

**Assignment 2: A Reflective Account of my Research Framework**

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A journey into the world of research is not without a journey into one's past, present, and even future. When reflecting on my topics of interest in research, including children's literacy, social-emotional well-being, independence, and play, specifically what we label today as risky play, I immediately draw connections to my own reality. I naturally adopt a constructivist epistemology, with an awareness that "each of us (not just researchers) always and inevitably 'frames' the world as we 'see' it (Hughes, 2010, p. 36), and am driven by wonder and curiosity; a desire to understand, construct, and share meaning with others (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). It is within this frame and with this motivation that I reflect on my interests, the how and the why behind them.

Before we ever venture into research, we must first understand "that research cannot possibly be objective ... [that] every time we think, use reason, and figure, emotion is tied to that process, therefore it is impossible to be free of emotion and subjectivity in research" (Lavalée, 2009, p. 23). This is mirrored by Creswell (2009), who states that "[r]esearchers recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretations" (p. 8). In recognition that "[a]ll the decisions made about the aims of the research, formulating the research question, deciding on the research design, choice of participants, analysis of the data and suchlike are influenced by the self of the researcher", Mukherji & Albon (2018) ask, "How will you affect your research?" (p. 26). It is, as shown, well known that we, as human beings, affect our research in a multitude of ways and, therefore, reflection must be a part of our practice.

To better understand ourselves as researchers, and how we influence not only the work we do, but the choices we make leading up to that work, we can look to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1994). For this reflective work, I am going to look at my research interest of risky play, with respect to how this interest came to be and what I hope to inquire by digging into it, through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's work. If you were to ask me where this interest came about without reference to any models or theoretical framework, I would tell you it is just who I am. I love the outdoors, I am driven by curiosity and wonder, I am passionate about independence and perseverance, and stubborn to a fault,

truth be told. I feel that children learn best when given the time, space, and freedom to explore; to test their own limits and boundaries; to navigate challenges and problem solve without outside influence; to get back up when they fall down, driven solely by their own intrinsic motivation; and to define success in their own way. However, if we look to Bronfenbrenner (1994), we know that “human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biophysical human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment” (p. 38).

Born in 1982, I grew up in what feels like an entirely different world than my 2009-2015 children are currently growing up in. My microsystem, defined by Bronfenbrenner (1994) as a “pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment” (p. 39), was one that shifted a lot in my first 8 years and settled into what remained consistent for the remainder of my childhood and teenage years. Even Bronfenbrenner’s definition being that of “face to face” (p. 39) interactions is something that gives me pause when we consider the times we are presently living, where meetings and courses, even primary schooling, is no longer face to face, but through screens, driven by technology, and lacking in human connection. In reflecting on my topic of research, it is not possible to move forward without recognizing the correlation between what my 1982 self was exposed to in terms of risky play and the reality many, arguably a high majority, of children are living today. My family unit comprised of working parents, a mother and step-father, latch key children, and personal, face to face, human connection, without the influence of video games and technology. Within my microsystem was also a school with strong Indigenous influence and exposure to nature, tradition, and an emphasis on recess and outdoors. Homework was sometimes necessary, but also sparse. The mesosystem defined by Bronfenbrenner (1994) as “... the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person ... a system of microsystems” (p. 40), felt

interconnected and with a natural cohesiveness; communication was strong, parental involvement was frequent, and many value systems were shared. My opportunities for freedom and exploration were equally valued and encouraged between school and home. My school had incredibly tall slides, monkey bars, forests, and fields. Another strong influence in my childhood and my perspective on risky play is to be found within my exosystem; defined by Bronfenbrenner (1994) as "... the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that directly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives" (p. 40). I grew up in a town on the coastline, surrounded by an abundance of nature, the ocean at my doorstep and the forest my backyard. Families in our community shared value systems and there was an unwritten expectation to look out for one another. It was commonplace for porch lights and the setting of the sun to call us home. There was a sense of the neighbourhood as a safe space for freedom and exploration. While some people felt less familiar than others, we were all known to one another, at least by residence, if not by name. Neighbours would call up or pop by with alerts of cougar or bear sightings, to be sure all the children and pets in the neighbourhood remained not fearful, but aware and safe. Bronfenbrenner (1994) expands his model and states that "[t]he macrosystem may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture or subculture" (p. 40). In this, I feel fortunate that, growing up on leased ancestral territory of the Tla'amin people, I was afforded the gift of immersion into not only the culture of my own family, but that of the Indigenous community with whom I shared many cultural experiences. Without question the culture in which I was immersed influenced my passion for nature and my sense of wonder; therefore, directly influencing my interest in the study of risky play. It is also not without acknowledgement of my privilege as a Caucasian female to have had many experiences immersed into sports and organizations within my community without prejudice, racism, or sexism, and to have felt safe to freely explore my surroundings.

We can dig deeply into my childhood experiences and discover many more places within the ecological framework in which my reality was formed, but the points of reflection here show clear evidence that in being afforded a childhood full of freedom, trust, opportunity, security, exposure to a culture that values the land, an immersion in nature in all aspects, within a town and community that felt safe and valued my experiences, I have formed an opinion of childhood play experiences that have shaped my practice today as an Early Childhood Educator and as a parent. So, if you asked me now why I have interest in these areas of research, I would not simply tell you it is who I am; I would tell you it is because of who I became. As I have carried this interest throughout my adulthood and into my professional life, I find myself full of inquisition: How do we re-create the opportunities I had for risky play for both the children I work with and my own children? How do we teach others about the value of risky play in a fear driven society? How has technology and the media influenced early childhood play and risk taking? And, to what detriment? How do we balance the safe playground movement with open ended, risk taking, loose parts playgrounds? How do we encourage our children to be confident taking risks and trusting their instincts in a world that tells them everything is dangerous?

As I sit with these thoughts and consider how one could argue that research should be objective, I find myself with an uneasy feeling that if it were, we would lose so much of what people like myself are trying hard to hang on to in a world that is ever changing; a world that in many ways is eliminating childhood. If we did not have our pasts, our own lived experiences, our thoughts and emotions, we wouldn't have the same desire to seek understanding. To see children as feeling subjects (Mukherji & Albon, p. 109), we must ourselves be willing to reflect on our own feelings and experiences and how they have shaped our realities and influence our work.

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