Discoveries from a Reggio-Inspired Classroom: Meeting Developmental Needs through the Visual Arts

Educators from Reggio Emilia encourage us to see children as competent and strong (Rinaldi, 2001). They persuade educators to acknowledge the children’s use of the visual arts as a “language,” especially during project work. Inspired by the philosophy from Reggio Emilia, I initiated a 10-week ethnographic study of young children in a Reggio-inspired preschool classroom.

Through this study, I gained an understanding of why these children spontaneously created artworks and gained answers to my question: What are young children’s purposes for creating in the visual arts? A further review of literature revealed that my findings connected with Bendtro and Brokenleg’s (2001) model called the “Circle of Courage.” This connection enhanced my understanding of the children’s purposes for generating visual artworks. This article will provide an overview of project work and the Circle of Courage framework and an explanation of how the children’s purposes, discovered during this study, fit this framework.

Project Approach

The project approach is based on John Dewey’s work (1916/1966) and his belief that curriculum should be grounded in children’s experiences. While Lillian Katz and Sylvia Chard wrote the first edition of their book Engaging Children’s Minds: The Project Approach in 1989, it was not until American educators began to learn about the preschools in Reggio Emilia and their use of projects with very young children in the 1990s that the project approach became a prevalent curriculum for preschool children.

A project is an in-depth study of a topic that is of interest to a particular group of children (Katz & Chard, 2000). During project work teachers closely observe and interact with children to discover their interests, questions, and misconceptions. A study might be generated from the children’s interest in worms found on the playground, or an ambulance they watched pass by their school. The children explore the topic for an extended period of time—as long as their interest lasts. Teachers offer support and guidance by bringing in books on the topic, experts from the community, and planning field site visits. They have daily discussions with the children about the topic to facilitate a growing understanding of the subject matter. Curriculum is not preplanned, but intentionally emerges day to day as teachers review what the children are learning, what interests them and new ideas that have emerged. The project approach employs children’s natural inclinations to use the arts as a language for exploring a topic (Malaguzzi, 1998). Drawing, painting, modeling, and construction are all used to deepen the children’s understanding of the topic and allow them to represent their understandings in concrete ways. Malaguzzi, the former director of the schools in Reggio Emilia, described the visual arts as one of the “hundred languages” of children (1998).

The project in this study began when the teacher noticed a group of children looking closely at a tree stump. She talked to the children about the stump and recorded their understandings and

Figure 1. Bridget’s drawing of the flowering tree branch containing tent worms. Recording as a method of remembering.
I wanted to understand the children's purposes for creating artworks within the context of project work. In the role of participant observer I videotaped, photographed, and dialogued with the children as they worked at the art center and other areas of the classroom. The study took place in a metropolitan area of the Midwest. The 16 children in the study represented a diverse population in age (3- to 6-year-olds), learning needs (five children identified with special needs), nationality (three English language learners), and socio-economic population (federally funded tuition for eight children).

Questions. Tree branches and pieces of bark were brought into the classroom for the children to explore. The project expanded to include things that live in trees when a parent contributed a flowering branch that contained a nest of tent worms. When a naturalist visited the classroom, she talked to the children about trees and answered their questions, which ranged from "How long do trees live?" to "Does money grow on trees?" A visit to the local city garden included time to draw and experience trees. The children climbed low branches, hid in clustered trees, and worked on bark rubbings. Throughout the project the children created homes for caterpillars; detailed drawing of plants, birds, and butterflies; and planned a party for the birds and butterflies. The classroom climate supported a creative spirit and the children's self-initiated artwork was prolific.

Developmental Needs of Children and the Circle of Courage

In today's standards-based system of education, school children's developmental needs are often overlooked. Most preschool educators recognize that self-confidence and self-worth provide a foundation for academic learning. Riley, San Juan, Klinkner, and Ramminginger (2008) assure us that children who are confident about themselves and their place in the social network are more prepared to learn. Bendtro, Brokenleg, and Bockern (1990) have proposed a framework, titled the Circle of Courage, for understanding children's development needs. This framework comes from a Native American perspective wherein fostering self-worth is a primary goal in supporting children's development.

The Circle of Courage framework is based on four developmental needs. These are mastery, belonging, generosity, and independence. Mastery is defined as competence. Children have a need for competency within their environment. They do this by mastering skills they use in their daily lives. Belonging is the desire to be a part of a community. Children want to belong and be an accepted member of a social network. Generosity is the need to make a contribution. It is the unselfish act of giving to the community. Independence is the need for a sense of autonomy and control over aspects of their lives. This includes independence not only over their external life, but also their internal life—indepndence in thought and the ability to manage emotions. These four components of the framework allow a child to develop autonomy and responsibility to themselves and their community (Bendtro et al., 1990).

Children's Purposes for Making Artworks

A domain and taxonomic analysis of the data found the children's purposes for working in the visual arts related to the four developmental needs in the Circle of Courage (1990). Table 1 shows this relationship. In this section, I elaborate on these categories and look at how the visual arts helped the children meet their developmental needs.

Mastery

According to Bendtro et al. (1990), children need to develop a feeling of competency in what they do. One way the children in this study developed a sense of mastery was by exploring art materials and using these materials to record their thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

Throughout the project the teachers provided new art materials which the children spent time exploring. When pastels were introduced, the children colored layers of lines on paper. They smelled the pastels, shook their papers, picked up three pastels at a time, and drew holding all three at once. The materials were novel and captured the children's interest. Almost all of the children found time to work with these materials. They discovered and mastered the affordances of many different art materials through exploration.
Children also explored methods of using familiar materials in new ways. Audrey discovered that the liquid from markers did not stick on shiny surfaces. She picked up a marker and told the teacher, "Watch this." She marked on the clear tape at the top of her construction and rubbed it with her finger. She showed her finger to the teacher, saying, "You can see that it comes off." She transferred this newfound discovery to another artwork. She carefully colored on pieces of plastic straw with a purple marker. She pressed her finger into these markings and then tapped her finger on the paper, making prints.

The children had not yet developed formal writing skills, and so the visual arts provided the mastery to record their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. During the project, the children recorded what was interesting to them without prompting from the teachers. They recorded what they thought was important and what they knew (Lowenfeld & Brittan, 1987). An added benefit of these representations included rich opportunities for teachers to discover what the children understood about the topic of trees and things that live in them. Patrick recorded drawings of the ants and spiders he saw on the tree. Catherine made drawings of the trees at the Civic Garden Center. Bridget drew the flowering tree branch (Figure 1).

When asked why she made her drawing of a tree branch, Audrey reported, "so that I can remember." The process of drawing allowed the children to look closely. This type of close observation helped them to remember the object. Recording "stabilized what would otherwise be difficult to hold on to" (Eisner, 2002, p. 10).

**Belonging**

Children have a need to belong. They need to know they are a significant member of their family and other social communities. When children begin to attend school, the classroom community becomes an important part of their lives. Play is a primary way young children socialize with others and become a member of the classroom community (Elgas, 2003).

My observations suggested that children met their need to belong by negotiating entry into play and engaging others in play. They often did this by creating props for their play scenarios. One day, Elizabeth was at the art table and a group of 5-year-old girls were on the other side of the room planning a play scenario. Elizabeth could hear the older girls saying, "I'll be the mom" and "I'll be the big sister." Elizabeth continued with her cutting, and said, "I'm the little sister." Elizabeth taped two bottle caps together, first placing some small pieces of cut paper inside. When asked what she was making, Elizabeth replied, "I am making a thing for the little baby and I don't know what to do with her and I'm the sister." When her artwork was complete, Elizabeth walked over to the girls and said, "Hey guys, I made a special present for you." They replied: "Thank you!" While children have been known to use classroom objects for entering play (Elgas, 2003), this child was able to negotiate entry to sociodramatic play by presenting an object she had created, thus allowing her independently to meet her need to belong.

Another purpose for working in the visual arts was to make a personal connection with others. Children used the arts to show affection and to establish a friendship or relationship. When the children liked someone or wanted someone to like them, they could give something they made. This giving even extended to the insects and animals that were brought into the classroom during the project. The children's visual artworks allowed them to connect to others and that connection provided a sense of belonging.

One child in this study who created objects from the art materials to give away was Dominic. Dominic was a child who, despite teachers' efforts, displayed angry and aggressive behavior with his peers throughout the year. However, Dominic demonstrated the gesture of using his artwork to express affection several times during the study. Prior to, and even early on in the project, Dominic's drawings were mostly scribbles or "bad guys" but when the project expanded to include animals that live in trees, Dominic drew a nest for the birds and placed it in the garden center. This was the first drawing he made related to the project. Another time, Dominic created a small painting for the chicks that had hatched in the classroom (Figure 2). He hand-picked the paints he wanted to use—metallic—and when finished with the painting, he carefully placed it on the top of the chick's cage, painted side down, so that the chicks could see it. On another occasion a girl from a different classroom in the school was on the playground, standing at the window looking in. Dominic waved to her from inside the room and ran to the art table to draw a picture. When he finished the drawing Dominic commented, "I love her" and ran out the door to hand his drawing to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental Need</th>
<th>Children's Purpose</th>
<th>Definition of Purpose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>Explore</td>
<td>Investigate the physical properties of the materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Record</td>
<td>Create a lasting account of a thought, feeling, memory or idea.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Enter</td>
<td>Use something made as a contribution to enter play.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engage others</td>
<td>Use something made to entice others to engage in play.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Prop</td>
<td>Use something made as an object in play.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Show affection</td>
<td>Create something and give it as a display of affection.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establish a relationship</td>
<td>Create something and give it to establish or reestablish a relationship.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wear</td>
<td>Create items for personal enhancement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide</td>
<td>Create an item that is needed. It serves a function and is a contribution to the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decorate</td>
<td>Create items for enhancement of the classroom.</td>
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Table 1. Purposes for Children’s Work in the Visual Arts.
the girl. These gestures illustrated a different side of Dominic—a sensitive child who clearly understood how to use his artwork as a gesture of affection. While Dominic’s behavior often made him an outsider from the classroom social groups, he was able to create a sense of belonging with the girl and the chicks through the visual arts.

Relationships in a classroom could be fickle at times. Children became angry with each other over things said or done; groups of friendships were formed, transformed, and reformed. The visual arts were frequently used to establish a friendship or relationship. One child who demonstrated this purpose was Audrey. Audrey spent a great amount of her day at the art center, often forgoing other activities to concentrate on her art. However, Audrey also wanted to establish relationships with other 5-year-old children in the class. She used artworks to accomplish this. One day Audrey and Bridget had an argument and Bridget told Audrey, “You are not invited to my birthday party.” Audrey picked up a round piece of cardboard, drew on it with chalk, putting lines around the edges.

Audrey handed the drawing to Bridget: “Here, a picture.”

Bridget: “A sun. It’s a sun. Put it in my cubby.”

A few minutes later...

Audrey: “Bridget, can I go to your party?”

Bridget: “Sure.”

Friendships were easily repaired and established with the gesture of giving artwork, thus fulfilling a need to belong.

Throughout the study children also used art materials to make embellishments such as necklaces, headbands, bracelets, and hats. Elizabeth made a necklace out of a seashell and a bow out of ribbon for her shirt (Figure 3). Audrey made headbands and bracelets out of pipe cleaners. The girls in particular used these embellishments as social markers to show belonging to the group.
Generosity
In addition to mastery and belonging, children need to feel that they make an important contribution to their community. The observations from this study suggested that the visual arts can provide children with the means to act generously and make contributions to the classroom community.

As the project unfolded the children began to make items for the classroom. These artworks were created without prompting, and these acts of generosity resulted in enjoyment for everyone. The children created an elaborate home for the inchworm, colorful sticks for killing “dangerous caterpillars,” and a very special machine that would give the children and teachers energy (Figure 4). This “energy machine” grew more powerful as the children added materials to it. It gave energy to the teachers, to children who were sad, and to the chicks that hatched in the classroom. An excerpt from the transcripts captures the primary creators’ thoughts around the purpose of the energy machine:

Patrick: “We’re working on something really hard.”

Patrick: “It just gives us more energy.”

Adult: “It’s going to give us more energy. So what is it?”

Patrick: “It’s a power thing.”

Patrick: “It gives us power to give us more energy.”

Adult: “How does it work?”

Patrick: “It gets energy by rain.”

Adult: “When the rain comes then we will have energy?”

Patrick: “Yes.”

Another purpose for making art was to enhance the classroom environment. The children gave generously of their time and efforts to decorate their garden center with flowers, pictures, and other artworks. Dominic took care to create flowers for the garden center by taping craft sticks to the wall. One morning, Patrick and Mark were looking at the tent worms that had formed a nest on a tree branch. The tree branch was in a vase of water. The boys became engrossed in decorating the vase, making it “beautiful” (Figure 5). Enhancing the environment allowed the children to realize acts of generosity for their classroom community.

The visual arts allowed the children to use the arts as a language for learning and expression. Open access to materials provided independence in using this language and open-ended materials provided a means for children to be problem solvers. The need for independence was satisfied throughout the visual arts.
Independence

Bendtro and Brokelen (2001) discuss children's need to have a sense of autonomy over aspects of their lives. As children grow, they typically gain more independence. My observations suggested that the visual arts promoted independence and this independence was infused throughout the children's purposes for artmaking. Not only did children independently decide what artworks to create, but they had the ability to meet their own developmental needs through artmaking. The visual arts allowed the children to use the arts as a language for learning and expression. Open access to materials provided independence in using this language and open-ended materials provided a means for children to be problem solvers. The need for independence was satisfied through all purposes for creating in the visual arts.

Conclusion

The Circle of Courage (Bendtro et al., 1990) describes four developmental needs of children. Observations from this study suggest the visual arts supported these developmental needs for this group of young children. The children demonstrated the development of mastery through their work with visual art materials to record their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. The children established a sense of belonging through the visual arts when they created items to enter and use in play. Their expression in the visual arts led to generosity as they made contributions to the classroom. The free use of the visual arts in this classroom met the children's needs for independence. They did not need to rely on others to provide the things they needed—these items could be created from the materials at hand.

Art educators and general education teachers might use the findings from this study to inform their practice with young children in three ways. First, teachers can provide children with open access to materials in the art room and allow them to make choices of what they want to create. Since it is difficult to know a child's goals on a given day, this choice-based approach to art education (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009) supports children's artistic behavior and at the same time allows them to meet their individual developmental needs. While an item a child is creating, such as a doghouse, may not seem significant to an adult, it can have an underlying significance to the child. Second, whereas traditional literature discussing young children's art frequently recommends a non-interventionist approach (Kelly, 2004), this study suggests that art educators can provide meaningful and appropriate support to young children. Showing children how to use tools and develop techniques will teach artistic skills, lower frustration, and help children reach their goals. Since the children are involved in artmaking of their choice, this approach will increase engagement and thus learning of artistic behaviors (Dewey, 1916/1966; Douglas & Jaquith, 2009). Third, teachers can support the integration of the visual arts in the general education classroom. Access to art materials every school day will support the acquisition and expression of academic knowledge. Art educators can work with children in small groups when they are conducting projects in an area of interest. This level of involvement from experienced art educators will provide many opportunities to support the "hundred languages" (Malaguzzi, 1998) of children.

The young children in this study were able to realize their potential and efficacy through the visual arts. Access to visual art materials throughout the day provided pathways that allowed the children to meet their developmental needs. The visual arts provided a means to gain respect from others and self-respect, which are essential for becoming full participants in society (Bendtro et al., 1990) and to learning (Riley et al., 2008).

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REFERENCES