

Extending Art Experiences in the Preschool Classroom

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Since art experiences offered in the preschool classroom are typically confined to activities carried out at the worktable or easel (painting, modelling, etc.), it is apparent that most teachers of young children find it unnecessary, or even inadvisable, to extend these activities beyond the limits of the child's own work. In addition, it is often assumed that 3- and 4-year-olds do not respond aesthetically to art, and that discussing works of art with preschoolers is therefore inappropriate. However, it is our experience that even very young children do benefit from exposure to art examples. In the following paper we examine various aspects of this question, suggest that there is a need to reappraise the scope of preschool art, and offer suggestions for implementing an extended art curriculum.

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Etant donné que les expériences d'art offertes dans les groupes préscolaires se réduisent strictement à des activités effectuées sur la table de travail ou sur le chevalet (peinture, modelage, etc.), il semble que la plupart des éducatrices considèrent non nécessaire, ou même déconseillent d'étendre ces activités au-delà des limites du travail de chaque enfant. De plus, souvent on pense que les enfants de 3 ou 4 ans ne répondent pas à l'art de façon esthétique, et qu'il devient donc inadéquat de parler d'oeuvres d'art à ces enfants. Cependant, notre expérience démontre que même les enfants très jeunes bénéficient d'être exposés à des exemples d'art. Nous examinons, dans ce travail, divers aspects de la question; nous croyons qu'il est nécessaire de réévaluer la portée de l'art préscolaire, et offrons des idées pour l'implantation d'un curriculum d'art plus large.

Puesto que las experiencias ofrecidas en los grupos preescolares se limitan típicamente a actividades ejecutadas en mesas de trabajo o atriles (pintura, modelaje, etc.) parece ser que gran parte de las educadoras de párvulos consideran innecesario, o incluso no aconsejable, extender estas actividades más allá de los límites del propio trabajo del niño. Además, se supone que los niños de 3 y 4 años no responden estéticamente al arte y que por lo tanto resulta inapropiado conversar de obras de arte con ellos. Sin embargo, nuestra experiencia nos demuestra que incluso niños muy pequeños se benefician al estar expuestos a ejemplos de arte. En este trabajo examinamos diversos aspectos relacionados con el tema. Sugerimos que es necesario reevaluar la extensión del arte infantil y se ofrecen ideas para implementar un curriculum de arte más amplio.

Background

Art programs for young children in North America have traditionally had their origins in two distinct educational philosophies which can be described as teacher-centered and child-centered (Fisher, 1978). The teacher-centered approach concentrates on instruction in factual knowledge and basic skills, and is evident in teaching manuals such as *Public School Methods* (Hughes, Scott, McMurry, Claxton, McCloskey, & Clarke, 1913) which includes lessons for making lanterns, valentines, and Easter

baskets--examples of which can still be seen in preschool classes today. The child-centered approach has its roots in the educational philosophy of Dewey and the Progressive Movement (Eisner, 1972) which stressed that children should be allowed to express themselves freely in art without teacher intervention. This philosophy had an obvious influence on later educators such as Viktor Lowenfeld whose writings emphasized the importance of creativity and the role art can play in the total development of the child (Lowenfeld and Brittain, 1975).

In the child-centered approach ad-

vocated by Lowenfeld, the teacher's role is to stimulate the child's expression through presentation and discussion of a topic or theme followed by an activity such as drawing or painting. Based on an assumption that children's artistic development is an innate unfolding process that requires only encouragement and little instruction in the early years, the teacher does not teach the child representational techniques, but may encourage the child to further explore a material. The teacher may also encourage the child to discuss his own work from a personal experience point of view, usually in the form of story-telling.

It can be argued that strict adherence to either one of these approaches is too limiting since teacher-centered programs might fail to include opportunities for children to engage in exploratory and self-expressive art activities, while child-centered programs might fail to provide the visual vocabulary or framework necessary for adequate self-expression, or fail to place artistic expression within children's cultural context leaving them without an understanding of their cultural heritage.

In practice the two approaches may coexist in the same program. The teacher-centered components, likely to be labelled as crafts or art-related activities (such as sewing), will involve direct instruction and close supervision by the teacher, who at other times may encourage children to explore materials and techniques in a manner consistent with the child-centered approach to programming.

The Art-Centered Approach

Since the mid-1960s art educators have become increasingly dissatisfied with art programs which remain focused solely on studio, or art-making activities,

and by the late 1960s art programs containing components designed to teach elementary school children about art history and art criticism were being advocated (Hurwitz & Madeja, 1977). This trend has sifted downwards to programs for kindergarten and preschool children, and art educators (including Eisner, 1968; Fisher, 1978; McFee & Degge, 1977) have increasingly advocated the inclusion of an approach which gives attention to the study of artistic heritage and development of children's aesthetic responses through exposure to examples of fine art (as well as architecture and the applied arts). Laura Chapman (1978) particularly has urged the use of this art-centered approach at the preschool level and emphasizes the need for adult art to be shown in the classroom. This approach does not exclude art-making from its curriculum but integrates art-making with experiences in looking and talking about art, and provides opportunities for children to make cognitive connections between their work, the work of adult artists, and the role art plays in society. The art-centered approach is a blending of the positive aspects of each earlier form of instruction. Retaining a developmental approach, knowledge about art is introduced through short discussions and multi-sensory experiences, allowing children opportunities to form personal conclusions about works of art (Stockrocki, 1984). Stockrocki has suggested that "any activity that stimulates young children's natural curiosity about art works has possibilities as a first step in their aesthetic growth towards perceiving aesthetic characteristics" (p. 13). At the same time children retain an opportunity to be involved in artistic creation appropriate to their developmental level. Through discussions about their own work, the teacher can introduce art vocabulary which will allow children to

more fully express themselves in discussions about art (Schirmmacher, 1986; Sharp, 1976).

It should be noted that introducing art works to children is not an entirely new approach. During the late 1880s and on into the 1920s art appreciation took the form of studying "great masterpieces" to help children recognize and value beauty as well as develop intellectually and morally (Eisner, 1972; Jones, 1974). With the rise of the Progressive Movement, however, the importance of introducing children to adult art declined, perhaps because educators found it to be increasingly incompatible with the scope of their child-centered approach which tended to view children's own art as an act of personal self-expression, unrelated to aesthetic values of the adult art world. Children's art was viewed as something to be valued and preserved for its child-like quality. Indeed, Kellogg (1970) warned that through repeated exposure to works of adult art, the young child might be unduly influenced by conventions used by adults for representing objects, which she thought could be detrimental to the child's own creativity and self-expression.

One obstacle to acceptance of this new approach to art education at the preschool level is the fact that most art educators concern themselves with children in elementary school. A search through the literature indicates that over the past twenty years only a very few art educators (Chapman, 1978; Douglas & Schwartz, 1967; Stockrocki, 1984; Taunton, 1983) have addressed themselves to this broader view of art education for the preschooler, and little research has actually been translated into classroom practices. In addition, there is only a limited amount of research in the area of children's aesthetic response. In review-

ing this research, Taunton (1982) has stated that although there are "discrepancies and neglected areas in the literature, a view of young children as having definite, albeit emergent, responsive capabilities in the arts is surfacing and needs acknowledgement" (p. 93). In this article Taunton has pointed out that much of the research in the area of children's responses to art works (usually paintings) has suffered from lack of consistency and clarity of definitions for words such as "aesthetic response," "realism" and "style." She suggested that much of the research lacks a firm theoretical framework on which to organize the information gained. She also discussed concerns about methodology, including the dependability of analyzing the content of young children's responses, a procedure which could be particularly unreliable when the responses of preschool children are assessed in comparison to those of older age levels, which are likely to be less idiosyncratic and more readily expressed.

Thus, lack of preschool art curricula and inconsistencies in the literature may discourage the preschool teacher from attempting to translate the art-centered approach into effective classroom practices. A helpful point of view can be found in Hurwitz and Madeja's suggestion that we are able to teach children to observe (and thus develop the means to respond critically to art) similarly to the way that we can teach them to read (Hurwitz & Madeja, 1977). By applying this analogy to learning at the preschool level, we might infer that in the same way that the young child is starting to recognize words (though not necessarily the same words as other children's), he is also beginning to observe and respond aesthetically to art. Just as he is influenced by seeing others reading and discussing books, and may himself

treasure certain books and memorize their texts, he can be influenced by adults' attitudes towards art and can have favorite paintings or other kinds of art works of his own. And just as we make attractive, interesting books available to the child in order to encourage him to read, we must also make accessible to him appropriate examples of art for him to view and discuss.

Showing Adult Art

There is some conflicting evidence in the literature about the art preferences of young children. According to Lark-Horovitz, Lewis and Luca (1973), children's preferences are influenced by the use of familiar media, and by easily recognized forms and images such as animals and families. Taunton (1980), in examining the effect of age on preferences for subject matter, realism and spatial depth in reproductions of paintings, found that subject matter was the strongest factor in 4-year-olds preferences, and suggested that "the preferences for young children for representational art relate more to what is pictured in the art work than to how things are pictured" (p. 49). However, other researchers have found support for young children's preference for bright colors and less representational works. Lovano (1971) has suggested that they will respond more favorably to paintings with bright colors, while Dean (1973) has suggested that they will respond to modern rather than traditional work. Gardner, Winner and Kircher (1975) found that 4-year-olds, are likely to prefer abstract work which focuses on color and design and where the subject matter can be imagined (Gardner, et al.). Taunton (1984) has summed up some pre-1970 research in children's art preferences as "children between 4 and 6

years of age prefer representational and brightly colored painting reproductions of familiar and pleasant subject matter. Consequently, it seems that appropriate work for discussion may represent a range of styles, including examples of twentieth century art trends such as realism, impressionism, expressionism, and cubism. It should be selected, not only on the basis of its possible appeal to the children, but also to demonstrate the artist's use of a particular medium or art element (color, line, texture, shape), or expression of an idea. It might be shown in conjunction with picture books or museum postcards in order that comparisons can be made on thematic interpretation and other aspects of the work. Themes such as animals, mothers and children, and household scenes have been depicted by artists of different periods and styles, and comparisons can help children to see diversity in artistic expression.

As in other preschool art activities, the teacher's role in talking about adult art is concerned with facilitating the child's experiences. Although young children may respond to works on a very personal level, rooted in their associations with the subject-matter (D'Onofrio & Nodine, 1981), Taunton (1983) has demonstrated that children can engage in discussions about art which incorporate these aspects of art criticism, and Stockrocki (1984) cites examples of preschool children's verbal, non-verbal and metaphorical responses to encounters with art works. Taunton (1983) suggests that the teacher use questioning strategies guided by the process of art criticism described by Feldman (description of the work, analysis of the relationship of the parts, interpretation of the meaning of the work, and judgment of the work). Framing the discussion, but not limiting it to this formal structure,

the teacher engages in an interactive discussion with the children as a means to encourage young children to explore various aspects of art works and express their reactions. It is important that the teacher refrain from intruding into the discussion with critical expertise which could deter the child's own responses. The teacher can ask such questions as "What do you think is happening in this picture? What do you see? What colors do you see?" to encourage children to look for details and information in the work. These questions can be followed by open-ended discussion to encourage imaginative responses using the vocabulary and information already gained. Children may also respond to the emotion they feel from the work and can look at ways in which the artist used different elements to create a mood or feeling. The works discussed should be available for children to examine at their leisure, either independently or with friends.

A Pilot Study

Lack of vocabulary has been considered a stumbling block for young children in talking about art. However, during the past few years, when testing 3- and 4-year-old classes at the University of British Columbia Child Study Centre, we have generally found that even the youngest children in this population enter preschool with an adequate vocabulary to begin brief art discussions. Using the test model of Castrup, Ain, and Scott (1972) for "correct responses to art vocabulary test items" (p. 65), we noted that children could correctly identify examples of colors, shapes and textures at the time of the pre-test, but samples of various lines (thick, thin, curved, straight, light, dark) were often missed, perhaps because children had not heard words used to

describe linear qualities in other contexts. These results were consistent with inner-city and suburban 4- and 5-year-olds in the Castrup study. In this study 75% or higher of both groups of children could identify colors other than grey and white, 75% of the children could identify a rough texture, and 85% of the children could identify circles and triangles. However, many of these children had difficulty identifying linear qualities, as less than 50% in either of their sample groups could identify light, thick or thin lines.

While test scores had improved when children were re-evaluated four months later, the increase was particularly noticeable for words about line following a two-week class unit exploring artists' use of line. In this unit children moved to music, creating lines with their bodies, looked at pictures selected for their linear qualities, and were encouraged to use lines in their own art work which included such activities as collage with straws, stir sticks, thin colored paper cut into zig-zag shapes, curves and straight lines and drawing with markers having various widths. The total score now rose from 54% "correct responses" to 90% "correct responses." When the teachers first presented art reproductions to children, most were at first unwilling to make spontaneous observations about them. As one teacher said, "They don't know yet that art is something you can talk about." However, once they understood that the teacher was interested in what they had to say about the work, they contributed many comments to the discussion. After the unit on lines, the teacher reported that children answered questions about the art with more expression and often volunteering additional information about the work's subject-matter. In examining a postcard reproduction of Van

Gogh's painting, "Thatched Cottages at Cordeville," one child commented on the prickly lines in the picture. Other children mentioned curvy and bumpy lines. When asked, "How does this picture make you feel?" (a question which children in the pre-test took literally and stroked the reproduction) one child commented, "It was scary because it's night time" and another said "Happy, cause I've got a warm house too." Older children would sometimes comment on the mood of the work as well, saying "It feels cold," for example, or "That's a quiet painting." We also noticed that 2-year-olds using the classroom would often stop to look at the art displayed. One small boy was especially attracted to a group of paintings showing horses, examining them closely again and again.

Curriculum Integration

While we believe that this type of exposure to art helps preschoolers to make gains in appropriate use of vocabulary, a more significant result may be the increase observed in their apparent enjoyment of art. This result may occur more predictably when art is shown in relation to other areas of the curriculum, so that it is experienced as an integral and frequent aspect of preschool education rather than a special and separate activity.

Looking at art with children can be readily integrated into different curricular themes and areas of study. For example, a unit on the farm or harvest can include showing Pieter Brueghel's "The Haymaking." Studies of animals can include samples of art such as Durer's "Hare" and Franz Marc's "Red Horses." Chagall, Picasso, and Renoir have all painted pictures on a circus theme. It may also be possible to bring original art works as well as reproduc-

tions into the classroom, depending on the availability of art from parents, local artists and craftspeople, perhaps, or from a nearby art museum. Field trips to local galleries and museums, or an artist's studio will also provide children with opportunities to respond to original art. Illustrations in picture books provide another important resource. This art is not only easily accessible to children in the classroom library, but when it is shown to them at storytime, it is only a small step further to examine the illustrations and discuss how the artist communicates ideas and feelings through visual language. The potential of this type of activity, which interrelates verbal, auditory and visual learning, and includes imaginative responses, should be recognized as a meaningful way of extending children's art experiences within the preschool program, since the early childhood years may indeed be the optimum time to begin a lifetime enjoyment of art.

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