

Panama Moments

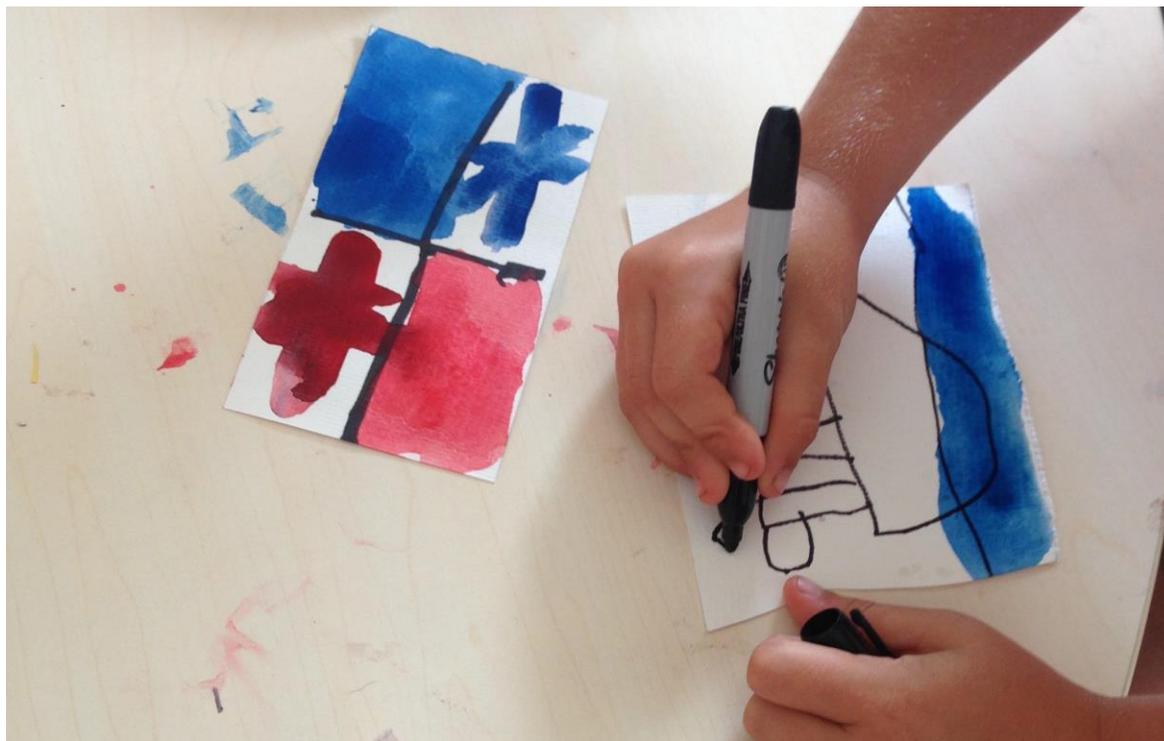
Hilary Nelson

Hilary Nelson is currently teaching at the Marin Preparatory School in San Francisco, California. Her reflections on teaching in a multiage school in Panama highlight the roles choice, interest, and Project Based Learning have in exploratory, experiential learning.

An amazing thing has been happening: our students are exhibiting spontaneous, uninhibited cooperative learning through play. When we let children figure things out on their own, something magical appears, without adult instruction. And the results are always uncertain—thank goodness.

Every morning, when I set out the familiar centers for my students to work at, I am usually met with questions. “What do I do here?” But last week, when I set out some small pieces of watercolor paper and paints, something completely different happened. Though there was no assignment, my students proceeded to take matters into their own hands and created things that were important to them.

“Where does the blue star go on the Panama flag?” Lorenzo inquired. He was busy recreating the flag of his native country and doing remarkably well. “The blue one goes here and the red one goes here,” Nuria advised, as she pointed out with complete accuracy where each star should go. I was astounded.



“I want to do a Kandinsky painting,” Sienna stated as she began to create bold lines and overlapping shapes in true Wassily style. Whoa! *Kandinsky?*



Kandinsky inspired watercolor painting

On another day, every student decided to create a center to run and successfully manage during recess time and beyond. Instant enterprise. We had two dentist offices, both offering free service to those who needed a check up. The girls decided to create a “relaxation center” and eventually expanded to a “tattoo center.” Each business thrived, allowing productive group work, intense brainstorming sessions and even, at times, compromise.

School is organic, alive, constantly evolving, ebbing and flowing with investigation and entrepreneurial learning. And ours has a strong, steady current. Kids write their own curriculum without knowing it. Math skills to be learned: graphing, ordering operations, and adding. Coincidentally, they were on Alistair and Dash’s schedules as they were busy with their clipboards, “just checking things off out there, making sure everything is good.” It was. Inspection results: pass.

Science was on the agenda as the group went outside to lift up a huge rock using a simple machine: a lever. “Ms. Hilary, if we put this wooden plank here, place it under the rock and sit on the other end, it lifts it up!” The boys exclaimed. Physics lesson: pass.

Simon is busy working on books, making chapters and creating words. “Ms. Hilary, how do you write, ‘mystery?’” I offer the spelling and he carefully writes it in his journal. “Simon, what will this story be about?” My curiosity was insatiable. “You’ll see, Ms. Hilary.” His mysterious response sounded eerily like something I say to the kids when I want to explain a concept to the whole group rather than an individual.

We all know that kids are capable of imaginative play, but being in an environment of supportive, collaborative peers encourages everything that we need them to learn: how to get

along, lift each other up, work together and create something bigger than themselves.

During this time of extreme self-motivated play, I'm reminded of something that progressive educator Francis W. Parker said, "Watch the child, watch his attitude of attention. Is it spontaneous? Is the light of pleasure in his eyes? Is interest the motive which controls him?" Attention, spontaneity, pleasure, and interest: pass.

Yes, interest does drive and motivate these children and no idea is off limits. "Ms. Hilary, do you want to get a tattoo at the tattoo center?" Yes, yes I do. I'll take one of Mila's fictional 'hexagooligan' designs and a black heart (the new 'it' tattoo, apparently). I'll pay tomorrow after Yago prints off the rest of his new currency. The currency of this play is learning progress, executive function, and business management. But don't tell the kids. They think they're just having fun at an extended recess.



