Art at the Heart: Creating a Meaningful Art Curriculum for Young Children

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As a studio art teacher at a small preschool in Los Angeles, I work with a team of 10 teachers to create an art curriculum for young children that goes beyond simply offering activities. All quality preschools offer crayons and markers, playdough and tempera paint. What is an art experience really, though? Is it the production of art and crafts objects or experimentation with art materials? These are especially important questions in my school, which is inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach. My official title is *atelierista*, and the most important aspect of my role is to develop children's ability to express their thoughts and feelings artistically.

Many artists and art educators find it useful to think of art as a behavior rather than a product (Dissanayake 1988; Simpson 1998; Simpson et al. 1998). When we think of art as encompassing the human tendency to beautify, organize, make special, construct meaning, and express oneself aesthetically, art curriculum changes. Art becomes not just a product to take home; it embraces nearly every experience in the classroom, from building with blocks to creating a composition on the light table.

Constructing meanings about ourselves and the world through symbolic languages is an essential part of the human experience (Bruner 1990). When the human beings in Lascaux, France, painted graceful and haunting animals on the walls of a cave roughly 20,000 years ago, they were constructing meaning about their experiences as part of the complex web of nature. How can we best cultivate children's artistic behaviors and support meaning making with materials? This article explores some of the practices my colleagues and I have found helpful in elevating our pedagogy of art.

Begin with the children

Meaning making begins with the individual children in your school, classroom, or studio. When you begin to wonder who they are and what may be inspiring or compelling to them, then you design curriculum around that curiosity, your job becomes easier and more interesting. You, as an educator, become a researcher studying those children. Rather than simply delivering curriculum, you begin to engage in the playful dance of pedagogy. A brief example will introduce the benefits of studying children's interests.

Recently, our 3-year-olds were playing many social dramatic games that were "smooky" (spooky). These involved wolf-dogs, dark forests, and lots of death. This sort of social dramatic play is a wonderful shared experience that offers an important window into the children's dreams, hopes, and fears. It is rife with symbol and metaphor—prime material for an art-making experience, or provocation. The teachers and I wondered what all this darkness was about. To explore their stories, we gave the children materials that would help uncover the meaning they were constructing through this play. Dark paper with oil pastels, evocative loose parts (such as sticks and pine needles), and a spooky palette of tempera paints inspired them to organize and express their big ideas around darkness.

When you find the core of an interest, a *big idea*, you can use the curriculum to challenge children's intellectual development and support their curiosity. For instance, a group's interest in dinosaurs could be about power, extinction, friendship, aggression, or many other big ideas. The key is to discover the academic connections and social-emotional core of the interest through conversation and observation. Exploring the children's smooky play, we found that the big ideas were death, aloneness, and losing one's parents. We met these big ideas with multiple opportunities for symbolic play and storytelling through sand trays and larger scale dramatic play. While this exploration was short-lived, others call for long-term investigations through multiple lenses and a variety of materials. The following more elaborate example illustrates how teachers can facilitate creative exploration over several weeks on topics that are central to children's development.

When our 4- and 5-year-olds became completely absorbed in a dying butterfly on our play yard, I scrapped the art experience I had planned for the day. The children's emotional response to seeing the fragile creature suffering was palpable as they wondered whether it was in fact dying or just sick. The children observed the butterfly and drew it with oil pastels as they discussed what they saw: "It's dying!" said Evan. "But I can see it moving," noted Luciana. Later, after more observation, the children concluded, "Its wings are broken, but its body is healthy."

A week later, the children were still talking about the butterfly. When asked whether they would like to observe caterpillars, the children were enthusiastic. They already knew a great deal about the butterfly life cycle. We asked what they might see, and the children made a list:

- We might see them hatch
- We might see them dead
- We might see the egg crack
- We might see a caterpillar going into a cocoon
- We might see one turn into a butterfly

Through conversation and observation, the teachers and I concluded that the big idea at the core of their interest in butterflies was *change*. This curiosity motivated the children to continue their exploration into the wondrous transformations that make up a butterfly's life. They explored all facets of their curiosity through visual media, such as charcoal, acrylic paint, and mixed media. Interestingly, this all happened at a time when the children were also anticipating a big change in their lives: they were preparing to leave our school to go to kindergarten.

Backward design

Pursuing children's emerging interests is one way to develop inspiring art experiences that help children make meaning. Another approach is to begin with a clear educational goal. *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe 2005) is a thought-provoking book that gives teachers the tools to plan a curriculum around the understandings that they want the children to develop. By beginning with the intention rather than the activity, the curriculum goes to the heart of the big idea that the classroom community is exploring. It assists teachers in avoiding "activity-focused teaching" (3).

At first glance, this might seem the antithesis of a responsive curriculum. How can a teacher follow the children's interests while at the same time beginning with the end learning in mind? At our school, we have found that even when responding to children's interests and motivations, it is immensely helpful to be clear with yourself and your coteachers about what knowledge and skills children need to develop and what the children's true interests are. With both in mind, intentional teachers can provide a well-rounded education that is anchored to big ideas and responsive to core interests. In the case of the butterfly investigation, we kept in mind that the children's core interest was the dramatic changes that define a butterfly's life. This understanding prevented us from pursuing activities that are "handson without being minds on" (Wiggins & McTighe 2005, 21), such as creating butterflies out of construction paper and clothespins, that would not have assisted them in constructing their understanding about change.

Intentional teachers can provide a well-rounded education that is responsive to core interests.

When planning our initial provocation with art materials, my colleagues and I begin with the end in mind. An example of this is a provocation using tempera paints that one of our interns was preparing for the classroom of 2- and 3-year-olds. She poured jars of red, blue, and yellow paint and was bringing them to the art table when she was stopped by Dewi, our mentor teacher. Dewi asked what her intention was in offering those particular colors. What did she anticipate would happen when the 2-year-olds painted with the three primary colors? After some discussion, the intern understood that the result would almost certainly

be a series of brown paintings. If that were her intention, Dewi explained, then her provocation would likely be successful. If her intention was for the children to discover the magic of secondary colors, however, she might consider introducing only two primary colors at a time. By observing the children who participated in this painting provocation and noticing how they used the materials, the teachers were then able to plan the next provocation to build on the children's curiosity and extend their learning.

Ask provocative questions

When the right materials are combined with the right questions, children are inspired to use the materials for real, personal, and valuable work. "The best questions push us to the heart of things—the essence" (Wiggins & McTighe 2005, 107). Inquiry-based teaching and learning asks students to contemplate big questions. Many of these questions might never be answered; but through the process of inquiry, our classroom communities become research laboratories—exciting places of wonder and discovery. By pondering the big questions, children become artists, philosophers, poets, and scientists.

At our school, the teachers and I compose a *wonder question* before we arrange an art provocation. It reflects either our questions as educators or the questions that the children might consider as they work. Wonder questions are visibly posted near the art experience or provocation. This practice assists us in creating provocations that are intentional and speak to the children's real curiosity. A provocation with fat oil pastels and large sheets of black paper is interesting and invites playful collaboration. But when the same provocation is embedded in thoughtfully designed art education, it stretches children's thinking.

In preparation for a visit to the Watts Towers—a series of 17 sculptures in a Los Angeles park—I combined the oil pastels and black paper with the question "What might we discover on our visit to the Watts Towers?," creating an opportunity for the children to imagine and make predictions. Wonder questions help children experience art making as a way of expressing their thoughts and emotions, which should be a central goal of art education: "Creating art provides a forum to delve into ideas and material that might not readily be expressed" (Polster 2010, 21).

In our investigation of butterflies, we often posted questions that asked the children to contemplate change. A loose-parts provocation with natural materials asked, "Where do butterflies go when it rains?" A provocation with charcoal and paper asked, "How do our caterpillars know when to come out of their chrysalises?" When facilitating an art experience with the children, I present the wonder question at the beginning of group time, often starting the experience with a discussion about that question. As the children work, they usually naturally revisit the question through dialogue. For instance, I might begin with something as simple as "Friends, yesterday you were talking about where different animals live, and it inspired me to create this provocation about habitats using this clay. I've included these plastic animals and I thought you could make habitats out of clay for them. I've also printed the question 'Where do these animals call home?' to inspire you as you work."

Of course, our questions do not always inspire the children. It is not uncommon for a question to fall flat or to create confusion. Sometimes the children completely disregard our questions to pursue their own play, theories, or ideas. In these instances, we step back to notice what *is* interesting to them. If we ask the children to contemplate how it feels to fly, and they instead tell a story about a butterfly family, we have not failed—we have learned a bit more about the children's interests and motivations.

Materials that support meaning making

When planning a meaningful art curriculum, it is essential to choose materials that will best express the children's thoughts, ideas, and stories. Whether you are the art specialist, studio art teacher, or classroom teacher, be aware that the materials you choose for an initial provocation or for a long-term project will influence whether the children feel successful and heard. Even the most skillful adult artist would have a difficult time expressing himself or herself with only red, blue, and yellow crayons; imagine the difficulty for a 3-yearold child whose skills are still emerging. I try to choose materials that are aesthetically pleasing, responsive to the children's ideas, and open ended.

Aesthetically pleasing materials

The desire to construct meaning with visual materials is often inspired by the materials themselves. Beautiful, interesting, and appealing materials call out to be touched, used, and played with. A colorful array of tempera paints in glass jars is an invitation that inspires both stories and meaning. A tray of smooth pebbles asks to be sorted. Young children have the capacity to recognize and respond to order, repetition, complexity, and subtlety. "Human infants have been shown to prefer interesting and

complex patterns to simple ones; they actively seek them out and will often 'work' to have them" (Dissanayake 1988, 77). The aesthetic experience—the ability to absorb and be moved by order, grace, rhythm, and loveliness—is essential to our humanity (Vecchi 2010). Young children, like the rest of us, are made whole by environments that feed the human hunger for beauty.

Responsive materials

Materials that respond to pressure, touch, and gesture are wonderful conduits for self-expression. When planning an art experience, I often lean toward materials that will show gradation and texture. Clay, for instance, is finer grained than playdough and allows greater opportunities for making marks, texture, lines, and fingerprints. Colored pencils and crayons show gradation and texture, making them more versatile than markers, which have an on/off quality. This is not to say that markers or playdough have no place in a preschool program; they might be just the thing for a certain provocation or idea. Their prevalence, however, needs to be questioned. Responsive materials have a unique vocabulary that needs to be understood and embodied before children are able to use them as an expressive language. Clay must be pounded, kneaded, flattened, bunched, and made both slippery and dry in order to understand it well enough to create a finely detailed face. Keep in mind that children need many hours of experimentation (including messing around) before they are able to use any material to its fullest capability.

Open-ended materials

"Look! These are helicopters!" 3-year-old Joey exclaimed about the plastic recycled pieces I'd set out for a looseparts collage. Earlier in the day, his classmate Griffin had used the same plastic bits to represent traps in his art piece—and several weeks earlier Lilah constructed a robot from them. Loose parts, such as sticks, pebbles, dried plants, and recycled materials, give children opportunities to make meaning visually, regardless of their current skills. Our school is fortunate to be stocked with a wide variety of loose parts that are accessible to the children at all times. These materials can be played with, arranged, and re-arranged; they also hold metaphoric potential. At our school, we rarely use glue with these materials. Instead, we give the children a foundation—such as paper, cardboard, or fabric—on which to arrange the materials. The ambiguity of these real and interesting materials holds much potential for the children to construct a variety of meanings.

Continual reflection

Reflective practice is essential for a meaningful art curriculum. When children and teachers revisit materials, processes, or experiences, they create a "spiral curriculum, each encounter giving access to increasingly complex possibilities" (Simpson 1998, 117). In our culture, we often talk about learning from our experiences, but experiences cannot be learned from or integrated until they have been reflected on (Dewey [1938] 1997). Especially with young children, experiences may need to be repeated, expanded, discussed, and reflected on over time for big ideas to take root. At our school, we cultivate reflective practices in a variety of ways that include both teachers and students. Children reflect on their experiences at the end of small-group investigations and again when they share their experiences during reflection while meeting in a large group. Teachers also need to construct meaning through reflection (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998; Vecchi 2010). As a teaching team, when we revisit our classroom experiences to explore what was exhilarating, refreshing, difficult, or ineffective, we are able to develop a meaningful narrative about our teaching practice. We have established a culture of documentation that allows us to revisit classroom learning moments, events, and dynamics. Each teaching team has a small tablet to take photos and video and make voice recordings; it is used during small group activities. The collected classroom moments are used for collaborative reflection among teachers. This constant search and research allows us to respond appropriately to the children's needs, interests, knowledge and skills, play, and creativity.

Conclusion

What if art were not something tacked on at the end of a classroom experience—what if it were the experience itself? When making meaning takes its place at the center of art education, early childhood classrooms and studios become places of wonder, curiosity, and joy. The art-making process is one of "inquiry and engagement, research and experimentation, trial and error, risk taking, reflection and reevaluation, and growth and discovery" (Polster 2010, 20). Children have a right to art. Through

meaningful art experiences, children can think more deeply about what is important to them. They can construct strong images of themselves as competent explorers and learners. Art is essential to our humanity; to deny our human instinct to beautify, organize, and create meaning is to deny ourselves. The next time you set up materials for an art experience in your classroom, ask yourself who the children are and what will inspire them about the experience. Be curious about the children: ask yourself how they might use the materials and whether these materials are the best choices to support, extend, and express their ideas. Art in early childhood can encompass every aspect of thought, wonder, and learning in a classroom. Look for ways to create meaning in the dramatic play area, in the science center, and in the construction area, as well at the art table. While this takes extra thought and attention, it will be worth your while as you and your students begin the exciting dialogue of discovery.

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