Disruptions to the “free and protected space” are not an unusual occurrence to those working in a school setting. While witnessing a child’s deeply focused sandplay, there was suddenly a piercing, strident noise and red lights flashing everywhere-- a fire drill. My student and I hastily abandoned the sandplay room to find the right place to stand outside. This disruption to our “free and protected space” is not an unusual occurrence in an elementary school setting.

More extraordinary was the time when I was sitting with another student engrossed with her work in the tray, and four men dressed in white, baggy garments and masks marched into and through our room (in the cellar of the school) to get to the boiler room below. Their work involved a lot of noise. My student didn’t seem that distracted, but I certainly was.

There was another time when I felt sound greatly affected my student’s sandplay scene involving snakes and darkness illuminated by candles: There was a didgeri doo performance in the auditorium, just outside our small sandplay room.

After 25 years of working in Sandplay in Schools, I find I have grown to accept these sorts of events fairly flexibly. Calmness and flexibility are necessary, for the protected space is ultimately in us no matter how calm and private or chaotic the environment. We make every attempt to be present with the other person, we try to understand them through body, language and symbol and we try to be present with ourselves, our body’s reactions, our thoughts and reveries.
Despite the challenges, there are many positive characteristics of creating a sandplay environment within the school setting. Not having to rely on parents to bring children for sessions and the fact that parents don’t have to pay for the service enable low-income families to participate. It is necessary to meet with the parents and obtain their written permission and explain what will be happening.

The interns and I speak with parents about sandplay as a support for children to help them focus better in class. The letter of permission clearly states that the child will be seen by a therapist in training, an MFT Intern. In California, interns are required to work a certain number of hours with children and this opportunity helps them fulfill this requirement.

Another advantage of working in a school is that the intern gets to know the environment where students spend the majority of their time during the school year. We observe students in their classrooms and outside on the playground. The child’s teacher is so very important. Interns are asked to notice the feeling when sitting in the child’s classroom, and the relationship between the student and the teacher, between the student and the other children -- inside and outside. Working within a school, we have access to such important information.
It actually takes many years to begin to get to know teachers and other staff in the school environment. Some teachers are open to talking with you during lunch, others not. A few have real problems having their student be pulled from their class for “one more thing.” Others wish that you could keep their student for the day or come at least more than once a week. Most are truly grateful to have a place to express their concerns and frustrations about their student. As we are not part of the official school staff, we are often a neutral person who can just listen as is needed. Many teachers will go out of their way to meet with us and help as they can.

With a background as an elementary school teacher myself, I have a very deep respect for what a difficult job teaching can be and how the child I’m seeing can be so different in a group environment as opposed to working with me one on one. Sometimes, just after a difficulty in class or on the yard, the teacher will ask us to address the issue and this is an opportunity to hear the child’s side of the story in full, if she/he is up for talking about it.

Children often can't express in words what they may be feeling so I encourage interns not to ask questions. Concerned adults who want to help are always asking a lot of questions, yet when children volunteer what is on their minds, this is most meaningful. My experience shows that with children, they will come to trust you more quickly without this probing, especially in the beginning of your relationship. Once I asked a third grade boy about his weekend as we were going through the cafeteria on the way to our room. He just didn’t say anything. However, in his sandplay work, bombs fell and armies were demolished. At a certain point these bombs (which were crystal marbles) transformed into eggs! He found his own way to tell me his story.

I worked with another girl who was rather reserved and wanted most to not stand out in the school. Her mother was dying of cancer and everyone in the school knew that and was very concerned for her. I will never forget the sandplays she did in my presence--the life giving water, the light. She never once “spoke” about her mother or how she felt, yet she certainly expressed it.

I believe it is useful to support what is positive and suspend judgment. I meet with teachers and acknowledge their concern and all they are doing; I stress the importance of meeting with parents and want to discuss with them their appreciation of the child; I meet with the principal to offer support and education to him and his staff; and I stress with interns the importance of finding what they can love in the child as they work with her. We know we can never fully understand another person, but we can have the intention to try to do that as much as possible.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

MARY WATSON, MA, SP is a Sandplay Practitioner member of Sandplay Therapist of America. She was the founding director of Sandplay in Education from 1989 to 2013. This involved educating and training school faculty regarding Sandplay, training and holding consultation groups for interns and volunteers, and working individually with students using Sandplay in over 8 schools in San Francisco. She has presented concerning the Sandplay process at Canada College, Bunkyo University, Kyoto, Japan and Appalachian State University. Her involvement in Sandplay began around 1986 when she began taking courses presented by Dora Kalff, John Hood Williams and others. Since that time, she has attended numerous conferences, classes and workshops concerning Sandplay and has been in consultation concerning her cases throughout the over 20 years she has worked in schools. Mary Watson has also been a practicing member of the San Francisco Zen Center for many years and tries to bring her intention to be present, to her Sandplay work. She is very open to helping anyone wanting to use Sandplay in schools. CORRESPONDENCE: mwatson4@yahoo.com.

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

DONNA JOHNSON, LCSW, ATR-BC, CST-T is a Jungian psychotherapist and artist who was born and raised in the southeast United States. She currently resides in Atlanta, Georgia. For 30 years she has specialized in art therapy and sandplay therapy. She is a registered and board certified art therapist and a licensed clinical social worker. She is a certified sandplay therapist and a teaching member of the International Society for Sandplay Therapy and is a faculty and board member of the Sandplay Therapy Institute. Simultaneously, she has studied painting, first at Wake Forest University earning a BA in psychology and then at the University of Tennessee where she earned a BFA in 2003. She received an MA in painting at Savannah College of Art & Design specializing in encaustic painting in 2008. A number of her paintings have been published in the Journal of Sandplay Therapy due to their archetypal content. She was showcased to the Atlanta art scene as an emerging artist in 2009 in shows at both Alan Avery Art Company and Bill Lowe Gallery. Her encaustic work has received international acclaim in IEA EncaustiCon 2012 and Metamorphosis: Contemporary Statements in Encaustic. She is a fellow of Hambidge Art Center with residencies in 2011 and 2012. Her work is on view at Reinike Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Donna Johnson’s work explores psychological and spiritual transformation merging her background as artist, art therapist, and Jungian psychotherapist. She is fascinated with abstracting the forms of archetypal motifs from alchemy and Jungian symbolism. Her desire to paint comes from a need to express visually what cannot be concretized into words. CORRESPONDENCE: www.donnajohnsonart.com

THE FREE AND PROTECTED SPACE: SANDPLAY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A Reflection by Mary Watson
San Francisco, California, USA
KEY WORDS: Sandplay, school, children, student, Sandplay in Schools, Reflection, therapists in training, Reflection: Books & Events.
ABSTRACT: The author reflects on the use of Sandplay in Schools, founded by Mary Watson.