





Children and educators alike benefit from making time and space for revisiting and reflecting, rather than rushing toward a clean slate for the next activity.

SLOW SCIENCE

Exploring What Remains in Children's Play

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(Pedagogical Project conducted at University Child Care Centre Society, West Campus, University of Calgary)

“What happens to play after the children go home?”
I asked myself this question one afternoon, in the stillness that followed the children’s laughter. The preschool classroom, still buzzing with color and texture, seemed to ask it too. Blocks leaned in half-finished towers, a puzzle lay partly put together, and paint trays shimmered as the faint scent of clay lingered in the air. This was usually the time to bring back order—to sweep, stack, wipe, and reset. My body knew the rhythm by heart. But something in the room pulled me back. I hesitated, wondering what stories I might be erasing by tidying too soon.

A crayon rolled from the table edge and came to rest at my feet, as if the space itself had more to say. It wasn't disorder I noticed, but possibility. I began to wonder what might unfold if the room stayed as it was, holding the traces of children's play a little longer—echoes of their voices still hovering like unfinished sentences. Noticing what the materials, traces, and atmosphere are communicating is an act of listening.¹ Perhaps leaving things as they were could also be a form of listening to stories still unfolding in the quiet after everyone had gone home.

Philosopher Isabelle Stengers² invites us to imagine *slow science* as a mode of inquiry rooted in hesitation, care, and attentiveness, an ethic of staying with uncertainty and listening for what knowledge might yet become. Slow science creates space for reflection, ethical attentiveness, and remaining conscientious of the worlds and relationships our work touches. Our classroom became a living laboratory of slow science in practice, a space where knowledge unfolded through waiting, wondering, and returning. We began to see the unfinished in children's play not as a mess to be restored into order, but rather as an opening of possibility and an invitation to listen differently.

Emerging from my pedagogical inquiry, *Traces of Play*, this article reimagines childhood education through the lens of slow science in practice. It explores how pausing and slowing down can create conditions for educators to notice children's traces in play and to welcome what continues to unfold.

Honoring the Unfinished and Unseen

Early learning classrooms thrive on rhythm. Clean-up songs cue the day's transitions, baskets are returned to shelves, and the floor is swept of its glittering evidence. These habits create comfort for children, yet I began to wonder if our devotion to tidiness also erases something essential—the traces that show how children think and imagine.

The next morning, the room greeted us exactly as we had left it. The blocks still leaned in soft disarray, the puzzle remained partially put together, and the paint trays shimmered in the new day's light. When the children entered, they stopped in the doorway and scanned the space as if something had been waiting for them. "It still remembers," one child whispered, tapping her index finger on the wooden tower as if it were alive. That comment stayed with me. It suggested that the materials themselves might hold memory—that learning, like the playroom, can carry its own echoes forward.



A quiet classroom after play—scattered materials catching late-day light. Photo by Amy Lin Mamadaliyeva.

From that day, we began leaving small remnants intact: a painting left on the easel, a clay unicorn resting mid-creation, a collection of shells arranged in a spiral. We cleared just enough space to move safely, but took care not to erase the day's stories. Sometimes I caught myself wanting to tidy, to make the room feel "ready" again, but something about the children's quiet noticing reminded me to wait.

Soon, we set aside a low table as a space that became known as the Memory Table. There, we placed what had been left behind: a tangled thread, a handful of clay bits, artwork from yesterday's making. This space became a living invitation for children to revisit their ideas, to listen back to what their hands had said.

One morning, a child arranged a handful of beads into the shape of a cat. After it had sat quietly on the Memory Table for a time, she noticed it again—her cat was still waiting. She began to fill its body with more beads, layering new shapes and textures. Later, she added a rainbow above the cat, using colored markers. Atelierista Veà Vecchi³ invites us to see how materials can become the memory of our gestures. In

this child's slow return to the cat creation, the beads themselves seemed to remember—holding the traces of her care and imagination. In learning to leave things be, we also learned to honor what is unseen: the quiet life of the unfinished, still whispering beneath our routines.

Creativity and Experimentation: Staying With the Trouble

Waiting was an uneasy experience at times. As an early childhood educator and a mother of two young children, the urge to restore order runs deep: part discipline, part care. Philosopher Donna J. Haraway⁴ urges us to sometimes *stay with the trouble*, dwelling in uncertainty and discomfort long enough for something new to take shape. I began practicing what felt like a pedagogical pause—holding back just long enough to see what might emerge if I did not step in too quickly.

One afternoon, the children mixed chalk dust, water, and sand into what looked like pastel mud. My first impulse was to intervene before the mixture spread across the floor and the children themselves. Instead, I waited. Their engagement was full—hands stirring, voices whispering, laughter rippling quietly



A child's work unfolds over several days on the Memory Table. The image reflects the slow process of return, where materials remember the gestures of imagination and care.
Photo by Amy Lin Mamadalyeva.

through the room. The air filled with the powdery scent of chalk and the sheer joy of collaboration. When the activity finally slowed down, one child looked up and said, "It's a Jigglypuff magic—but it's still cooking."

That phrase captured something I had not been able to articulate. The learning was not in the finished product; it was in the becoming. Peter Moss⁵ describes pedagogy as a space of *living inquiry*, where meaning unfolds through encounter rather than outcome. In that moment, I began to understand what that might look like in practice. Each act of waiting became a reimagining of the curriculum itself—not as a plan to deliver, but as a living inquiry shaped through shared experimentation. Each hesitation held the possibility of a new opening for creativity.

Conversations That Continue

As our practice evolved, listening extended beyond the children to reshape how we, as educators, interacted with one another. Our team began to adopt a slow science approach in our communications—with each other, with families, and with the preschool community. Rather than rushing through agendas or checklists, we gave our exchanges time to unfold, letting questions breathe.

Instead of weekly meetings with set agendas and outcomes, our dialogues unfolded in passing—over snacks in the garden with children, beside the Memory Table, or while wiping a spill. These spontaneous exchanges became our most meaningful professional learning experiences, resonating with pedagogical documentation⁶ as a practice of collective reflection with materials, ideas, and one another. We were no longer simply recording evidence of learning; we were learning through the act of revisiting together.

This shift changed how I listened to children's traces—from capturing what happened to conversing with what continues to unfold. No longer confined to planning sheets or meeting notes, reflection began to live in our glances, our pauses, and our shared wonderings. Sometimes, while preparing snacks or stepping outside for a breath of air, one of us would quietly return to a question from the morning: *What might this trace be trying to tell us? What might unfold if we wait a little longer?*

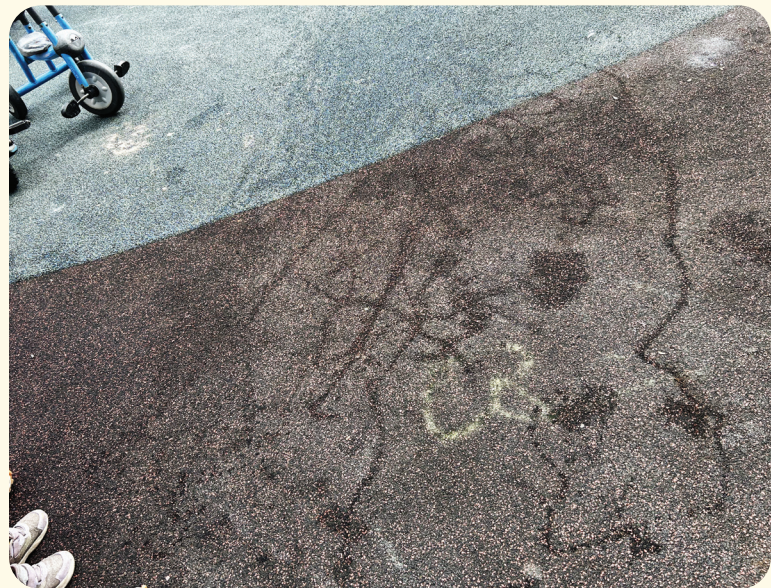
Over time, our listening extended beyond the classroom walls. We began sharing learning stories through our communication platform—a short clip or image, a child's quote, a question—and inviting families to respond. Each fragment felt like a glimpse

into a living inquiry, a moment still unfolding. One parent wrote, “My daughter said her painting was still waiting for her. I think she means it’s not finished.”

Those small exchanges reminded me that attending to traces is also a form of relationship. When families joined the conversation, our practice shifted from showing to sharing—an act of reciprocal curiosity and care.

The Power in the Unfinished

Through these traces, time began to feel different. In early learning classrooms, time often rushes forward—measured by routines, transitions, and the next scheduled activity. But when we slowed down with children, I discovered that time could stretch and breathe. Keeping in mind Alison Clark’s⁷ notion of slow pedagogy as an unhurried and attentive approach that honors children’s own pace and rhythm, I began to



Traces of outdoor play—faint chalk lines, tricycle paths, and water marks glimmering across the playground floor. Often overlooked and soon to vanish, they still hold the quiet memory of movement, laughter, and return.

Photo by Amy Lin Mamadaliyeva.



Close-up of making and mixing chalk paste in motion—swirls of color forming and fading.

Photo by Amy Lin Mamadaliyeva.

see how traces of play invite us to return, revisit, and remain open to what might still be unfolding.

When children returned to a previous day’s work, they weren’t repeating; they were reimagining. A block tower became a bridge; a collage unfolded into a story map. They revealed that creativity is not the pursuit of the new, but the practice of returning. Their gestures of turning, layering, and reworking became quiet acts of persistence.

One morning, a child discovered a small cluster of rocks and leaves we had left by the window. “Oh, we picked them [up] yesterday from the garden,” she said softly. She began arranging them into a spiral, her fingers tracing careful circles across the table. The moment was familiar and inviting. Others joined, adding their own textures with twigs, shells, and scraps of paper, until the pattern began to shift and grow. There was no plan and no instruction, only shared momentum and quiet concentration.

Moments like this reminded me that the unfinished is full of life. By allowing traces to remain, we created space for imagination to emerge from what was already present. Jane Bennett⁸ writes about the vibrancy of matter: the world itself participates in our thinking; we are never working alone. Watching the children return to familiar materials, layering them and finding new stories in what had already been made, I began to see that creativity does not always start with something new. It can emerge through relation, through the slow, attentive act of noticing again

what the world has already offered. Through their quiet returns, the children showed me that innovation lives in this kind of careful revisiting. In the unfinished, I recognized an invitation to linger, to think with the world rather than rush ahead of it.

Attending to What Remains

Attending to what remains in children's play has taught me that change in childhood education rarely arrives as something grand or complete. It begins in the smallest gestures: a mindful pause, a play scene left untouched, a willingness to wait. Over time, I have come to understand care as something quieter than I once imagined. It can sound like silence and appear as stillness. It can mean standing beside a child's work and resisting the hurry to tidy or define, trusting that what remains—an imprint of paint, a half-finished puzzle, a whisper of a pretend play story—still carries liveness and meaning.

In the stillness, what lingers begins to speak: the subtle rhythms of care, the slow unfolding of time,

the gentle insistence of what asks to be noticed. These familiar traces—brushes resting, towers leaning, paper curling softly at the edges—remind me that teaching is not only about moving forward but also about pausing to listen, to reflect, to remember. In the unfinished, the overlooked, the messy yet softly glowing traces of children's play, we find continuation instead of closure—the quiet beginnings of what is always still becoming.

Notes

¹Rinaldi, C. (2006). *In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, researching, and learning*. Routledge.

²Stengers, I. (2018). *Another science is possible: A manifesto for slow science*. Polity Press.

³Vecchi, V. (2010). *Art and creativity in Reggio Emilia: Exploring the role and potential of ateliers in early childhood education*. Routledge.

⁴Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

⁵Moss, P. (2019). *Alternative narratives in early childhood: An introduction for students and practitioners*. Routledge.

⁶Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., Nxumalo, F., Kocher, L., Elliot, E., & Sánchez, A. (2015). *Journeys: Reconceptualizing early childhood practices through pedagogical narration*. University of Toronto Press.

⁷Clark, A. (2022). *Slow knowledge and the unhurried child: Time for slow pedagogies in early childhood education*. Routledge.

⁸Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press

About the Author:

Amy Lin Mamadaliyeva is an educator and researcher whose work explores how slowing down and listening can transform early childhood education. She studies the traces of children's play—those messy, unfinished remnants of activity—as invitations for creativity, inquiry, and connection. Through her practice, she reimagines curriculum as a relational and interpretive process that bridges the classroom and family. Guided by attentiveness and reciprocity, she invites educators to embrace slower pedagogies that honor the complexity of children's thinking and the quiet power of what often goes unseen.

Disclosure Statement:

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Pencil shavings gathered on paper, arranged by a child into the shape of a heart. What might have been swept away instead became a small act of attention and wonder. Photo by Amy Lin Mamadaliyeva.