



## So the Boys Won't Bother Us: Kindergarten Students as Researchers

*Vivian Maria Vasquez*

**B**arely a month had passed since the first day of school and already four-year-old Hannah's space on the bulletin board was covered with drawings of horses. She had yellow horses, blue horses, and red horses. She had some horses looking to the left and others to the right. She had large horses and small horses. Hannah was a Kindergarten student in a linguistically and culturally diverse classroom of 16 four- and five-year-olds in a school located in a middle class neighborhood in a community close to the Greater Toronto Area in Ontario, Canada. In this column, I reflect on the student research done by Hannah, and her use of art as a tool for engaging in research focused on an issue of importance in her life. I close by talking about the implications of stifling educational policies that make it more and more challenging for teachers to create curricular spaces in which children like Hannah can engage in the kind of transformative learning that resulted from her student research.

### Art as Research

The myriad of horse drawings clearly demonstrated Hannah's abilities as an artist. One particular piece, however, was anomalous. It was a drawing of a horse with a big X drawn across it. When I asked her about the drawing, she explained, "This means no horses allowed here in school. Only horse pictures are allowed here." After sharing her explanation, she proceeded to draw two more drawings of horses with an X, to be placed in different areas of the school. She said the drawings would "let people know that horses aren't allowed here."

The next morning, Hannah greeted me at the doorway to the classroom saying, "I think I choose to draw first. I have to draw pictures of horses to put up in barns because that's where they should be, in barns." On this day, she drew a number of horses without an X across them. Whether to add an X or not was a deliberate choice meant to convey a particular message. This was in keeping with the long-standing notion that during the early years, children become fluent and inventive users of symbols and that they readily use the lines of drawing to represent their world (Dyson, 1986). Drawing was definitely a comfortable mode of expression for Hannah (Leigh & Heid, 2008).

After having created several horse pictures, Hannah was faced with a dilemma.

**Hannah:** Where should I put these pictures?  
I need a barn. Let's put these up [drawings without an X across them] outside a barn.

**Vivian:** Well, the thing is, we don't have a barn close to the school.

**Hannah:** Let's find one.

With this, Hannah and a friend asked to go to the front office of our school to borrow a phone book because there was no Internet access at the time. With phone book in hand, I showed the children how to use the yellow pages to search for barns and places with horses in the vicinity of the school. She decided to send her posters to a place called the Five Star Ranch, which boarded horses.

Three weeks after mailing her posters to the Ranch, she received a thank-you letter stating that the posters would be put up on the wall in one of

the barns at the Ranch. Hannah was excited to have received a response, but not at all surprised. She expected to receive a response. I asked her what she would have done if they had not responded. She said she would have sent them another letter to make sure they received the first one. At four years old, Hannah was well immersed into a communicative world and had some understanding of the effect of taking an authorial stance. Receiving a response definitely boosted her confidence, as seen through the next set of drawings she created to disrupt a problematic issue she had with some of the boys in the class.

Hannah described her next drawing as a poster called “So the Boys Won’t Bother Us.” She said it could also be called, “How to Trap a Boy.” She explained, “You buy some donuts and buy some brooms. Look for a swing to make it look like a horse. When a boy comes, he will ride the horse and then trip on the broom. When he eats the donut, throw him in the truck. That might work.”

After talking with some of the other children and looking through books with mazes and puzzles, Hannah created another trap that uses food and curiosity as enticements (see Fig. 1). She commented on the image, “Figure this trap out yourself if you want, but the answer is, the boy goes up the ladder. Falls in the cage. Trips over the broom. Eats the donut, and falls into the trap.”

Her next two boy traps involved a dog and a shark, respectively. Hannah noted that one of the

traps is “a dog with sharp teeth. He [the boy] thinks it’s a friendly dog, then when he pets it, it bites him. When he[the boy] gets scared, we throw him in the truck.” The other trap was a shark tank.

Unlike the other traps, the ones in Figures 2a and 2b are versions of the same trap. Figure 2a is a bit more complicated, as Hannah describes: “The tank is painted so the boy sees the starfish only, climbs the ladder, and falls in the tank.” However, unsure as to the potential effectiveness of this first trap to keep a boy in the tank, Hannah decided to create a different version (see Fig. 2b). In this one, she said, you “tie him with a rope before he falls in so he can’t escape.”

Hypothesizing that perhaps not all boys would be enticed by pets like dogs or intrigued with wild-life like sharks, Hannah resorts to wishful thinking. She notes, “Maybe he’ll get it when he crosses the

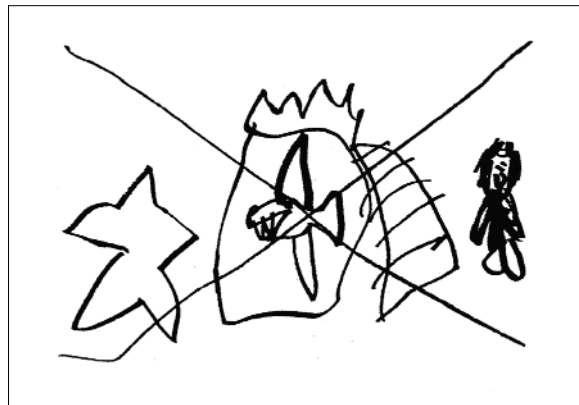


Figure 2a. Hannah’s first conception of a shark tank trap

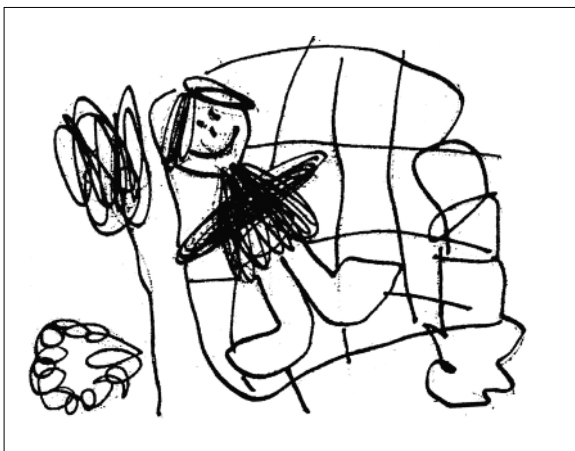


Figure 1. Hannah’s “Donut Trap” for entrapping boys

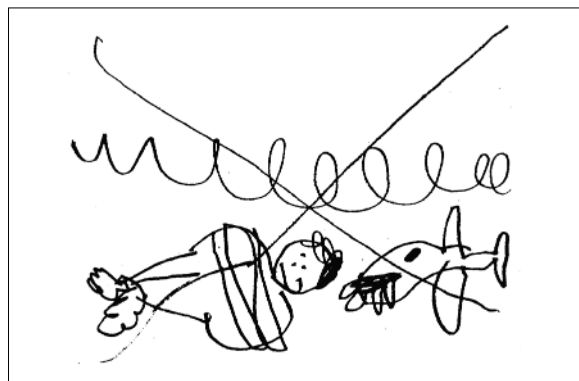


Figure 2b. Hannah’s “improved” shark tank trap with its victim tied up

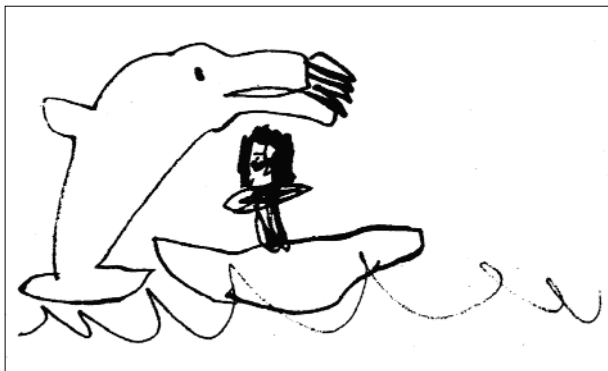
street. Because everybody crosses the street some time! Don't they?!" And with this, she produces a picture of crossing the street to add to her image collection.

As she continues to draw, Hannah begins to use qualifiers to reveal more about the individuals she is (and is not) specifically having problems with. She describes a subsequent drawing as great, saying, "When he goes in the boat, he'll find a whale and he'll get eaten" (see Fig. 3). Upon making this

statement, Kevin, a boy with curly hair whom Hannah is quite fond of, happens to walk by. Seeing this, she quickly returns to her statement with an amendment. This time, to describe her final drawing, she says, "The killer whale eats a boy. So he's done except for Kevin. He's nice. That's why I don't draw curly-haired boys." I immediately revisited her draw-

ings, which confirmed for me that she really had not drawn any curly-haired boys. This was a powerful demonstration of the systematic way in which Hannah had carefully and thoughtfully researched and crafted each of her boy trap ideas.

The two final images I discuss are ones that Hannah said she had drawn earlier, but only chose to share after she had shared the series of boy trap images with me. When asked about these drawings,



**Figure 3.** Hannah's alternate boy trap featuring a killer whale

Hannah's response was, "Well, they're just about what shouldn't be allowed, that's all." The first was a picture prominently featuring monkey bars, with a large X drawn through it. At first glance, it appeared to be a message that someone should not go on the monkey bars. Upon further discussion, however, Hannah revealed that the monkey bar image was about her own hesitance to use the monkey bars if the boys were on it because they shouted at her, made fun of her, and laughed at her whenever she was on them, causing her to feel threatened.

The second drawing (see Fig. 4) featured Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, an image that also holds a deeper message. Through talking about the image, what surfaces is Hannah's identification with the red-nosed reindeer character's experience in the animated movie *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town* when he was called names and bullied by the other male reindeer. She re-mixes her reality with Rudolph's experience of feeling helpless. She represents her re-mixed storyline by creating an image of Rudolph with a person in a circle with an X situated just above him. This symbol is meant to convey her desire for the boys to stop teasing Rudolph—that is, to stop teasing her.

She ended our conversation by summarizing, "We don't want any girls to be teased by boys any more. They even call us names that hurt us." Hannah's friend Haley joined the conversation, confirming her friend's observation, and then called on a few of the other children to show that the bullying



**Figure 4.** Hannah identifies with a bullied Rudolph

issue was not just experienced by Hannah but also by many of the other girls when they were in the playground. Her reason for sharing the monkey bar and Rudolph images last became clear to me: those two images were the ones she drew to visually articulate the issue at hand; therefore, she found them the hardest to share. She also used them to punctuate her message.

## Art as a Semiotic Research Tool

Albers (2007) notes that opportunities to create visual text provide spaces for learners to develop communicative strategies. Through the series of drawings, it was clear that Hannah was using drawing as a powerful tool for not only communicating her intentions but also hypothesizing about, and interpreting, the world around her. The experience with the Five Star Ranch was a testing of the waters, prior to taking on the bullying issue, to see what effects her drawings could produce on those who view them.

Hannah used drawing as a semiotic research tool for producing visual narratives to systematically and intentionally engage in inquiry about how to disrupt the bullying on the monkey bars. When she first began drawing the boy trap images, she was somewhat hesitant to share them with others. This is very much in keeping with Lytle's (1993) observation regarding the sense of vulnerability felt by teacher-researchers when making their questions and investigations public. Up until that moment, Hannah had only talked about the issue with her close friend Haley and a few of the other girls in the class. As Lytle notes regarding teacher inquiry (1993), "telling the truth" can be unsettling when taking the data outside of the group.

In our classroom, we had regular class meetings where children could share what was on their minds. I asked Hannah if she wanted to share her research with the class. At first, the task of presenting her thinking to others was daunting, especially knowing that some of the boys whose actions she was problematizing were in the room. Nevertheless, her frustration with what was happening in the playground outweighed her reservations about sharing what was on her mind. Also, she knew her drawings storied

her issue in a somewhat humorous way. Representing her ideas in this way provided enough context so that viewers were able to enjoy the images while still being able to read through the nuances of those images to make visible the issue at hand.

Hannah was very systematic in how she shared her images. She began by sharing and explaining each of the boy trap drawings. As she did this, some of the children giggled and laughed at how funny they thought some of the traps were, while others shared their amazement at her drawings. Some children also commented on the practicality and possibility of a particular trap working, as seen in the following exchange when Haley asks where one would find a horse swing.

**Carlos:** So that's a horse swing? I would ride that.

**Sebastian:** I would get on that, too.

**Haley:** Where do you find one of those?

**Hannah:** That's why I put a cross on it. I don't know where to find that.

Part of Hannah's process in visually narrating for herself ideas for trapping boys who bully girls was to revisit her images and begin sorting them according to how possible or impossible a trap might be to carry out. The ones that were not feasible were marked with an X. The trap involving the truck, for instance, was rejected because she said, "I can't drive yet." The trap where the boy crosses the street was not feasible because "None of these kids [her classmates] are allowed to cross the street alone and there is a crossing guard."

The ones she did not mark with an X were ones she deemed to have potential. Those traps were created based on Hannah's observations of the boys in the class. For instance, she had overheard one of the boys talking about how much he liked going to the aquarium. Hannah surmised that if he liked

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going to the aquarium, then falling into a shark tank was possible, and thus created her shark tank trap. Similarly, using a donut in the trap seen in Figure 1 came about after one of the boys talked about how much he liked tea and sprinkle donuts for snack.

The last two images that she shared were of the crossed-out monkey bars and Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer (see Fig. 4). While sharing the images with her classmates, she referred to them as the reason why she created the traps in the first place. She had created these images first to represent her research question: how can we stop the boys from bullying the girls off the monkey bars? However, she felt it

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best to share them last as a way to make explicit why she designed the boy traps in the first place. The result was that groups of children, boys included, became interested in looking more closely at Hannah's drawings and talking about them, thereby opening a space for Hannah and some of the other girls to bring to the fore the problematic gender relations and subjectivities of the playground. The issues were therefore pushed to the center of our curriculum. Once pushed to the center, we were able to tackle the issue head on and effect change.

Using Hannah's drawings to initially mediate our conversations, we talked about what was going on at the monkey bars in the playground. To their credit, the boys were very receptive to hearing about the girls' concerns. They were so impressed with Hannah's drawings and her ideas that they wanted to know more about them. As noted by Sebastian, "I didn't know girls could think those things." Carlos suggested, ". . . maybe we can play how to trap boys on the monkey bars." Janks (2013) notes that signs are abstract representations of things, made-up ways of re-presenting the world. Hannah's representations of boy traps were very appealing to the boys, leading to the negotiation of new boundaries and the reinvention of new ways of being on the monkey bars.

While talking about teacher research, Campano (2007) says that research done by teachers is partly speculative research because it is about a larger process of imagining alternatives. Through her speculations, her humor, and her playfulness in introducing the issue at hand, Hannah was able to create a space in which to explore alternate ways of being on the playground. Rather than keeping the girls from being able to use the monkey bars, new ways of playing together were generated by the class as a whole.

## Redrawing an Existence

We have known for some time that "long before receiving formal instruction, the young child is actively making sense of the world" (Short & Harste, 1996, p. 12). It should therefore not be surprising to see Hannah's ways with images and how she was able to use her art to effect change. Each of Hannah's drawings was done with intent, with purpose, because it had importance in her life. None of them were done innocently or naively. In fact, her drawings represent a systematic documentation of her thinking that implicates her question. She formulated her question through observation of happenings in the classroom and from her own experiences. Through her drawing, she came to see that the way the boys treated the girls on the monkey bars was problematic. She used art as a literacy to construct meaning in her life and to attempt to change the conditions of her world, to redraw her existence and that of the other girls in her class. Much of what Hannah did is in keeping with what many of us do in our practitioner research.

Ravitch (2014) identifies the promise of practitioner-driven research as stemming from the learning that "emerges from local, situated inquiry . . . that is grounded in our own contexts, practices, and settings" (p. 6). She further describes this promise as where the hope is: in the stories, in the data and in the evidence that emerges from knowing and caring about people in a setting. Similarly, Hannah's student-driven research stems from her observations of something problematic in her setting. In many ways, the hope for disrupting the bullying

that was going on at the monkey bars lay in Hannah's presentation of her drawings. These drawings were her way of bearing witness for those (the other girls in the class) who did not feel they could do it for themselves. In the end, her student-research with its real-world intent led to new discoveries and renewed ways of being (Janks & Vasquez, 2011; Vasquez, 2014).

Hannah's research also led to many more class conversations about rethinking not only how to ensure access to the monkey bars for all children, but also about what it means to be a bully and what it means to be a victim; it was also about how we treat other people throughout the day and day by day. Janks (2012) refers to these minute-by-minute choices and decisions that make us who we are as "little 'p' politics" (p. 150). She describes such politics as a politics of identity and place, noting "it is about small triumphs and defeats. . . it is about taking seriously the feminist perspective that the personal is the political" (p. 151). These renewed ways of being that resulted from Hannah's research, which dismantled the girls' feelings of powerlessness around the boys, produced new little "p" politics in our class, and created spaces for new ways of talking, being, and thinking.

Unfortunately, the cumulative deprofessionalization of teachers through education policies that over-emphasize standardization and testing are making it more and more challenging for classroom teachers to create spaces for their students to do the kind of work that Hannah did. Current standards are not grounded in what we have come to know based on years of practitioner research about how children learn. This, of course, is no surprise, given that early childhood teachers and child development experts are regularly excluded in the writing of educational policies such as the Common Core State Standards for K–3 (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). For instance, according to Carlsson-Paige (2014), "In all, there were 135 people on [the committees that wrote and reviewed the Common Core State Standards]. Not a single one of them was a K–3 classroom teacher or early childhood professional."

If we believe that early childhood is the time in our lives when we develop our core dispositions—"the habits of thinking that shape how we live" (Pelo, 2011, p. ix)—then we need to find ways to make sure that classroom teachers, other early childhood professionals, parents, and caregivers are able to take their rightful place at the table. While doing this, however, we need to also make sure that we put in place ways of supporting teachers to re-shape the Standards as a step toward breaking the bonds of prescriptive mandates that work to bind what teachers can and cannot do. In this way, we can begin to do what Simon (2014) suggests: to critique what binds us while engaging critically with it as a way of supporting teachers and at the same time speaking against standardization and testing.

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**Vivian Maria Vasquez** is a professor in the School of Education, Teaching, and Health at American University and can be reached at [vvasque@american.edu](mailto:vvasque@american.edu).

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