

Rethinking Classroom Order: Staying with Uncertainty in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract: Early childhood classrooms often move through familiar rhythms of activity, transition, and restoration. At the close of the day, materials are tidied, towers dismantled, and surfaces cleared in preparation for what comes next. While these routines help sustain order and care for shared spaces, they can also erase the unfinished material arrangements of children's play—gestures, ideas, and relations still in the making. What is left behind may appear incidental or disorderly, yet it can also hold traces of thought, experimentation, and collaboration that are not yet complete. This project asks what becomes possible when educators resist tidying too quickly and instead attend to what remains.

This qualitative study presents a 10-week pedagogical project conducted collaboratively with educators in a preschool classroom at the University Child Care Centre (West Campus). Drawing on Stengers' (2018) concept of slow science, the study approaches early childhood education as a space of hesitation, attentiveness, and ethical care. Slow science invites educators and researchers to pause, remain with uncertainty, and allow knowledge to emerge through ongoing relations rather than predetermined outcomes. From this perspective, the classroom becomes a living site of inquiry where play is not simply documented as evidence of learning but revisited, interpreted, and reencountered over time.

The project explored what happened when selected material arrangements were intentionally left in place rather than cleared away at the end of the day. An unfinished block tower, a clay sculpture mid-formation, or a cluster of materials from collaborative exploration remained visible and available for return. Rather than being treated as leftovers or evidence of incomplete cleanup, these arrangements were understood as pedagogical openings—material invitations to think again, notice differently, and remain in relation with children's unfolding ideas.

Over time, these unfinished remnants invited children back into earlier gestures of making and imagining. Children returned to materials with new questions, altered previous constructions, extended narratives, and encountered their earlier work from changed perspectives. In this way, thinking unfolded through revisiting, reworking, and relational engagement across time. What remained in the classroom supported continuity without closure; it made space for ideas to be resumed rather than resolved.

This practice also required educators to reconsider their role in classroom rhythms. Drawing on Haraway's (2016) call to *stay with the trouble*, moments of hesitation became pedagogical acts in themselves. Rather than intervening quickly to direct, interpret, or restore order, educators practiced waiting and observing, allowing experimentation, messiness, and uncertainty to remain present. In doing so, the curriculum shifted from something delivered in advance toward a living process shaped through encounter, interpretation, and collaboration (Moss, 2019).

Approached through slow pedagogy, the unfinished becomes more than disorder; it becomes a pedagogical provocation. By slowing down and honoring what remains, educators may cultivate classrooms where learning emerges through return, relation, and ongoing interpretation (Clark, 2023; Rinaldi, 2006). Rethinking classroom order in this way opens space for uncertainty and creates conditions for pedagogical inquiry.

References

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