

## Pedagogical Narration: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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Sophie has grown up exploring our dense forest, particularly the large dirt mound. She has watched many of her friends climb the dirt mound with ease and then happily slide down. Sophie, however, would sit at the bottom and scream and cry, waiting for me to help her climb up this mound. Although my nurturing instincts made me want to help her, I stopped myself. Instead of rescuing and enabling her, I waited, watched, and encouraged her. Finally, Sophie challenged herself to climb up to the very top of the mound all on her own. She was incredibly proud of herself (as was I) when she accomplished her goal.

One day in the winter, the children and I were again in the forest. It was very cold, the ground was very hard, and the wind was biting at our faces. The dirt mound was extremely hard and slippery, and many children without mittens had cold hands. Sophie sat at the dirt mound wearing my gloves and stared at the hill. The weather brought an entirely new challenge, and with that, new obstacles for her to face. She slowly crawled up the frozen dirt mound with my large gloves on, grunting the entire way, her determination never wavering. She never once cried, yelled, or screamed for assistance. As she grunted along, I wondered

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if Sophie no longer sought help because I had consistently given her words of encouragement instead of rushing over to lend my helping hands.

Finally reaching the top, Sophie clapped her hands in excitement, but as she did so a glove flew off and rolled down the hill. She sat on the hill quietly, staring at the fallen glove. She could have easily become upset. It was a less-than-ideal situation. The cold wind bit at her hands and fingers, and at the top of the hill, there was another obstacle to face: a large rock sitting right in the middle of the hill. She backed up and started to go around it. Her peers seem to understand the importance of their friend conquering this obstacle, and stood back patiently watching. This hill is usually full of life, with bugs and

insects crawling all over it in the warmer weather, and children racing up and down. Today, however, all was calm. It appeared we understood that this was Sophie's moment.

Although I believed in Sophie, I realized it would be easy to rush to her aid and "help" her. If I did help her, would it be a selfish act so that I would no longer feel uncomfortable? Anastasia Butcher (2015) questions this perfectly by asking, "Do we have a right to interrupt their flow?"

I also contemplated the land and what it has taught Sophie. I wondered if the hill felt familiar to her and if the dense forest felt safe and reassuring.

Sophie stared at the rock calmly. I wondered if past experiences came into play to assist her? I

wondered if time mattered in this moment. Butcher describes time “as being layered with memories, experiences, history, and dynamic intra-actions that affect it, with time itself having agency, influencing and shaping everything that comes into contact with it” (2015).

Had the passing of time and her memories of previously attempting to climb the hill and of watching her peers successfully climb the hill given her skills, knowledge, and awareness?

Showing great persistence, Sophie crawled over the rock! Despite the frozen ground, despite the cold, and despite her fingers turning red, Sophie’s determination was equal to her focus. I believe we both overcame uncomfortable tensions in this beautiful yet less-than-ideal situation. I also realized we both trusted each other.

I gave up control by not stepping in and helping Sophie (or would I have been helping myself?) and gave complete control to Sophie. She decided how to conduct her plan and took as much time as she wanted. Butcher (2015) asks, “When time is controlled by adults assigning certain small chunks, does it truly allow for experimentation?”

It is incredibly easy to focus entirely on Sophie’s accomplishments. However, I cannot help but reflect on the tensions and uncomfortable moments that come with investigating the forests. As the children run, they create beautiful paths; however, I wonder what happens to the

paths when we leave. Are we taking over the forest, or are we experiencing the forest in unison with the other creatures that are there but we do not see? I often wonder who is in this beautiful space when we are gone. Do the deer come out then? Do the insects breathe a sigh of relief

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when we leave? The children are very respectful of the forest, which makes me so proud. I do not see them picking or wrecking foliage. We leave the berries on the salal leaves for the animals and talk about why we should leave the fruit and who needs it more. But I also feel tension at times, as I would like the children to experience local and native plants in all their juicy glory. Is it wrong to pick the berries and teach the children about native plants that give fruit and satisfaction to both animals and ourselves?

When we explore the clay and dirt hills in our forest area and when we stumble upon pill bugs,

millipedes, centipedes, worms, and larvae, we all sit patiently in the dirt and observe. Do I feel guilty that we allow the children to scrape the earth and investigate what is below the surface? Yes. Yet I feel they are discovering much more than they would if they were only reading about these insects. It is these conflicting tensions that are so interesting yet so uncomfortable.

What I do know with certainty is that we are striving to think with the children to learn about the land, and to learn about the children’s capabilities. I hope through our teachings that the children and families see we are just as eager as the children to learn through risk taking, exploring, and investigating and that, even as adults, we never have all the answers. Working side by side with nature is far too complicated for that.

*Miranda Tanner has been working in the field of ECE for seven years. She works with infants and toddlers in a nature-based program on Vancouver Island.*

## Reference

Butcher, A. (2015). Thinking with Time in Early Childhood, *Canadian Children Study* 49, 40 (3).