns or Pizza Hut™.” William adds. “Yep. I think I might want to be a restaurant owner when I grow,” Alexis confirms.

“If you’ve never had ‘Soft Landing’ then you’ll never learn what you’re good at. You might not know what you want to do when you grow up,” William thinks. “We learn how to count money, give change, help customers, and stuff like that,” Angelina explains. “It’s fun and it’s learning,” David sums up. “I think ‘Soft Landing’ is fun games that help you learn,” Jacob adds. “And I’m thinking that’s why we have it.”

I believe students’ passions are always there, waiting to be activated. Today’s school system just does not always take advantage of them. If we allow the children to play out their passions so we are forced to listen, they just may become a reality. Their main subject may become a part of the school curriculum. Multiply the effect by eighteen children, one hundred eighty school days a year, and you have an intensive, continuous curriculum in language and thought. That’s exactly what “Soft Landing” is.

“Soft Landing” Isn’t...

In the Words Their Way (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2007) developmental approach to spelling instruction, teachers help students construct knowledge of spelling patterns by comparing and contrasting as they sort words that fit

the pattern and words that do not fit. Although my first research question only focuses on what “Soft Landing” is, I think it is equally important to draw the distinction of what “Soft Landing” is not. Just as the authors of Words Their Way (2007) suggest, I will paint a picture of what “Soft Landing” is not in an effort to help readers construct a better vision of what “Soft Landing” is.

.. A Time for Teachers to Prepare for the Day

“Soft Landing” is a gift of time for students. And although I believe “Soft Landing” is also a gift of time for teachers – a gift of time for listening to, talking to, and watching students – it is not designed to give teachers extra time to prepare for the school day. That is, during “Soft Landing” teachers are found in the heart of the action. They sit on the floor with the boys who use blocks to build a four-story control tower. They sit on the couch with the chrysalis observers and they too have magnifying glasses attached to their hands. They visit the food service crew at their restaurant and sample the play-dough offerings of the day. They touch the snakes to see if they really do feel like rubber bands. The teachers do not sit at their desks correcting homework or cutting out lamination. They do not ruffle through their filing cabinets in search of the perfect written activity for math. They do not gather supplies for their upcoming science lesson. Instead, these teachers watch, listen, interact, and capture. They write about what they see students doing and they record all the language interactions they hear. They write their classes’ histories through a permanent tale of “Soft Landing” happenings.

.. A Time That Mirrors Indoor Recess

Instead of planning with my colleagues in the teacher’s lounge one rainy afternoon, I decide to wander down to Room 119 just to see the kids in action. I wonder

if they engage in the same activities during this free time period that they choose to engage in during “Soft Landing.” So I sit back and watch. I look for the bookmakers, the mailmen, and the helper protectors, but they are nowhere to be found. I look for the researchers, playwrights, and puppeteers, but I cannot find them either. Instead, I see a group of children who use white boards to play hangman and a cluster of children who play Chutes and Ladders. I notice the play-dough is present just like during “Soft Landing,” but when I take a second look, I notice the restaurant is not. There are no aprons, tablecloths, order tablets, or stacks of money. The kids do not take orders, and in fact, they do not even talk to each other or anyone else for that matter. Instead, they use rolling pins and cookie cutters independently.

“Why is it so different?” I wonder. Although the children play during indoor recess and during “Soft Landing,” the two look and sound nothing alike. In indoor recess, competition replaces collaboration, games with set directions replace open-ended materials, and conformity replaces imagination. Indoor recess, at least indoor recess in my classroom, is not a time for creative use of materials. And “Soft Landing” is. Indoor recess in my classroom seems more like a time to zone out, relax, and rejuvenate. I liken indoor recess to providing the same mental break that watching television or reading a mindless book provides for me. Indoor recess is a break, a time-out and “Soft Landing” is not. “Soft Landing” is a beginning, a beginning to all that can be.

...A Time of Silence and Tranquility

“I saw kids flying airplanes all around the room. Is that what they should be doing during ‘Soft Landing,’” a teacher asks me one afternoon. “That doesn’t seem like a very *soft* landing,” she continues, expressing her concern. It is important to note that

the name I chose for this phenomenon, “Soft Landing,” refers to the type of greeting students receive when they enter the classroom doors and not to the loudness, or lack thereof, of classroom activity. In fact, a Room 119 “Soft Landing” is not very soft at all, but then again, the excitement that comes along with watching a butterfly emerge, touching a snake for the first time, finding the right mixture of ingredients to create a bubbling explosion, and building a structure taller than a teacher is not very soft either.

“Soft Landing” is full of discourse, discourse that matches the fury of activity. The builders talk about building and use words like, base, structure, stable, and stories. The writers talk about writing and use words like diagram, table of contents, genre, and craft. The restaurant workers talk about food preparation and use phrases like on the double, coming right up, and make it snappy. “Soft Landing” is full of bustling activity that makes the classroom vibrant and lively. Instead of being soft and silent, “Soft Landing” is energetic and exciting. I use the words of a Room 119 Alumni, Victor, to help emphasize the origin of the “Soft Landing” name in another way. “Soft Landing is a time when you come in to start your morning softly. This way you get to enjoy your morning. You start it off kind of happy, relaxing, and restful. A hard landing would be when you come in and do like 100 pages of work. It would be harsh if you did all that work the second you walked in the door” (Victor, 2006). And I say, “Room 119, prepare yourselves for a ‘Soft Landing.’ It is sure to be a bumpy, exciting ride, but it certainly will not be harsh. What a great, energizing way to start your day!”

“Only We Get To Pick. No One Picks For You.”

How do students choose to use their “Soft Landing time? How do these choices change over time? Just as every group of children is different, so is every “Soft

Landing.” Room 119 never really feels exactly the same from year to year and neither does “Soft Landing.” There is always a new scenario out there to try on and each year, Room 119 finds it. Some years it is the plays – A Shark’s Life, Meet Sally Ride. Some years it is the businesses – mapmaking industries, laptop assembly lines, pupuserias, dog adoption centers. Some years it is the writing – bookstores, letters for every teacher in the school, employee of the day awards. And some years it is the challenges – building the tallest building, reading every book about space, counting to 10,000.

So how do they decide which scenarios to try on? I ask the children and many of them are not exactly sure. “You just pick what you want to do,” most of them tell me. “It’s not like someone is telling you to do this or that,” David explains. “It’s your choice. You could play with puzzles or Legos®, or blocks. Whatever you like, you choose,” he adds. “Whatever you want to do that day, you just do. If you want to cook, you cook,” Dominic assures me. But others have specific reasons for the choices they make. “I do all the stuff that I can’t do at home,” Javier says. “And I play with stuff that I haven’t played with in a while,” Angelina adds. “I do a pattern. I choose play-dough one day, writing another day, and art another day,” Juliana admits.

Perhaps Jacob is able to express his decision-making process best. “I come in the door and look at everything I could do. Then I think. What do I feel like today? How do I want to express myself?” It is evident that everyone understands what Jacob is talking about. “Exactly!” David says. “It’s what you feel like.” Alexis nods in agreement. “Kind of like how you pick out which clothes to wear.” Just when I think I understand a bit better, Angelina offers one more note of clarification. “How do you pick what music to play when we’re working?” she asks me. “Hmmm...” I say. “Good question. I guess

I play whatever I'm in the mood to hear." I answer. "Now do you get it?" she wonders with a big smile. "It's the same for us!"

Each year as our learning and thinking become more sophisticated, so do our "Soft Landings." I reflect on a vision from this year. Children, their yellow lab notebooks, caterpillar cups, and magnifying glasses were sprawled all over our carpet. As I looked at them, I took the time to scan the room. Where were the Legos® and the blocks? Where were the plastic animals and play dough? They were replaced with lab notebooks and pens. They were replaced with scientific observation and writing. I think back to another day and remember a conversation I overheard. "You know, you could just write those books during Writing Workshop," a group of children pointed out. Angelina, Juliana, and David stopped their work to look at each other for a moment. They seriously pondered this suggestion. "Well, we *could*," David began. "But we don't want to wait for Writing Workshop. We want to do it now," Angelina continued. "And besides, we love to make books. It's fun!" Juliana exclaimed.

Each year as our learning and thinking become more sophisticated, so do our "Soft Landings." It happens every year. Every year, things like scientific observations, research, and writing replace fantasy play. Every year, doing replaces pretending. In an effort to better understand this switch, I decide to ask the students about why their "Soft Landing" choices change. Interestingly enough, they say nothing about becoming more sophisticated thinkers or carrying their work from other parts of the day into "Soft Landing." They say their choices change for different reasons. "First you pick what you like best. And if you get bored, you change to something else," Kayla notes. "Well, I like variety," Jacob admits. "That's why I change. I don't want to do the same things

five days a week for every week of the year. If I do that, things get too easy. I want to change it! I want to try something new, do something else,” he continues. “When we get new supplies for ‘Soft Landing,’ I change my mind because I want to try the new things,” she says. “I change my choices to match how I’m feeling,” Angelina says. “If I’m feeling like I want to be alone, then I choose something that no one else is doing. If I feel like I want to talk to a lot of people, then I choose something that is crowded,” she explains.

So maybe the children and I do not share the same ideas about *why* their choices change over time, but we do both agree that there is a change. They notice it too. “I’ve been working on my shark study a lot during ‘Soft Landing.’ You know, the one from reading workshop,” Javier admits. “And Jacob and I decided to work on our memoirs for three ‘Soft Landings’ in a row!” Alexis tells me. Remember the “Soft Landing” liquids lab, an idea planted by Cristian and his grocery-shopping list? And the Reader’s Theatre performance about Sally Ride? Every year our formal second grade curriculum seeps over to “Soft Landing.” It happens time and time again.

“‘Soft Landing’ is My Sunshine”

What does “Soft Landing” mean to students? I have come to realize that although many students cannot verbalize what “Soft Landing” means to them, the open time and space means something very different to students than it means to me, their teacher. We learned from Jason that “Soft Landing” means time to forget about all that happened before he arrived. For him, “Soft Landing” is a time to regroup, re-center, and prepare for the upcoming day. It is a time to breathe. We learned from Javier that “Soft Landing” means sunshine and happiness. For him, “Soft Landing” is about smiles,

laughter, and fun. It is a time of bliss. We learned from Jacob that “Soft Landing” is a time to inspire. For him, “Soft Landing” is about finding inspiration for work the rest of the day. We learned from Kayla that “Soft Landing” is a time for fun. For her, “Soft Landing” is about exercising her brain through play. And we learned from William that “Soft Landing” is a time of discovery. For him, “Soft Landing” is about learning what he can be when he grows up.

Even though “Soft Landing” means something different to students, I am able to use this precious gift to release each one of them to find their own ways of being children and of existing in the world. Among many other things, each day during “Soft Landing,” the children feel happy and inspired. And “Soft Landing” helps them create an identity of self. They do identify as builders, restaurant owners, readers, writers, researchers, and so much more. I hear them claim their identities over and over and over again. Through play, they create their own sophisticated identities. Through play, they systematically build individual and collaborative independence.

A Teacher in a “Soft Landing” Space

What have I learned about myself as a teacher during “Soft Landing?” First and foremost, I learned to take my cues from the children. I let their actions guide my decisions. If I observe children fighting over supplies, then I know we need more opportunities to model and practice sharing. If I observe exclusion, then I know we need more talk about considering others’ feelings. If I observe improper use of supplies, then I know I was not explicit enough when I introduced them. If I notice that many students seem to spend “Soft Landing” researching sharks, then I know I should visit the library for more shark books. By listening and watching my students during “Soft Landing,” I

have learned to honor the child, to keep imagination alive, and to trust the “Soft Landing” process. Once I began to view the children as storytellers, playwrights, mapmakers, and restaurant owners, the potential of fantasy as a learning tool overwhelmed my conventional expectations for the classroom. So now I know to honor the child and trust the “Soft Landing” process. I learned to step back and watch as the children transcribe and expose the words and images that crowd their minds and place them on a stage, becoming actor, writer, critic, linguist, scientists, and philosopher all at once. And I have come to realize that they do not need me to teach them how.

Honor the Child

When children develop their own meaningful purpose for listening and trust that they will be heard, they begin to feel free to talk. Just like that, the words start flowing because children know that someone will listen and someone will care. And when the words start flowing and teachers start listening, we learn a lot about our students. Levin (1989) reminds us that, “To listen to another is to learn what the world is like from a position that is not one’s own; to listen is to reverse position, role, and experience” (p. 193). “Soft Landing” gives time for students to talk, and it gives time for teachers to listen, to experience life from their students’ positions. Through their talk, children let us into their worlds. I listen, pay attention, and continue to carve out a “Soft Landing” space each morning where children can talk their way into stories in the company of an audience who values what they have to say. Inviting children to talk about themselves and about what they know honors them for who they are.

When I reflect on my experience as a teacher in a “Soft Landing” place, I realize that when I trust children by giving them the gifts of space, time, and choice, they are

able to develop stronger relationships with teachers and peers. They are able to take their own learning to deeper levels. They are freed to glimpse what might be, to form notions of what should be, and to understand what is not yet. They are more motivated to work during the rest of the day when it is time for me to have a bit more control over the classroom agenda, all because they are ready, all because they had time, all because they had a “Soft Landing.”

Keep Imagination Alive

Imagination breathes life into experience. I know this now, but I did not always. There is always more to experience, and more in what we experience than we can predict. Remember the control tower workers? As I looked at their play through my adult lens, I thought it was through when David knocked over the giant tower of blocks. “That’s it,” I thought. “This is getting pretty dangerous. Crashing airplanes? Tumbling blocks? I don’t know about this.” But because I decided to stand back, trust the process, and wait for an opening in the experience, I saw firsthand that there was more in their block experience than I originally predicted. There is always more to experience. Imagination opens experience to the mysterious and strange as it moves us to go in quest, to journey where we have never been.

Children are rarely hesitant to let their imagination take them for a ride. And “Soft Landing” helps the young devise many situations in which they are freed up move from the habitual and the ordinary to consciously undertake a search to look beyond. During “Soft Landing” children experience the felt possibility of looking beyond the play-dough containers, Lego® boxes, and blocks. Perhaps they do not see these supplies in the same light as children who do not have “Soft Landing.” They see pupusas, helper

robots, and control towers. They see “On Top of Spaghetti” all covered with cheese, refueling stations, and runways. They see the possibilities. These possibilities are promises about where their imaginations might reach if they tried, if they kept believing and seeing and imagining what could be.

As a teacher in a “Soft Landing” space, I have come to think of “Soft Landing” as a summons, an address to the child’s imagination. Children hear this calling. They activate their imaginations in an effort to reach wholeness. By putting imaginations into words or actions, children reach out and make things real. I have come to see imagination as a way to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected. Through imagination, children find the natural method for concentration and continuity while satisfying their intuitive belief in hidden meanings. Imagination may be a new way for children to break out of their confinements into a space where they can come face to face with others and call out, “Here we are.” As a teacher in a “Soft Landing” space, I have learned to watch the happiness and health of children grow as they are released to find their own ways of being children and of existing in the world.

Trust the Process

“Soft Landing” is a community-based phenomenon that reflects the hearts, souls, and minds of the students who enjoy its structure. It is a phenomenon that is organic, growing as students grow, strengthening as student relationships strengthen. It is a phenomenon that is an alternative to the templates that increasingly find their way into teachers’ plans. It is a transformative pedagogy that breaks through frames of custom and touches the consciousness of those we teach. “Soft Landing” sustains lives and expands minds. It feeds lives and fuels hopes. “Soft Landing” allows the sounds, the

light, the heads of the children, the surface sensations of school life to be re-seen, re-imagined, to bend yet again into new understandings. “Soft Landing” does all these things and maybe more, but in order for its effects to be realized, it is important for teachers to trust the process. Trust that in time, the effects of “Soft Landing” will be felt.

In reflecting on my actions during “Soft Landing” I learn to think about my specific interactions with students. What do I do and what impact does it have on the children? I begin to pay attention to which comments of mine support the play and extend the conversation and which of my interventions dampened the spirit and spoiled the drama. Do I always cringe when the block towers get higher and higher? And when I do, how do the block builders react? I remind myself that this is the children’s time to create their own curriculum in its natural form. I remind myself that there is no activity for which children are better prepared than fantasy play. Nothing is more dependable and risk-free, and the dangers are only pretend. I remind myself that in the development of their fantasy play themes, characters, and plots, children explain their thinking. And I try to respond to what I see and hear in such a spirit. As a teacher in a “Soft Landing” place, it is important to stand back, trust the process, and watch the story unfold.

During “Soft Landing,” customs are invented that bind a group of children together. These customs affect everything else that happens in our classroom. They become a part of our written history. Paley (1990) agrees. “The fantasies of any group form the basis of its culture” (p. 5). I just have to trust that somewhere in the midst of the play are lessons that promise to lead me to questions and commentary and allow me to glimpse the universal themes that bind together our individual urgencies.

Pedagogical Recommendations

Early on in my career when other teachers became curious about “Soft Landing” and asked what it was, I did not give much thought to my answer. “Oh, I let the kids choose what they want to do when they come into the classroom each day,” I would answer. And as a result of my thoughtless response, some of them did not give much thought to their implementation of “Soft Landing” either. Just as I said, they let their kids make choices when they entered the classroom in the morning, but their “Soft Landings” were very different than the “Soft Landings” of Room 119. Over time, I overheard the conversations of other teachers as they spoke about “Soft Landing.” “I’m not doing that this year, it’s just too much trouble,” they would say. “That doesn’t work for me. I teach the children how to play the games and then they just fight,” they continued to complain. It became even clearer that not everyone was experiencing the “Soft Landing” that I intended and the “Soft Landing” that Room 119 enjoys each day.

In the process of reflecting on and writing about my work with “Soft Landing,” I now realize that certain prerequisites should be in place in order for “Soft Landing” to reach its fullest potential and its intended outcomes. First, “Soft Landing” needs to occur in a place where attention is placed on creating a classroom culture – a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and patterns of everyday life that characterize a classroom. Students need to be invested in engaging in shared learning experiences. Students and teachers need to value each other and delight in each other’s company. Second, it is important for the teacher in a “Soft Landing” classroom to have a vision of what could be. It is important for the teacher to realize that if implemented carefully, “Soft Landing” has the potential to introduce students to their own capacity as learners. When teachers

give students permission to make choices about the tasks they will pursue and the freedom to act upon those choices, they introduce students to their own capacity to go beyond created structures in order to create other, more meaningful experiences. I highlight other pedagogical recommendations for implementing “Soft Landing” in the sections that follow.

Open the Room Gradually

When students enter Room 119 for the very first time and experience their first “Soft Landing” the shelves and countertops are nearly bare. Because of this, students do not have a wide variety of “Soft Landing” choices to pick from during their initial days of school. This is intentional of course, so as to not overwhelm kids with a freedom of choice *and* a room full of supplies from which to choose. When kids walk into Room 119 they can look around and say, “Oh good! There’s room for me here. I can put my mark on this place.” So with this spirit, I do not put everything out before the kids arrive and we start slowly. Bit by bit our room starts to take shape. This year, on the first day of “Soft Landing,” students chose between Legos® and books. The next day I added blocks to their available choices. Then came paper, scissors, and markers. Then came play-dough. So as the days accumulated, so did the choices.

When I introduce new materials slowly, I have more time to model, discuss, and demonstrate the purpose and proper use of each material. Once I show kids how to use materials throughout the room, I can trust them, and they can trust themselves to use them in a variety of appropriate ways. It is important to note then when I introduce new materials, we talk about the proper use and care of the material and not specific functions of the material during “Soft Landing.” So although we discuss how to use and care for

scissors, I do not tell students what they should do with scissors during “Soft Landing.” That is for them to decide.

If I want students to take care of their classroom and the materials it houses, we need to work together to create our physical space. I found that involving kids in the organization and placement of classroom supplies is a smart thing to consider. Kids learn a thing or two about thoughtful organization, and because they are a part of the placement process, they know firsthand where things are kept, why it makes sense to keep them there, and where to put things back when it’s time to clean up. Further, inviting and involving student participation in the room organizing process sends the message that I believe in kids and value their opinions, that the materials are ours, and that this year their role in the classroom is going to be an active, participatory one.

Provide Provocative Materials

The first few years I implemented “Soft Landing,” indoor recess and “Soft Landing” supplies were one in the same. And many students chose to spend their “Soft Landing” time playing Connect Four, Chutes and Ladders, and Hangman. Day after day, week after week, these children and their one or two opponents only interacted with an already-established game with already-established rules. Over time, I learned that “Soft Landing” is different than indoor recess and I began to visualize all that “Soft Landing” could become. If I want students to experience the creative use of materials, I knew I would have to be more strategic at provisioning “Soft Landing” supplies. I made the decision to keep indoor recess supplies, specifically competitive board games, separate from “Soft Landing” supplies. And I kept my eyes open for open-ended, provocative materials.

Bit by bit, I introduce new “Soft Landing” materials. One day I place a box full of rocks on the low table. Another day I place pieces of driftwood on a bench and another day, species of caterpillars. In the beginning, the kids’ reaction is always the same. “What is this?” they ask. “What do we do with this?” they question. “What is this for?” They learn quickly that my response is always the same. “I don’t know. I guess that’s for you to decide. You can figure it out!” And soon, they stop asking and just start doing. One day the rocks become the currency of a pretend village. Another day they are moon rocks. Another day they are used in a lab for observation. “We’re trying to see if any of these are gemstones,” they explain. The driftwood is mostly used for building and balancing, but some kids use the texture of the bark to produce artist rubbings, while others decide to make a campfire complete with a construction paper flame.

I found that children can and do use familiar materials in unfamiliar ways especially when I do not attach labels or purposes to certain supplies. When they are forced to use their imagination to create a vision for the possibilities, unlike when following the directions to a familiar board game, they rise to the occasion. Without fail, they always think of more creative options than I could ever imagine.

Listen

“Soft Landing” is mostly a gift of time for students, but it is a gift of time for teachers too – a gift of time for teachers to get to know their students more deeply, a gift of time for teachers to help activate passions and develop agency. So, relax, slow down, and be present. Take time to grab a notebook, pull up a chair, and just listen. Give the children your undivided attention. We cannot plan what will happen during “Soft Landing,” but we can plan to listen carefully, make sense of what the children have to

say, and respond in thoughtful and purposeful ways that acknowledge, clarify, honor, and support their efforts and move them forward in a quest to create an identity surrounded by newly discovered passions. Reach, touch, and teach by being present, putting yourself in the moment, and focusing your full attention on the children sitting by your side.

Imagine If...

Standards, assessments, outcomes, and achievement, these are the concepts and currency of many educational discussions today. What should seven-year-olds be expected to know, whoever they are, wherever they are? How can school achievement in this county be raised to world-class levels? Teachers are to comply and students are to perform. But, shouldn't teachers intervene and say how they believe things ought to be? Shouldn't teachers transform their classrooms into places of possibility?

We all have the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our society, on the streets, and in our schools. It is not enough to simply reproduce the way things are. Instead, I have in mind a better state of things for those I teach and the world we share. Imagine if other teachers choose to resist some of the thoughtless and careless "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1991) that undermine public education at every turn. Imagine if other teachers see themselves as challengers who embark on new beginnings. Imagine if other teachers engaged in thinking that refuses mere compliance and looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of more fulfilling, vibrant ways of being in the world. Imagine if other teachers started to open pathways toward better ways of teaching and better ways of life.

Imagine if “Soft Landing” was the first impression all kids had the moment they walked through their classroom door. First impressions count. Classroom environments need to be welcoming places: interesting, joyful places that beckon kids and teachers to actively participate in the pursuit of knowledge; places that invite curiosity, exploration, collaboration, and conversation; places that make us want to come in and stay, day after day after day after day. “Soft Landing” is the kind of first impression kids should have. I created “Soft Landing,” an intentional gift of culture, conversation, care, time, and choice, to help fuel my students at the beginning of each school day. The students of Room 119 can trust that they will be greeted with a “Soft Landing” and its predictable structure every morning. And I, their teacher, can trust that over time “Soft Landing” will begin to mold my students, our classroom, and our learning.

I realize that I do not have control over the environment from which my students come, nor do I have control over some of the adversity they must overcome to be successful. What I do have control over is eight hours of their lives five days a week. During that time, I can give them the hope, the dreams, and the tools to make their lives meaningful. Everything they become, I also become. Because I continually reinvent myself in the classroom, I enable my students to do the same.

Appendix A

“Soft Landing” Observation Summary Form

Date: _____

1. What choices are students making during this “Soft Landing” session?

2. Are their choices related to current classroom learning activities such as our current science unit?

3. Do students sustain engagement with one activity throughout the entire “Soft Landing” session?

4. Are students working alone, in pairs, or in small groups?

5. What are students talking about?

6. Do any conflicts arise between students? If so, how are they resolved?

7. Is there anything else that strikes me as salient, interesting, illuminating, or important during this observation?

8. What new (or remaining) questions do I have for my next observation?

Appendix B

Student Interview Protocol

Date: _____

1. What is “Soft Landing?”
2. What does “Soft Landing” mean to you?
3. Why do we have “Soft Landing?”
4. What would your day be like if we didn’t have “Soft Landing?”
5. What do you look forward to doing during “Soft Landing?” Why?
6. How do you decide what to do during “Soft Landing?”
7. Do you choose the same activity every day? Why?
8. Has “Soft Landing” helped you discover your strengths as a student? How?
9. Has “Soft Landing” helped you become more aware of your personal interests?
How?
10. Do you prefer making choices or having a teacher tell you what to do?

11. How do you decide whom to work with during “Soft Landing?” Do you work with the same friends each day? Do you ever choose to work by yourself? Why?

Appendix C

A Request For Parental Permission to Have Students Participate in a Research Study

Dear Parents,

As a master's student in the Department of Education Policy Studies at the University of Maryland College Park, MD, I request permission to engage in a research study with your son or daughter.

The purpose of this research study is to explore and understand what it is like for second grade students to learn and grow in a classroom community where there is time and space each morning for students to make academic choices, interact with peers, and ease into the school day.

Your child's participation will require nothing in addition to regular class obligations. Through the course of the school year, students will participate in "Soft Landing," the first thirty minutes of the school day during which students make choices about the kinds of activities they engage in as they make the transition from home to school. As part of normal classroom expectations, students will write journal reflections about different aspects of our second grade community including "Soft Landing." I seek permission to collect data from students during predetermined times throughout the last two months of the school year.

For my research, our class will proceed as usual while I make observational notes during select "Soft Landing" sessions. All of my written notes will be held in the strictest confidence. These observational notes will be examined in an attempt to unravel connected themes. Any student who participates in this study will be given a pseudonym.

Each student's experiences are unique. Information obtained in this research may provide a deeper understanding about the experience of providing time and space for student choices. By studying how my students experience "Soft Landing," I hope to be able to formalize the child-initiated, authentic learning that occurs during "Soft Landing" in order to extend the learning opportunities "Soft Landing" affords to many students in many classrooms. When my research is complete, a summary of results will be made available to you and your child.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any further questions.

Sincerely,

Aimee Domire
University of Maryland
Master's Student
Education Policy Studies
aimee_e_domire@mcpsmd.org

Dr. Steven Selden, faculty advisor
University of Maryland
Education Policy Studies
selden@umd.edu
301-405-3566

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

Project Title	Transformations, Openings, Possibilities: Personal Discoveries During “Soft Landing”
Why is this research being done?	This is a research project being conducted by Aimee Domire, a student at the University of Maryland, College Park. The research is being supervised by Dr. Steven Selden, a professor in the Department of Education Policy Studies at the University of Maryland. We are inviting your child to participate in this research project because he or she engages in “Soft Landing” in our classroom on a daily basis. “Soft Landing” is a program that allows students to make choices about the kind of activities in which they participate and takes place during the first 30 minutes of the school day. The purpose of this research project is to learn what the “Soft Landing” time means to students, to discover what kind of choices students make during this time, as well as to understand how these choices help to provide students with a richer classroom community and more engaging, motivating academic year.
What will my child be asked to do?	A decision to participate will require nothing in addition to regular class obligations. Your child will be asked to continue to participate in “Soft Landing” each morning as he or she typically does. I will observe your child once a week during “Soft Landing.” I will make notes about the kind of activities he or she chooses to engage in, as well as the kinds of interactions he or she has with peers. These weekly observations will not interfere with your child’s daily learning activities. The observations will occur over a three-month time period. Your child will be asked to continue to write reflective journal entries about many topics including “Soft Landing.” I will collect the journal entries that are specific to “Soft Landing.” I will read the entries and look for themes. I will collect journal entries over a three-month time period.

Initials _____ Date _____

Project Title	Transformations, Openings, Possibilities: Personal Discoveries During “Soft Landing”
What about confidentiality?	<p>We will do our best to keep your child’s personal information confidential. To help protect your child’s confidentiality, (1) I will not include your child’s actual name on interview notes or journal entries. I will use pseudonyms on all research data. (2) I will store observational data in a password-protected computer file. (3) I will store journal entries in a locked filing cabinet. (4) Your child will bring his or her own journal home at the end of the year as he or she typically would. (5) Upon completion of the study, observational data will be shredded.</p> <p>If I write a report or article about this research project, your child’s identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your child’s information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</p>
What are the risks of this research?	<p>There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project. A decision to participate in this research will not have an affect on your child’s grades. Likewise, a decision to not participate in this will research will not have an affect your child’s grades.</p>
What are the benefits of this research?	<p>This research is not designed to help your child personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about how student choice affects learning motivation and the nature of classroom communities. The investigator hopes that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through an improved understanding of what it means to children when choice times are available in the classroom.</p>

Initials _____ Date _____

Project Title	Transformations, Openings, Possibilities: Personal Discoveries During “Soft Landing”
Does my child have to be in this research? Can my child stop participating at any time?	<p>Parental permission and student participation are completely voluntary. You may choose to not have your child take part. Your child may choose not to assent to take part. If your child decides to participate in this research, he or she may stop participating at any time. If your child decides not to participate in this study or if your child stops participating at any time, he or she will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which he or she otherwise qualifies. Participation is not a class requirement. A decision to participate or to not participate will not have an affect on your child’s grades. Although I will only collect data from students who submit signed consent and assent forms, all students will have the opportunity to participate in “Soft Landing” each morning and to engage in reflective journal writing activities. That is, no students will be isolated or left out of these regular classroom activities as a result of their decision to not participate in the research study.</p>
What if I have questions?	<p>This research is being conducted by Aimee Domire at the University of Maryland, College Park. The investigator’s Faculty Advisor is Dr. Steven Selden. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact:</p> <p>Dr. Steven Selden 3112C Benjamin Building University of Maryland College Park, Maryland, 20742 301-405-3566 selden@umd.edu</p> <p>Aimee Domire 823 Violet Place Silver Spring, Maryland 20910 aimee_e_domire@mcpsmd.org</p> <p>If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) irb@deans.umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678. This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</p>

Initials _____ Date _____

Project Title	Transformations, Openings, Possibilities: Personal Discoveries During “Soft Landing”
Statement of Parental Consent	Your signature indicates that: you are at least 18 years of age; the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and you freely and voluntarily choose to allow your child to participate in this research project.
Signature and Date	NAME OF CHILD:
	SIGNATURE OF PARENT/GUARDIAN:
	DATE:

Appendix E

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Dear Second Grade Student,

I invite you to be a part of a research study that explores your experiences during “Soft Landing.” I am a master’s student in the Department of Education Policy Studies at the University of Maryland College Park, MD.

The purpose of this research study is to explore and understand what it is like for second grade students to learn and grow in a classroom community where there is time and space each morning for students to make academic choices, interact with peers, and ease into the school day.

As I try to understand the “Soft Landing” experience, once a week, I will watch what you are doing and write notes about the choices you make and the friends that you work with during the “Soft Landing” time. I will also read some of your journal entries to look for ideas and themes.

I will not use your name in my research report. Instead, I will use a pseudonym or a different name. After the research is complete, I will share the results with you.

Each student’s experiences are different. The information I learn from this research may help me understand “Soft Landing” better. Maybe other students in other classrooms will get to have “Soft Landing” too.

This study will make an important contribution to understanding student choice. It may help other students and teachers too. I look forward to working with you throughout this project.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Aimee Domire

University of Maryland
Master’s Student
Education Policy Studies
aimee_e_domire@mcpsmd.org

Dr. Steven Selden,
faculty advisor
University of Maryland
Education Policy Studies
selden@umd.edu
301-405-3566

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