

## Why Art is Important for Young Children

Before making decisions about what to include in our arts programs and how we will go about our work with the children, it is important to give some thought to why we make such decisions. Without some strong philosophical underpinnings, our visual arts programs could be simply a series of ad hoc activities or the slavish following of a formula.

Research in early childhood art education has enjoyed an increased amount of attention over the recent years (e.g., Bresler, 1994; Kindler, 1996; Matthews, 1999; Piscitelli, 1996; Thompson, 1995; Wright, 2000). A review of the literature shows multiple forces pulling in different directions, with policy statements emerging from the field of early childhood and the field of art education. Uncertainties are perpetuated in a number of common beliefs or myths about the nature of art, development, and creativity of young children (Kindler, 1996).

The complexity and diversity of influences that have shaped views on the teaching of art can be understood as a palimpsest, a term that describes the way in which the ancient parchments used for writing were written over, but new messages only partially obliterated the original message beneath. Both the new and the original messages still stand, albeit partially erased and interrupted (Davies, 1993). A reading of the numerous philosophies and practices of art education throughout our relatively recent history allows us to see familiar things in new ways. This new way of seeing enables the continuous exploration of new ideas in bids to improve practice, while recognizing that traces of previous thinking are not always completely obliterated but instead recur, shape, and interact with new developments.

At the site where a young child is learning about art, there are points where ideas about the child, art, and teaching meet, sometimes connecting, sometimes colliding, sometimes competing. We have beliefs that have shaped our ways of seeing the child, art, and teaching. Media can enhance our understanding of children and the art media themselves and how we can scaffold young children's learning within these media.

## Ways of Seeing the Child

Commonly held images or constructions of the young child shape and inform all aspects of early childhood—policy, practice, institutions—as well as relationships between teacher and child, parent and child, and child and child (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). Some possible readings of why we do what we do in our work with young children can be explained by examining different constructions of childhood (Dahlberg et al., 1999; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Jenks, 1996; Stainton Rogers, 1992).

To reiterate some content discussed earlier in this book in relation to the arts in general, let us go a bit more deeply into how children have been viewed throughout time, particularly in relation to the visual arts. Early views of the child as *tabula rasa* or an empty vessel shape the belief that children's early artworks are fairly worthless scribbles. With this view, teaching art is seen to lead the children on a path of progress toward realism and representation. In contrast, the view of the child as natural—as inherently innocent and uncorrupted by the world—shapes the notion of precious childhood and the idea that this should be preserved at all costs. From this perspective, teaching art requires preserving child innocence and spontaneity and avoiding any form of intervention that might corrupt spontaneous creativity.

Other views are that children are capricious, with innate propensities to the wild and savage. The work

of teaching is seen to be one of "civilizing" the child, and art activities are extremely teacher-directed, leaving no room for error, experimentation, or accidents. Developmental theory also frames childhood as universal stages of development, and the teaching of art is seen in relation to developmental continua, ages, and stages, and the provision of developmentally appropriate activities. In addition, the view of childhood as a supply factor in determining the future labor force causes art to become marginalized in the curriculum, so that a greater emphasis can be placed on the "basics" of literacy and numeracy. Art is validated largely on the basis of how well it can integrate with or enhance these "more important" curriculum areas.

More recent views of the child center on democratic principles, where children are seen to be freely choosing individuals. However, if freedom and fun are viewed as the essence of childhood, it is possible that teaching art will be considered useful only if it ensures that children are busy, happy, spontaneous, and free, rather than bored. The notion of children's working at skills and techniques in art may be seen as inconsistent with a philosophy of democratic freedom. Some contemporary early childhood educators advocate the view of children as competent beings, co-constructors of knowledge, and art can be taught as one of the multiple languages available to children without destroying the children's sense of freedom; in fact, such co-construction can enhance children's enjoyment of learning (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1994; Malaguzzi, 1993).

When we realize that many positions have appeared, remained, or disappeared, only to reappear in a different time or place throughout our history, we come to understand that we also participate in the shaping of current and future views of art education. Evolution of ideas requires us to adapt to change—to recognize the influence of current, modern influences on children's lives and how we can incorporate some of these positively into an art program. Childhood cultures, for example, are made up of interwoven narratives and commodities that cross TV, toys, fast-food packaging, video games, T-shirts, shoes, bed linen, pencil cases, and lunch boxes (Luke, 1995). Teachers and parents can often find their own cultural and linguistic messages losing power as they compete with global narratives—the passing phases of pop culture fashions. Pokemon replaced Power Rangers, which replaced Ninja Turtles, which replaced something else. Yet popular culture and the media are a part of children's cultures, and we need to depart from the idea that cultures and languages other than those of the mainstream are deficit. To be relevant, teachers and parents need to recruit, rather than ignore or erase the different interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes that children bring to learning (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, et al., 1996).

As discussed in this segment, how we see children will affect the way we teach. We may view children as empty vessels, natural, capricious, developing, or competent. At times, some or all of these views may exist simultaneously; at other times, one view may seem more relevant in certain circumstances or for particular reasons. Not only is our teaching affected by our views of childhood, it is also influenced by our views on art.

## **Ways of Seeing Art**

There is a great deal of confusion currently about where art fits into society and what function it serves beyond that of a salable commodity. Teachers need to consider what it is we are referring to when we speak of art and whether our art programs are designed to produce a certain type of art (e.g., self-expressive, representational, experimental, skilled). As discussed in the previous section, the ways of seeing the child might lead us to provide children with art activities that are, for example, fun, busy, exploratory, messy, highly structured, or completely child-centered—but is it art?

Here is another opportunity for another palimpsest to assist a reflecting on the value of art in young children's lives. As with our views of childhood, some ideas about art persist, some disappear, and others reappear to find favor in a different place or a different time. There are many reasons why art should be a core of the curriculum for young children.

Art is considered by some a fundamental biological need, a need that defines our existence and the human condition (Dissanayake, 1992). Those who hold this view will encourage children to appreciate beauty and aesthetics within their surroundings. Art should be valued "for art's sake" because it is considered an important means for self-expression—spontaneity, imagination, play, experimentation, and lack of inhibition are desirable components of making artworks—and for freedom of expression. Art is also valued as an emotional mode for communicating unconscious things otherwise unsayable (Feldman, 1996) and for enhancing "healthy" personalities. Art also enhances children's cognitive processes, involving children in problem solving, thinking, and using symbol systems to record their thoughts, ideas, and feelings. In many ways, art offers a form of spiritual awareness as well, revealing itself through the heart and intuition (Barthes, 1972) and embodied or somatic ways of learning.

When we view art as a distinct discipline, with a distinct body of knowledge that must be taught and mastered, we are not frightened to teach skills and techniques, as well as appreciation and art history. We will see art as an important discourse that should not be offered only to the special or talented, but as a universal and special way of making and communicating meaning, both at a personal level and in a broader sense as well. Art is viewed by others as an expression of culture, and a means of communicating about and between cultures, through links with the community. Opportunities to read and appreciate the lives of others are possible through art. Some consider art a conduit for understanding self in relation to others, a means for recognizing our interdependence as peoples, and a way for global unity and understanding (Eckersley, 1992). One aspect of teaching art is to bring the child's view, as depicted through their art, to a wider audience.

Our view of teaching art involves applying critical lenses to our ideas of art and teaching. In many ways, the application of critical analysis is similar to coming to grips with postmodern art. Postmodern art depicts life's confusions and fragmentations and subverts our ways of seeing—it makes us look again, to make the familiar appear strange. Our work with young children is about ways of seeing as well. It requires us to recognize how many influences have shaped our views of art, such as whether we consider art to be therapy, spirituality, a form of individual self-expression, a language, a cultural artifact, a discipline to be mastered, an expression of freedom, and an essential part of being human. Like the numerous views of childhood, each view of art holds truths, and each has implications for how art is best taught. Consequently, the teaching of art should also be viewed in relation to our ways of seeing the teacher and the meaning of teaching.

## **Ways of Seeing the Teacher**

What we decide to say to a child about his or her art, or what we choose to provide in the environment, will be contingent to some extent on a view of teaching and learning—a view of the role of the teacher in the education of children in and through art. What is considered "proper" art teaching is contingent on a number of factors, including our experience, our training, and the discourse of education (McArdle, 2001).

Current discourses of art education have been influenced by progressivism and democratic ideals, which include notions of child-centered and hands-on learning and freedom for the individual (Dewey, 1902, 1916; Tyler, 1993). Creativity and problem-solving skills are currently favored in the education

discourse in many countries (Eckersley, 1992; Fowler, 1996). Active discovery has become closely linked with play, and one of the enduring mantras in early childhood literature is that children learn through play (Berk, 1997; Katz, 1996; Perry & Irwin, 2000). Multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) have become an accepted conceptual framework for teachers' work, and many believe art should hold a privileged position within the curriculum. Current notions of a master/apprentice model of teaching position the teacher as protagonist, working alongside children who are pursuing self-determined projects (Malaguzzi, 1993).

Currently, art is seen as a language, a symbol system, a literacy (Gardner, 1983). The Reggio Emilia schools, where children's symbolic representations are read as "visible thinking," have become world renowned as a model for early childhood education (Edwards et al., 1994). In addition, influences of discipline-based art education (Eisner, 1988) outline a curriculum approach made up of four components: art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and art production. This takes art education beyond an ad hoc approach to the learning of a discrete discipline. The push for national standardization in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia has placed art within one of the key learning areas, and syllabus documents for art provide a framework for planning and enacting the art program. Within such frameworks, teaching and learning are seen to occur not only in schools, but also in galleries, museums, and other informal places of learning as sites for assisting young children's developing artistry. Here, learning occurs through interactions between children and objects, children and their teachers, and children and other children.

In spite of all of these influencing factors on our beliefs about art teaching, it is interesting that the issue of "freedom above discipline" remains a dominant discourse of art when compared to other curriculum areas such as literacy or numeracy. How is it that freedom of the individual is equated with noninterventive practices in art, but not in learning areas such as literacy or numeracy? For example, teachers place great importance on the child's acquisition of reading and mathematics skills, but are frightened to offer learning activities that enhance children's competencies in artistic areas (Spodek & Saracho, 1992). While most early childhood educators believe it is the right of every child to be taught literacy and numeracy skills, they may not be as concerned about the right of every child to be visually literate. Can a child have fun while learning the skills and techniques necessary to developing artistry? Can children be free to express their own thoughts and feelings through drawing, painting, or modeling with clay, if they have no artistic skills to enable them to articulate this?

Faced with such inconsistencies and contradictions in the field of art education, teachers can be excused for throwing their arms in the air and sticking to the "tried and true" practices they have come to know and with which they feel a degree of certainty (Kindler, 1996). Yet in our work with young children, we have a responsibility to consider, reflect, and live with the multiplicities of planning a visual arts program. It is part of our work to be informed about current thinking and make informed decisions about quality art programs. A recent study of exemplary art teachers showed that these teachers find ways to combine seemingly opposing messages about "proper" teaching—they blur the boundaries between natural unfolding and guided learning and between creativity and the training of skills and techniques (McArdle, 2001).

The following section describes how individual children can be viewed as competent beings who know lots of things already and are wondering about lots of other new things. Through art, children invite us into their thoughts by communicating through words, drawing, painting, clay, and a number of related "languages" to express these (Edwards et al., 1994). It is our role to provide children with rich experiences, good-quality materials, and skills that will help them be lifelong learners and lifelong thinkers. Such art experiences are not about: "Follow the directions, stick this on here and that on there, now color it in, and now doesn't that look pretty?" Children should be encouraged to be thinkers and

theorists, not merely learn to follow directions. Based on the children's ideas, we can prepare a structured art program that allows for the sharing of the power and responsibility and positions the children as artists and all that this view of children, art, and art teaching entails.

## **How We Can Assist Children's Learning in and through Art**

It is quite appropriate to assist children's learning in and through art and to ensure that children are equipped with the skills and techniques to enable them to express their own ideas better than they might do on their own. When we have a sound theoretical background and philosophical foundation for art education, we will be continually reflecting and revising what we do with young children. We will bring expertise to our work, provide plentiful and good quality resources, and plan the learning environment so that children will be enabled to learn within it. While syllabus documents can provide guidelines for content, skills, knowledge, techniques, and outcomes, we must ensure that the children remain at the center of the curriculum and that exploration, discovery, and play remain central to the child's experience.

Symbol making and symbol understanding are central to the program. Product-centered craft activities that use adult-designed templates will not allow children to develop and use symbolic representations. Likewise, art activities that change daily or weekly do not provide opportunities for children to consistently use core art media and processes for the purposes of symbolic development and meaning making. Hence, drawing, painting, and working with clay should be the core areas of our art programs and be offered daily, so that children come to understand and use these media for cognitive and expressive purposes. Other art media or forms of expression, such as collage, construction, printmaking, constructing, and textiles, also can enrich the program, but painting, drawing and claywork should be offered daily.

Learning in and through the visual arts involves participating with and understanding basic elements and principles of art. These provide a vocabulary for teachers and children and a way of helping both to talk about their own processes, products, and the works of other artists. Children's engagement with the forms of learning in art—drawing, painting, printing, constructing, modeling, and sculpting—all involve the use and understanding of the following elements and principles within the visual-spatial domain of artistic learning.

### **The Elements and Principles of the Visual Arts**

**Line:** Thick, thin, wavy, straight, soft, hard, vertical, horizontal, diagonal, radiating, jagged, parallel, angry, calm, happy, sad

**Shape:** Geometric, organic, rectangle, square, circle, round, angular, curvy, fluid, symmetrical, spiral

**Color:** Primary, secondary, complementary, warm, cool, light, dark, bright

**Texture:** Rough, smooth, bumpy, fuzzy, prickly, slippery

**Space:** Two-dimensional, three-dimensional, real illusions, foreground, middle ground, background, overlap. Space is related to compositional aspects within two-dimensional work, and form within three-dimensional work

**Structural Principles:** Unity, rhythm, proportion, design, balance, harmony, contrast, repetition

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