Sandtray Practice:

Weaving Together Verbal and Visual Languages

by Kelly Massey

Meet the Author
www.ChildCareExchange.com/issue

In an attempt to draw play and storytelling into our art studio or *atelier*, I've introduced sandtrays as a core studio practice this year and have found it to be a richly satisfying experience for the children. Sandtray Practice is an adaptation of Sandtray Therapy, an art therapy technique in which clients arrange small materials and figures in a tray of sand to create a symbolic landscape. In traditional sandtray therapy, the therapist facilitates healing through this nonverbal medium.

In what I am calling *sandtray practice,* students simply construct their own meaning through the arrangement of visual materials in a tray of sand. My goal in introducing this practice was to allow space in the atelier for play and storytelling; this has been more successful than I even dreamed. Not only do the children remain focused in this activity for much longer than the average art experience, they are able to construct meaning and process their world in a very direct way. While sandtray practice is similar to an activity like dollhouse play where children manipulate the small materials to create storylines, the open-ended nature of the sandtray allows endless possibilities for the children's imaginations.

Kelly Massey, MA, is the Atelierista at the Sunshine Shack Preschool in Los Angeles California. Massey has been an early childhood educator in holistic and contemplative settings for over 20 years as a teacher, atelierista, administrator and presenter specializing in mindful and contemplative art practices. As a teacher/researcher she is curious about how creative thinking is nourished and sustained. Massey lives in West Hollywood, California with her husband and daughter.

Joey's Story

Joey, three years old, carefully arranges a line of corks as he tells me his daily story about losing and then finding his parents:

… Yeah, but the little boy is Joey. That's me. This is the story of me in the forest. My mom and dad were at home and I was by myself and I didn't know which way and so I went through the forest. Guess what's going to happen in my story? I bounce on this and I bounce so high all the way to my family. And I flew all the way to my mom and dad.

Each day that Joey has the opportunity to work with the sandtrays, he creates a new set of obstacles between himself and his parents. Quicksand, booby traps, dark forests created with corks, dried leaves, and recycled buttons stand between himself and the people most important to him. Every day he seems to find his way back to them as he works through one of the most universal fears of childhood.

Play and Visual Art

There is little doubt of the powerful draw of symbolic play for preschool-aged children. It is the preschool child's primary directive to construct meaning out of their raw experience; they do this with image, metaphor, and story — in short, play. Paley (2004) calls play, "the main repository for secret messages, the intuitive language with which the children express their imagery and logic, their pleasure and curiosity, their ominous feelings and fears" (p. 63).

A note: Because we are educators, rather than therapists, our role in this process is to allow the children to construct meaning. Only a qualified therapist should attempt to analyze a child's artwork. If a child's story or imagery is consistently disturbing or violent, please recommend the services of a qualified professional.

Many would call children's symbolic play an art form in its own right. Play is a colorful bricolage of popular culture, fairy tales, personal struggles, and bits of overheard conversation interwoven into a meandering storyline, added and subtracted to according to complex rules and logic. Theorists have noted the link between play and visual art (Walker, 1998: Zimmerman, 2009). Jaquith (2011) writes of the close connection between visual art and play. Smolucha and Smolucha (1985) go further and call adult creativity the maturation of symbolic play.

Resources and Materials

Sandtray practice offers young children the chance to create meaningful and personal work with visual materials. In this section we will explore the best physical environment for sandtray work, possibilities for the trays themselves, and the materials that may be provided.

Sandtray practice can be integrated into most programs for preschoolers organically and with little financial output:

- Materials are low cost, can be reused, and take up little space.
- Dissayanke (1998) defines art as the human tendency to 'make special' through organizing, beautifying, and expressing ourselves through symbol. Sandtray practice offers young children to 'make special' with aesthetically satisfying, open-ended materials.
- Very little instruction is needed; children seem to instinctively understand how to use the materials.
- Even two- and three-year-old children can remain engaged in sandtray practice for 30 or more minutes without redirection.

The materials needed for sandtray practice are humble and require more creativity than financial investment:

- *Recycled materials* such as corks, bottle caps, and empty spools can be collected from the homes of the children in your program or through a program that collects materials for schools.
- *Natural materials* such as dried leaves, flowers, and sticks can be gathered by the children on nature walks.
- *Small open-ended figures* such as plastic animals, people, or aquarium figures can be found in thrift stores, garage sales, or personal collections.

The Environment

The pre-primary schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, house lovely ateliers or studios both within the classrooms and as classrooms themselves. These are inspiring spaces rich in a variety of materials that are accessible to the children at all times. More than just an art studio, the atelier is a place of research. It is a place for teachers to deepen their understanding of children and development through observation and documentation. In the atelier, the children have opportunities to express their rich and complex understandings of the world through a variety of open-ended materials. Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the influential preprimary schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, wrote that in the atelier "hands and minds would engage each other in great liberating merriment" (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998, p. 74).

While most preschools do not have the resources available to recreate the sunlit ateliers of Reggio Emilia, we can borrow the child-centered exploration that they foster and their curiosity about children.

Olive's Story

Olive, three years old, often begins her tray with the assertion that she is going to make a 'smooky' (spooky) world. Using a favorite book, *The Gruffalo* (Donaldson, 2006) as inspiration, she tells and retells a story that, for her, has become a symbol of all tameable scariness. In addition to the Gruffalo himself, Olive has added a Gruffalo mommy, daddy, and baby to her stories. Olive narrates:

Olive telling her Gruffalo story to Walker
Photograph by the author

"The baby Gruffalo is hungry, but it's yucky. It's not for persons. It's foxy food; it's disgusting. Then the baby Gruffalo was so hungry; so I'm the momma Gruffalo, so I can eat it. But who's going to be the dad Gruffalo?"

Using small pinecones and leaves she creates the dark and spooky forest in her favorite book. Small pebbles form a pathway for the Gruffalo and his family, small red plastic pieces make a warm fire. Inspired by her favorite book, Olive is able to use creative and divergent thinking to create an elaborately realized world with very simple materials.

Even in the most humble environment, it is highly recommended that a space for art be created within the classroom that is set apart and special. This can include a low table with room for four or five children, shelving for trays of sand, loose parts materials, and any other supplies that you would like available. Storing materials in clear containers such as glass jars or plastic take-out containers creates an inviting and accessible environment.

Sand Trays

The most basic supply needed for sandtray practice is a small tray of sand. These can be anywhere from 8 x 12 inches to 18 x 24 inches in size. Traditional sandtray therapy recommends a tray that is 30 x 20 inches and three inches deep. These can be specially bought, but I have been able to repurpose a variety of wooden and metal trays and containers for children's use. It is even possible to reuse plastic take-out type containers, though these will need to be replaced more often. The trays can be filled with about an inch of white or black craft sand.

Materials

Young children are naturally drawn to materials that we as adults often overlook. A tray of buttons is captivating for young children and invites them to sort, arrange, and stack. Collections of well-organized materials such as leaves, twigs, nuts, and seeds, as well as recycled materials, are irresistible to young children and invite exploration.

Small open-ended figures can also be made available. These should invite the children to tell their own stories and not include toys from movies or television shows. (When children are presented with such figures or toys, the existing story becomes very difficult for the children to override with their own.) Small plastic animals, people, and buildings are good places to begin a collection of figures for sandtray practice. Aquarium figurines of bridges and castles can evoke stories as well.

Procedures

On days that you would like sandtrays to be available during work time or small group time, set the table in a visually appealing way with jars of corks, bottle caps, seashells, and any other open-ended materials that might invoke wonder, stories, and curiosity. Arrange the table as if an important guest were coming to dinner, with order and beauty. Three to five trays of sand can be set out on the table to define the workspace. Depending on your program, sandtrays can be offered to the children as an everyday option or as something that is occasionally available. In our school, sandtrays are always available in the main atelier and are occasionally available in the classroom ateliers, depending on what else is planned for small group time.

Questions

When the children arrive, very simple instructions can be given to create a world within their tray of sand. For children who haven't had a lot of experience working with open-ended materials, the teacher might model the construction of a world:

> I've decided to create a forest in my world and I need to use some of these materials to represent trees. What do you think would make a good tree here? Maybe I'll arrange these leaves as trees and stand them up in my sand. I'm going to pick this little gnome to be a character in my world and he needs a home. How do you think I can give him a home?

Sally: The bunny lives here and she's having a nap right now. The bunny was not… there was a flower and there was a goat and it climbed up here and it was a mountain goat. This was the fluff that was a monster: "I want to eat you!" He has four heads. It was a four-headed monster. The rabbit hopped up there. Photograph by the author

Listen to the children's ideas and allow them to collaborate on your story line. Beware of creating something too appealing or involved as every student might decide to create their own gnome world in their own tray of sand. Once the children have an idea of what is expected of them, allow them to begin work on their own worlds.

Sit with the children as they work and keep your movements around the room to a minimum. When you sit with them, you communicate that their work is important and worth paying attention to. An adult moving around the room tidying up and tending to little details can be distracting to children and sends the message that this is a time for them to move around as well. If you want the children to learn to keep their

seats as they work, you will also need to keep your seat.

As the children work, light prompting questions are appropriate to facilitate critical thinking. Children generally want to share themselves with the adults in their lives and appreciate the curiosity and interest in what they are doing. Some things you might ask are:

- "I see you are really enjoying those shiny rocks, what do they represent in your story? Where do they go in your world?"
- "Henry, will you tell me about your world? I'm very curious about that long line of corks that runs through the middle."

Allow the children to self-talk as they work and allow questions and divergent conversations to happen. As long as the children aren't distracting each other, this should be an easy and relaxing time. It isn't necessary or even desirable to create a silent work environment; young children learn from each other and enjoy the company of their peers. We hope they will tell each other about their work, inspire each other, and take their creativity to new levels.

Clean-Up

About ten minutes before the end of the work period you can let children know, "This is a good time to start thinking about how you are going to end your work for the day. I will be coming around to hear about all of your worlds in a few minutes." Allow each child to tell the story of their world to the group. If you have a camera to take pictures, create a record of their pieces before the materials are put away. These can be used to share the children's work with parents or to revisit with your co-teacher.

Montana: The baby mermaid mom said, 'Do not snatch my baby's eggs!' Then the alligator flew into the swamp and it got jumped and jumped and jumped and the alligator died. Then everyone said, 'Yay, Baby!' 'Yay!' said the mom and they cheered because the alligator died. Then the alligator said, 'Fee Fi Fo Fum! I'm gonna eat your eggs, Mum.' And he fell into the swamp. The End. The name of my story is "Secret Rose Garden Story." Photograph by the author

When each child has told his or her story, materials should be put away in an organized way. Treat this as an opportunity for children to learn to sort and organize the materials themselves. When they are given the opportunity to take proper care of the objects in their world, young children better understand their value and importance.

Conclusion

Integrating sandtray work into a preschool program creates opportunities for young children to work with visual materials in a low pressure and intuitive way. Through the creation of a world and a storyline with visual materials, they are finding the joy in creating meaning through art. Csikszentmihaly (2009) writes in his seminal book *Flow*,

"In flow… our concentration is focused on what we do. One-pointedness of mind is required by the close match of challenges and skills, and is made possible by the clarity of goals and feedback" (p. 112).

When activities and environments offer high challenge and low threat, a relaxed alertness is developed, which is optimal for learning, making connections, and holding complexity. Because sandtray practice offers the challenge of creating with non-traditional and open-ended art materials in a low-stakes environment with little fear of failure, the creative process "begins to hum" (Csikszentmi-

haly, p. 18), and children become lost in their work. As Eva, age four, tells me about her experience, "I feel nice and good and relaxed and happy and I was using my imagination."

References

Csikszentmihaly, M. (2009). *Creativity, flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York: HarperCollins.

Dissanayake, E. (1998). *What is art for* (1st ed.). United States of America: University of Washington Press.

Donaldson, J. (2006). *The Gruffalo*. New York: Puffin Books.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (Eds.). (1998). T*he hundred languages of children* (2nd ed.). Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Jaquith, D. B. (2011). When is creativity? *Art Education, 64*(1), 14-19.

Paley, V. G. (2004). The classroom as narrative. *Studies in Education, 1*(2), 63.

Smolucha, L. W., & Smolucha, F. C. (1985). A fifth Piagetian stage: The collaboration between analogical and logical thinking in artistic creativity. *Visual Arts Research, 11*(2), 90-99.

Walker, S. C. (1998). Stories of two children: Making sense of children's therapeutic work. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 25*(4), 263-275.

Zimmerman, E. (2009). Reconceptualizing the role of creativity in art education theory and practice. *Studies in Art Education, 50*(4), 382-399.

— ■ —