

## THINKING WITH PAINT AND WATER

*(AN INTERVIEW WITH TERRY WILSON, DEANNA ELLIOTT,  
DIANA FORELAND, AND TERESA DIXON)*

**Vanessa Clark and Narda Nelson**

**Abstract:** This paper presents a conversation between a group of educators employed at the University of Victoria's Child Care Services (Terry Wilson, Deanna Elliot, Diana Foreland, and Teresa Dixon) conducted by interviewer Vanessa Clark, assisted by Narda Nelson. Throughout this dialogue, these educators reflect on their year's collaboration working with paint and water as part of a multi-site inquiry conducted over a period of three years. They discuss themes of rethinking with respect to their respective practices, the challenges and struggles associated with the project, and the importance of working together as a team.

**Keywords:** pedagogy, materials, early childhood, rethinking practice

**Vanessa Clark** is a Ph.D. student and sessional instructor in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, P.O. Box 1700, STN CSC, Victoria British Columbia, Canada, V8W 2Y2. E-mail: [vanessa.vondruska@gmail.com](mailto:vanessa.vondruska@gmail.com)

**Narda Nelson** is a Master's student and research assistant in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, P.O. Box 1700, STN CSC, British Columbia, Canada, V8W 2Y2. E-mail: [narda.nelson@shaw.ca](mailto:narda.nelson@shaw.ca)

Vanessa and Narda work in the University of Victoria's Child Care Services in British Columbia, Canada, alongside Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw. Vanessa acts as an *atelierista*,<sup>1</sup> Veronica acts as a *pedagogista*,<sup>2</sup> and Narda is a Child and Youth Care graduate student and research assistant. As part of a three-year, multi-site inquiry, entitled "Encounters with Materials in Early Childhood Education" (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2012), a group of toddler educators<sup>3</sup> and 18 children from their centre were part of an in-depth inquiry into materials – first, Tempera paint, and then water – that took place over the course of one year. We ask: What are the possibilities and dangers of an in-depth inquiry with paint and water?

During this time, Veronica, Vanessa, and the educators met once each month for a duration of two hours to discuss readings and examine their individual and collective work through the use of pedagogical narrations.

With this paper, our intention is to support the educators in communicating their ideas and practices, gleaned throughout these significant inquiries with paint and water, to other educators. We decided to present this collective experience of deeper material inquiry, to a wider audience in an interview format. In the paper's first section, we present an interview on the subject of the educators' inquiry with paint. In the following section, we present an interview concerning their practices and thinking with water. We conclude with an invitation to other educators.

### Thinking with Paint

In a toddler classroom the educators, children, and Veronica investigated the medium of Tempera paint one day each week over a period of several months. Vanessa participated one time in the classroom, and a few times during the monthly meetings. During this time, they worked collectively to challenge their taken-for-granted thinking and practices with paint. They engaged with new ideas through readings, pedagogical narrations, discussions, e-mail correspondences, and experimenting with new art practices. Vanessa interviewed the educators, inviting them to talk about their experiences.

**Vanessa:** Can you tell me about your inquiry with paint?

**Terry:** We made the decision to use paint and to let the inquiry evolve. I felt comfortable using paint with the toddlers so it felt like a good place to start. I was ready to see what possibilities

---

<sup>1</sup> As an *atelierista*, Vanessa works to extend the engagements with the arts in early childhood spaces. This might include collaborating with educators and children to support the inquiries with materials and ideas and working with specific readings.

<sup>2</sup> As a *pedagogista*, Veronica works collaboratively with educators to deepen and broaden pedagogies in the classroom, including attending to ethical and political aspects of early childhood pedagogies.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Wilson, Deanna Elliott, Diana Foreland, and Teresa Dixon

could arise through a more in-depth investigation. Working more collaboratively with my co-workers and others helped me to uncover what I couldn't see previously because of my preconceived ideas about what the outcomes would be. I was ready to discover a *new* way of looking at my practice. I wondered what I might be missing as I looked through my much-practiced lens, not knowing what the other possibilities were because I wasn't looking for them or allowing them to unfold.

Our inquiry provided us with an opportunity to stop and really think about why things emerge the way they do. When we stopped to look back at what transpired with the paint, when we were not so quick to jump to a limit or boundary for the children to adhere to, different outcomes were made possible. I was ready to change my responses to what children could do with the paint from “Absolutely *not!*” to “*Why not?*”; what can unfold from there? As a team, we constantly reassessed and readdressed where we were at, and talked about the limits and asked why instead of saying no.

**Vanessa:** This is a really interesting concept to think about: unfolding from the limits. Were you all interested in opening up limits?

**Deanna:** Initially, I wanted a challenge and was curious to work more deeply with one material for a longer period of time rather than constantly changing materials that the children work with. We selected paint. This inquiry with paint was important for me because of the connections we felt while working with this material in our centre. As I keep talking, I realize it's about the connections I had within my practice; also, moments of connecting with the children through the material, or watching children connect with one another while experimenting with the paint. We watched some children build relationships with the paint. One boy in particular sat back and viewed his peers' interactions for weeks before he felt comfortable enough to physically investigate the paint.

Certain moments that came up got us talking, thinking, and opening up to new possibilities within our practices. We became more reflective as educators through this process. Our team was increasingly able to let go of preconceived thoughts about where things would go, allowing the moment to be “the moment” versus a moment being used as a stepping stone towards a desired outcome or “product”. It really brought us closer and we talked more about what was happening. Focusing on the material and how it changed made us realize it was okay for us to change too.

**Diana:** I thought it was an important experience to broaden our ideas of art with the children. In the past, I felt that we usually did art in certain ways. It was what we were taught: We had to set up a table with a tablecloth and the paint had to stay in that structured area. As a material, it wouldn't travel conceptually or literally throughout our centre.

**Vanessa:** What was having materials remain within a structured area supposed to teach you, from your Early Childhood Education background perspective?

**Diana:** I don't think it was supposed to “teach you”; it was more about trying to show you, as an ECE student, that there are activities the children are supposed to engage in, in order to learn

about concepts like touch. If it was finger painting, it was explained to you as a sensory thing, but it would be a *structured* sensory thing.

When we started this project with paint, I questioned how this inquiry would look. We set up the paint for the children and I thought, “They are going to go crazy and we’re not going to be able to control the situation!” There *were* moments of chaos; I’m not saying that there weren’t. Initially I was worried about it and thought the children were going to approach the paint with an attitude of, “Ahhh, paint everywhere, and I can do anything!” I really felt the need for structure and believed that children need that consistency. But they don’t need that constant structure everyday. We don’t have to be so rigid because we think one child can’t handle a lack of predictable structure, so we started playing around with things more.

I also noticed a lot of our inquiry was calm. Even though I thought the engagements with unlimited use paint would become a high energy level activity (e.g., putting paint on each other or throwing it in ways that disturbed their play), it turned out to be a low energy level activity (massaging the paint into bodies in a cooperative, relaxing interaction). That was interesting. It showed something I didn’t expect. That was fun – to prove myself wrong!

We used to be very sure about outcomes. Now, instead of approaching an activity with the children thinking, “This is what is going to happen” as educators we now say, “Let’s see what will happen!”; sometimes it will be what we thought would happen, like when a child kept eating the paint (we did stop the child from eating the paint). But, there were other times when we didn’t expect something to happen and something lovely emerged instead.

**Vanessa:** Were there any limitations of the ideas or concepts that evolved from your inquiry with paint?

**Teresa:** The limits came from the physical space that we are working within. Did it get too loud? Or, was the space not as welcoming for the children who were “outside” of the activity? The room and space were limitations.

**Deanna:** There were physical limitations – when the children were running in the paint, slipping all over the place, and leaning on the Plexiglas walls that we brought into the centre to paint on.

Time was a limiting factor too; we tried to not stress out when one or two children remained inside that space while other children were getting ready to go out. But eventually, lunch needed to happen and diapers needed changing and there are just moments in the day. My own personal mood can be limiting too: It is hard to be open all the time. And that is okay!

We recognized that talking with your team and organizing who will work with a child while someone is busy elsewhere is important. I think that is such a strong part of what worked for us: the respect that everyone had working together. It can get really busy so we all had to work together as a team (i.e., one of us washed the paint and another made and facilitated snacks). At the end of the day you may be more exhausted when trying new things, so energy levels can be limiting too. I think there are definitely limitations – but pushing through some of that is worthwhile.

Children, themselves, also limit things, too. My mood might mean that I am not too into it one day and I can push myself. But on a certain day, perhaps one child might not be into it, and I want to respect the child. There is a philosophy about including all of the children in an activity, but some children might not want to engage, and that can be a hard feeling. A more typical attitude might be, “I want you to get in there and I want your parents to see you were engaging”. But it is important to respect where the children are at and realize each child can take the piece from an inquiry into materials that is important to them. For example, during our paint experiment there was one child who just watched everything for weeks and weeks.

**Terry:** There is more to the paint than just the colours. Working with paint exposes children to a lot of vibrant colours, but also to blending colours. It is probably a very abstract concept to them. In this project, there was more about the depth, texture, and what could actually be done with the paint. We can provide an environment where it isn't about getting paint on the floor, or paint on hands, or paint on clothes. It's about *experiencing* the paint: basically the interactions they are having with the paint and the paint *has back with them*.

I think around this time we also read an article by Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010), which was about a child engaging the sand. Part of our work together during this inquiry involved reading different articles and/or chapters every month. I questioned, “What was the child doing with the sand and the sand with the child?” It was the same sort of thing with the paint – the paint was having some say in the matter too. It made me see things differently. It wasn't just about the children and the paint and the educators and the paint, but the paint was talking back to us in ways.

**Vanessa:** What struggles did you have?

**Diana:** Initially, I didn't want to be painted very much on my own body. Allowing myself to experience that helped me see why they were enjoying it. If I hadn't allowed myself to let them paint me a little bit I wouldn't have understood that the paint felt like cream going on and being rubbed into your skin – it was like a massage with cream. I can understand why they enjoy it and feel calmness from it.

**Terry:** Some of the struggles that I had were when the children thought that, because they had painted other educators' bodies, they wanted to engage me in that way. I wasn't comfortable to pull my pant legs up and be painted in that way. I think I had to be true to myself in that moment – but I was perhaps more comfortable to roll up my sleeves a bit and I could manage that. Then also being aware of how much I put that back onto the children. I didn't want my differing attitude towards it to get in the way of how the children wanted to experience the paint. But I also thought that was okay to say that I wasn't comfortable with that. Maybe one of the other educators was comfortable. They might not be comfortable when one of their peers wanted to paint their faces.

**Teresa:** I think that my personal struggles came from worrying about what my coworkers thought. It's not about us, as educators, and the mess. My philosophy is to let the children expand as much as they can. Yet, working is also about being respectful to your co-workers, so

it's not always about *my* philosophy. It is important that my co-workers think I am respecting their philosophies.

**Vanessa:** What kind of things did you do with children?

**Teresa:** I'll give you one example. I put out the paint pucks (disks of dry Tempera paint), bowls of water and paper. The kids came along, painted on paper and realized the disks were getting wet and, that because of this, the paint travelled to the floor – and I allowed that to happen! There were these lovely drawings on the floor, and then it went onto their bodies.

**Vanessa:** I can see what you mean by expanding.

**Teresa:** Yes, and lots of kids watched. I was okay with allowing these two kids explore this particular medium. When I say “expanding” I mean letting it travel, adding different elements to it. Allowing children to move with their ideas and with the paint.

**Deanna:** We did many things with the paint: painting on Plexiglas; placing an easel out with paper; allowing children to go under the easel; having clips on the easel; standing on wooden blocks or stools while painting; having paint move around the area and being okay with it getting on things; having Plexiglas panels in different rooms; realizing the children needed more space – paper on tables and walls in an open space; connecting between stories and paint; allowing and being open to paint on us; being engaged with the children.

**Terry:** I had one experience where I really enjoyed being on the opposite side of the Plexiglas with one child in particular. There were other children present, but there was no paint going on our bodies. We were painting what we saw through the Plexiglas. That was a very intimate interaction. After my struggle with getting paint on my body, this was a really positive time.

Another thing that really stuck with me was when we marked off an area that had furniture with tape and the painting was happening inside those boundaries. So it provided the children who weren't sure that they wanted to paint a safe space to watch and see what was going on.

As their comfort level grew, I can remember different times being able to invite children in by just extending a hand. I could invite a child into the taped-off space, not to paint, but just to be close to me – to be in the space where it was happening after much observation and slowly becoming comfortable with the situation. Then eventually, on his own, he picked up a paintbrush. I felt I was a huge part of the process. So I felt that being there without actually doing the painting was one of the things I did with the children – to make it welcoming for all the children.

**Vanessa:** How was your pedagogy impacted?

**Teresa:** We have more moments now where I can just be involved with the activity and I don't have to worry what's going on in other areas of the centre, or about my role, or where else I need to be. I can take photographs and ask questions. Then I can go back later and print the

photographs out, and share it with others by showing video footage or the photos, which allows me to go back to the moment and reflect on it with others. Now, when it's a very important moment for me, I can say to my team, "I am going to be here for about 10 more minutes" and that is something we never did before.

**Deanna:** I learned that it is important to be comfortable in the uncomfortable.

**Diana:** Another thing I learned was about clean-up. Before this paint inquiry, we used to focus on things like cleaning up right away – it was a large, structural element to our day. That was another thing we changed our view about. I learned more about what is important in the day and making different priorities.

I guess, with the paint, I would have limited an activity to paper and paintbrushes. Children were not to put their hands in the paint, unless we were doing fingerpainting. I would have structured the activity so that we were either using paintbrushes or we were fingerpainting by making prints with our hands on paper, but not paintings with hands and bodies immersed.

Now the children just open the paint up any time. Is that such a big issue? If the numbers are low, or if we are outside, is that such a big issue? Sometimes we worry about paint getting on the couch, or if children bring the paint to snack, or, if we are doing a transition time, that we won't have time to keep up with the paint. Every child is different, every situation is different, and we are not structuring it to be always the same.

### **Thinking with Water**

Following the inquiry with paint, everyone (the educators, the children, Veronica, and Vanessa) engaged water closely for several months. Within this investigation was a challenge to work with water without using a typical water table – for many weeks we engaged and experimented with water while not using a water table at all. Veronica and Vanessa visited the centre each week to support the transforming ideas and practices with water.

**Vanessa:** Can you tell me about your inquiry with water?

**Teresa:** I have always thought water is important for children. It is such an attraction. It's flowing, and there's motion. It's a natural element that kids seem attracted to; I have always loved water. The inquiry with water was about allowing the water to be moved, to travel around the room, and to have things to be added to the water. It was important because we talked about the idea of working with/thinking with water as a team and this is something that we were comfortable doing.

**Diana:** I was apprehensive about *not* limiting the water. Safety was always brought up in school. As an educator, I was taught to keep the water in the water table, so you would not have slippery floors. There still is a danger in slippery floors, but what about solutions such as providing towels? What about a mat? We had children in rubber boots. I really liked that we thought through that barrier of "safety" and came up with a compromise. It felt great to broaden our engagement with water by working through safety concerns! By making water abundant but

utilizing towels and mats we created a more relaxed atmosphere. The educators did not have to limit the water to only the water table; it now travelled and opened both children and educators to learn with water spilling safely.

**Vanessa:** And it sounds like these ideas, such as safety, come from somewhere.

**Diana:** Yes, from our backgrounds. We bring things to the inquiry, and it's about being aware of our histories, our backgrounds.

**Vanessa:** We took the water table out of the classroom at one point. What was that like?

**Teresa:** I think the water play table is small, limited, and the water had to stay in the bucket. We really didn't encourage it to come out of the bucket. All of a sudden, taking out the water table opened up more accessibility for the kids: It's flowing, it's motion.

**Deanna:** I think that removing the water table enabled us to view water through a new lens. We were less confident in knowing what water can do or how it will be used.

**Vanessa:** I saw you trying things I had never seen before with water. I usually see water in the water play table, not that that's a bad thing to do.

**Teresa:** Yes, it was great to try water in different things: in glass bowls, in wooden bowls, and in plastic tubing. We put water in the daily living (kitchen) centre. Basically we would leave small amounts of water in different areas, and watched them, watched to see what the children did with it.

**Vanessa:** Was there the same kind of water flow that happened during your inquiry when you used small amounts of water?

**Teresa:** I think that what changed with having limited amounts of water in small bottles is that the children started to treasure the water more. I think because the bottles were so visually attractive, the children actually held onto the bottles and onto the water and treasured it. I don't want to say they "respected" the water, but they wanted to protect it. In contrast, when there were large amounts of water, there was more dumping. It changes the relationship.

**Diana:** I really liked it when we limited the volume of water available for the children to play and explore with. One day we limited the water and tried to gather water. We realized how difficult it was to gather water. How much learning that was! The idea was that we were trying to use this limited amount of water and sweep it back up. In countries where water is scarce, once you pour it out it's gone, so it has to be used carefully. When there was a little water in the classroom it was used more sparingly. When we had lots, there was more movement.

**Terry:** My ideas and concepts of thinking with water were limited in the beginning, because I didn't know what the potential was to use water as a material. I think I was curious to see where we could go with the idea of water. Water is around us all.

We experimented with different sizes of tables at the beginning. Then, after reading a chapter from Olsson's (2009) book for our professional development (evening) class, and seeing an image of the young children with the low table and see-through bowls in Olsson's book, we thought completely differently about water. For example: "Why have we always kept it in the water table?" This way of approaching water usually ends up with the experience not being a positive thing. As soon as we started thinking beyond that and started talking as a team about different possibilities, it really changed the way we use water in our centre.

**Vanessa:** What did you learn with water?

**Teresa:** That children get wet (laughing).

**Diana:** We used glass and metal bowls and filled them with water. We (children and educators) noticed there is a different sound with the metal than glass. We taught and experienced with children that tin has higher tones. We were also thinking with light through the water, and noticed how light can go through the glass and through the water and right through everything clear like the water table. We had the lights off one day and were playing with what light shines through.

It was fun to bring in pine cones, leaves, and pebbles, to see how they would sink and get destroyed. Well, it depends on your thoughts, I guess. To a child, something that falls apart in water might not be "destroyed". We brought "natural things" to the water, and asked the children what happens to them: Would they float or sink? Would they get damaged? Maybe they don't get damaged, but the structure changes with the water. We brought paper to the water and the paper got wet, that's a structural change. It changes the paper from a dry smooth hard structure into a soft flimsy structure that was able to cover an object like papier-mâché.

**Vanessa:** I'm just realizing all the things water can do.

**Diana:** Yes. I really liked engaging with ideas of how quickly water can move and also how slowly. One day we did a lot of dripping things. Water moves. We looked at the movement of water and the properties of water. We also made ice cream bucket ice chunks once and I was talking with one of the children about how frozen water doesn't move at all. Prior to our inquiry with water, when we brought in ice, I didn't think of it in the sense of movement, it was more about noticing that it was cold. I didn't think about it as movement, slow/fast and still.

**Vanessa:** What struggles did you have?

**Deanna:** I was worried that the water would be too slippery. I was worried when Teresa filled the four-litre milk jug with water and gave it to the children. This is where having a team is important as I wasn't able to be in the moment with the children, but Teresa was. I remember being so glad she could be there. The floor didn't fall out from under the centre and we were all okay. The children realized, "This is a lot of water, maybe we should put on our boots!" Coming up to those moments and just being present and open to possibilities in those moments was difficult but meaningful. Those moments are so important and struggles come with those moments. We all bring a different piece to our practice and it can be hard to agree with

colleagues on how an activity should happen sometimes. Different approaches to an activity can cause friction and conversations trying to sort things out can cause friction, but without friction you can't find those close and intimate moments.

I think about moments that didn't work as well. We had a piece of bamboo that we hung from the ceiling, then draped a towel over the bamboo and poured water onto the towel. I remember one of the children being so excited to see this waterfall coming down. But it only worked if we were doing it *for* them. It wasn't as meaningful or rewarding if the children engaged to try and make the "waterfall" happen. It was just an entertainment thing we were doing for a moment. The children weren't necessarily connecting that moment to anything. I think our practice should be less about entertainment or instruction and more about engagement. Not to say that entertainment and instruction never happen in our practice. We have found that when we work alongside the children to investigate materials and ideas that our relationships strengthen. These relationships include people, materials, and place. There was a moment where a child then made the water drip on his own – the set-up didn't have to be as elaborate as we had thought. He made this little drip – it was the same effect for him to drip so little.

**Vanessa:** It sounds like you are relating differently to the place (i.e., the classroom). Things shifted for you.

**Deanna:** It is also about the experiences I, as an educator, have; these experiences build and impact my practice. Being an Early Childhood Educator isn't the type of situation where you can just get shoved off a cliff and be ready to embrace something completely foreign "right now" and implement it for the children. It is the climb up the mountain. We are fortunate we are having these discussions with one another in our practice. It is about relating to a place, and place with a history. Our team has worked in this centre for many years. We have our own personal histories of what has happened or "worked" in the past. It can be difficult to move with and beyond these histories to challenge ourselves to think deeper, to view this place with a new lens so we let go of "knowing" what will happen when we experiment with new children and materials.

### Continuing Shifts

Our conversations in this article represent just a few of the continuing engagements with materials that we have experimented with, both as individuals and together as a team. Perhaps, as our discussions suggest, attending closely to one material, asking questions such as "why", playing with the possibilities, engaging the boundaries and limits, and challenging our taken-for-granted pedagogical lenses, all offer up new means by which we, as Early Childhood Educators, can move towards increasingly meaningful and transformative experiences in our work. We hope that our discussions might inspire other educators to not necessarily replicate what we have done, but to engage in practices and discussions in a meaningful and complex way that fits within their own context. Given what Deanna, Terry, Teresa, and Diana shared through these interviews, the possibilities feel endless!

### References

- Hultman, K., & Lenz Taguchi, H. (2010). Challenging anthropocentric analysis of visual data: A relational materialist methodological approach to educational research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 23(5), 525–542.  
doi:10.1080/09518398.2010.500628
- Olsson, L. (2009). *Movement and experimentation in young children's learning: Deleuze and Guattari in early childhood education*. New York: Routledge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203881231>
- Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., Kind, S., & Kocher, L. (2012, April 17). *Encounters with materials in early childhood education*. Paper presented at the annual general meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, BC.