

Everything in My Hand: Reflecting on Meanings and Processes of Art in Early Childhood Settings

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This paper explores art practices in early childhood education and care. Drawing on the author's work as an early childhood educator and as a pedagogical facilitator working with educators and children, this paper challenges developmental perspectives of art as leading to particular learning outcomes. By presenting concepts of modern art and artists and using these as a lens through which to view children's art, the author suggests new approaches in thinking about children, materials, and art processes.

Art is an integral part of early childhood settings. We understand art as part of a "good" curriculum. Terms such as self-expression, problem solving, experimenting with colour, line, and shape, using tools, and taking risks are used in relation to what children "learn" from art experiences. Primary colours are offered so children will learn about colour mixing, and we expect children to represent what they know from experience, to be creative, and to have opportunities to explore materials of different textures, shapes, and sizes. Fine motor skills are part of an art experience as we offer different kinds of tools to manipulate (text paraphrased from a sign in a local childcare centre). Art is about what we think children should be learning.

But should art be about learning? Is art simply a means to a developmental goal related to skills? Are we truly opening spaces for creativity? What is the meaning of art?

I have been lucky to work with an *atelierista*, an artist and academic who works alongside educators and children in early years settings bringing new perspectives to art practice. We have spent long hours over many cups of tea discussing, reflecting on ideas of art, early childhood, and the meanings and values we hold. She offers concepts of art as inquiry, as a struggle to know a material or a process, to develop understandings. She speaks of how the materials, environment, light, sound, children, and adults all come together in different interactions and encounters. We talk of artists who work with a particular material for years, learning everything there is to know about it, testing limits, pushing boundaries.

As we talk, I think of the many children I have known who use materials in unexpected ways, the children who paint their arms

every day at the easel, the children who pour paint directly onto their paper, the ones who tear the paper and stack it in layers, the ones who seem to make messes . . . is it art?

Consider this:



Fig. 1 A table set with four small palettes of paint, four small brushes, and a variety of small squares of paper.



Fig. 2 A giant paper taped to the floor with shallow trays filled with paint placed around the perimeter

As we look at the resulting paintings, do we judge one form to be “better” than the other? Do we place more value on the neat, tidy representational picture than on the blobby, wet, swirly picture? In the first instance, the art making is collaborative; in the second, it is individual. Does art making need to have a product for each individual child? Is a collaborative work still art? How do the questions we ask frame how children think about their art? “What are you drawing?” “What is it?” These questions assume that the art is intended to be something. Sometimes this might be the case; however, sometimes the art might invite us to imagine our own meanings in response to the art piece. Vanessa Clark (2011) considers a different way of responding to children’s art:

What if, instead of focusing on the products of children’s artistic activity, we looked at art making as a process (Tarr, 1990)? We might notice how the child pushes the paintbrush into the paint and how the paint speaks back by globbing onto the bristles. We might notice children exploring by using their bodies as a canvas, feeling how the paint and bristles move over their skin. The collisions of different materials, such as paint, paintbrush, clay, fabric, and stone with the child’s body activate different potential explorations and movements. (p.24)

When we look to the artwork of artists, some genres involve performance pieces, such as action poetry, happenings, and fluxus where both artists and audience participate. These art forms have no product unless photos were taken during the performance. This absence of product raises the question, Does art making need to have a product? And further, does the product need to look a certain way to be valued? What informs our thinking as to what is valuable art?

Disagreements of what counts as art often take place within discussions of fine art and contemporary art. These discussions revolve around our values, and they have no definite answers. We can value representation through art, but we also have multiple values. Representation is not the only way to see art. However, in ECE we typically view children’s art through a developmental lens, looking, for example, at scribbling as a precursor to “real” art that is representational. How does this lens limit what we see? What might we see if we considered children’s art as an expressive language (Kind, 2010)? What are we missing when we only consider what the end product looks like?

In my collaboration with the atelierista (similar to an art studio teacher) we looked at the work of contemporary artists. We looked at the works of artists who cover many pages with a single charcoal mark, and artists who create assemblages from seemingly incongruous items. I went to galleries and saw art made of shoes and other common materials. These artists see materials differently than I do; they think with materials, they connect ideas and meanings to processes of art and art making in

creative, beautiful, unusual, disturbing, and wacky ways. And so do children.

Environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy is widely known for his environmental art using grasses, stones, ice, and many other materials. His work is impermanent, altered by time and the elements. He works with materials over many seasons, learning more each time he encounters them. He explains:

Repetition is very important. I return to the same places many, many times over. Each time I am shown a different aspect of it. I can learn an awful lot by that. The dead elm tree I work on is one of many elms in this very small woodland, most of which have died through the Dutch elm disease. There is one tree that fell into a stream and then into a bog on the other side, so it revived and has become very, very vigorous. Because of the place it’s in, that tree is where [the leaves turn] the most intense yellow. Each year I work with that yellow of that leaf. (The Scotsman, 2011, para. 2)

We have all observed children who are drawn to particular materials: the toddler who moves straight to the paint every day, the 3-year-old who always carries a handful of sticks, the 5-year-old who covers pages and pages of paper with drawings. Just as Andy Goldsworthy continues to work with the yellow of the leaf, perhaps these children are learning all they can from their chosen material.

In early years settings, offering different materials to children is seen as leading to cognitive and social development. Through the use of clay or paint, children are thought to develop higher thinking skills, develop analytical skills by expressing opinions on what they like, and learn spatial acuity (The Task Force on Children’s Learning and the Arts: Birth to Age Eight & Goldhawk, 1998).

Viewing children and art through this developmental lens does not invite us to think about children encountering, acting with, and reacting to materials. It does not acknowledge that materials have a force, a presence, that they contribute to the meaning of the experience.

Consider this:

A table is set with paper, small bowls of paint, brushes and small cups of water. Four girls approach the table and begin mixing water and paint and applying it to the paper. Kaylin takes some paper towel from a nearby shelf, folds it, and dips it into the water. She squeezes the excess water out, unfolds it, and places it on her paper. She applies black paint to the wet paper towel, folds it again, and dips it into the water. She repeats this process over and over.



Fig. 3 A table is set with paper, small bowls of paint, brushes and small cups of water.

When I set up the table with paint and water and paper, I did not anticipate the addition of paper towels. Kaylin, however, had a relationship with paper towels. Every day when she washed her hands, she dipped paper towels into the handwashing tub, squeezing, floating, pressing the towel onto the adjacent wall to watch the bubbles and water stream down. So adding paper towels to paint was part of her process of making meaning, of dialogue, of creation. Kaylin may agree with Andy Goldsworthy when he states: "It's not enough for me to just look at something. I don't want to be a spectator, I want to be a participant. I don't understand something until I've worked with it and actually made something out of it" (The Scotsman, 2011, para. 2).

Georgia is a quiet girl, and because I only visit her class once a week, we have not said much to one another. On this day we were outside. I had my camera, and I was inviting children to take photos. Georgia was picking some flowers and I asked if she would like to take a photo of them. She shook her head, no, but held out her hand, wordlessly inviting me to take a picture of the flowers she held. I took the photo and showed her. Georgia then put some

grass in her hand and held it out for me. Again I took a photo. She picked up a rock and I photographed it. Georgia continued to find materials and I continued to photograph them in her hand until we had 59 photos. As we scrolled through the photos together, Georgia nodded, looked at me and said, "Everything in my hand."

The medium of the camera "invoked a particular way of thinking" (Kind, 2010, p.124), inviting engagement with the natural materials Georgia found in the yard. The materials, the camera, Georgia, and I connected, opening possibilities for new thinking, for seeing materials in unexpected ways, for engaging with one another. Georgia and I, the materials, and the camera were entwined. Meaning was made within the entwinement, and it would not have been possible if any of the threads of entwinement had been absent.



Fig 4. "Everything in my hand."

When we think of art as an encounter, as a language of expression and inquiry, and of materials as inviting particular engagements, where do we go? How does this kind of thinking inform practice?

Perhaps it means presenting materials in ways that invite exploration, where there is not a prescribed "way." Perhaps it

means stopping and observing, noticing how the consistency of the paint pulls at a paintbrush, discovering the sound of a fist slapping against clay, the stickiness of glue on fingers.

Perhaps it means offering one colour of paint and paying attention to the exploration that emerges. Perhaps it means offering that one colour for an entire week to see how the exploration deepens.

Or perhaps it means presenting collage materials in new ways, arranging a table with only white materials, or only round materials. Maybe it means putting the materials in small bowls, or arranging them directly on the table, or inviting arrangements with no glue.

Maybe it means thinking of “encounters” rather than “activities.” Perhaps it means talking less and observing more. We might find that we see differently, create openings for the unexpected, make spaces for possibilities of expression and processes. We may find we are led to new questions and new ways of thinking about children and art.

References

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In collaboration with *Reggio Children*, there will be a Canadian Study Week in Reggio Emilia in the Spring of 2015.

Watch for details
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