
Everyday Artists

Inquiry and Creativity in the
Early Childhood Classroom

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Foreword by Judith M. Burton



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“Spooky Elevators” and Other Preschool Adventures

Rethinking the Word *Art*

The Art of Taking a Walk

Taking a walk with the preschoolers is never a simple process. The idea of simply traveling from point A to point B in the quickest manner possible is completely foreign to them. Instead, all of our travels are punctuated by mini-adventures. A trip through the school hallways includes sharp (unnecessary) turns and squeezes around columns, shivers as we pass the “spooky elevator,” and the clatter of combination locks as the kids systematically touch each and every locker. Walks outside include the ever-exciting “switches!”, which refer to weaving through the scaffolding in place for construction work, as well as the never-ending passion for ramps. There is something magical about ramps, and the kids seek them out wherever we go, begging to run and for the teachers to “scare us!” Typically we oblige, waiting at the top of the ramp as they race up, giggling and shrieking in delightful anticipation of the teacher growling “Grrrr! I’m gonna get you!” at the top.

As a teacher, I have learned to leave time for these adventures. They make a trip to the market or an errand at the post office into an expedition of epic proportions, full of drama, excitement, and possibility. In fact, I find myself encouraging the kids to join me in all of my little travels, just for the adventure that they bring to the most mundane of tasks.

EVERYDAY ADVENTURES: DEMANDING AN EXPANSIVE DEFINITION OF ART

Art is thus prefigured in the very processes of living. A bird builds its nest and a beaver its dam when internal organic pressures cooperate with external materials so that the former are fulfilled and the latter are transformed in a satisfy-

ing culmination. We may hesitate to apply the word “art,” since we doubt the presence of directive intent. But all deliberation, all conscious intent, grows out of things once performed organically through the interplay of natural energies. (Dewey, 1934, p. 24)

If art is not what we once thought it was, not a painting on the wall, a drawing at the art table, or a sculpture in the window, then what is it? If the child is a unified learner, engaged daily in artistic learning, then how must we redefine the meanings of art to meet the needs of early childhood? The “spooky elevators,” clattering lockers, fascinating scaffolding, and magical ramps offer a glimpse into a reconceptualized meaning and practice of art in the lives of children and teachers. These are the daily artistic moments, the everyday adventures that are reframed through a particular definition of art, and it is the teacher’s willingness to participate in and extend this artistic practice that supports the child as an organic, integrated learner and creator.

I foreground this chapter with the words of John Dewey (1934) as he champions a multifaceted notion of art, addressing daily experience as the fundamental identity of art as a whole. Dewey identifies art as embedded in “lived experience,” a natural part of engaging with the world. In Dewey’s words, our adventures of “spooky elevators” and magical ramps are brought to mind. The young child engages in artistic experiences “organically” within the typical rhythms of the school day, making artistic meaning with a simple walk down the hallway.

The following section will explore the foundations of this definition of art, offering a historical perspective that explains how we might come to understand and practice art anew in our classrooms.

STEPPING BACK IN TIME: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF EVERYDAY ART

The definition of art used in this book is situated in a long history of the arts and their role in society. The ancient Greek perspective on the arts illustrates a tradition of artful living that pervaded all elements of culture and society. From sculpture and architecture to language and government, the Greeks had a tradition of making the arts a cornerstone of an ideal lifestyle (Kleiner & Tansey, 1996). This notion of art was reprised in the neoclassicism of the Renaissance, and the term “Renaissance man” emerged as a descriptor of someone engaging with the world from this particular, diverse, artistic

perspective (Kleiner & Tansey, 1996). I characterize the notion of art in early childhood using a conceptualization similar to that of the Greeks, placing art at the center of everyday experience (Allen, 2002). In exploring the role of art in Greek life, Allen states, "Before this modern 'aesthetic' tradition took hold, people had also assumed that the arts belonged to social life, having vital implications for morality, education, and politics" (p. 19). Although the preschool classroom is hardly a microcosm of Greek society, the historical Greek interpretation of the role of the arts in the world is salient with regard to the role of art in early childhood. The Greek concept of art pushes past the modern limitations of aesthetics and invites an understanding of the arts as they shape everyday life. Living life artfully engages the process of "making beautiful" discussed in the Introduction. According to the Greek conception of art, experience at large may be approached in this artful manner of "making beautiful." Art in the life of the young child is an active stance, a perspective that shapes a broad range of experience.

ART AS AN APPROACH TO EXPERIENCE

In the life of the young child, the definition of art must extend to include an active approach to the world. This perspective on art is supported by George Santayana's (1936) discussion of art in the context of beauty and aesthetics, in which he states, "All subjects, even the most repellent, when the circumstances of life thrust them before us, can thus be observed with curiosity and *treated with art*" (p. 167, emphasis added). Later, Ellen Dissanayake (1988) describes "art as behavior," addressing the many ways in which humankind, across boundaries of culture and society, engages in these acts of artful behavior as a part of their daily experiences. Art is an approach to government, to interaction with peers, to science, justice, conflict, and friendship. All of these elements of life may be approached artfully or "made beautiful," according to this active conceptualization of art (Allen, 2002; Dissanayake, 1988; Santayana, 1936). These arguments approach the word *art* as active; art is a manner in which one can engage with a subject. Here we find the idea of art as a way of conducting life, a method by which experience might be approached.

These concepts of art as an active way of being highlight the role of artistic practice in the life of the young child. The child, who naturally and actively integrates his or her knowledge, approaches artistic practice actively, as a fluid component of a holistic experience. Through the process of "making beautiful" the child may engage in an artistic navigation of the world in

which experience is shaped through an active use of art as “behavior” (Dis-sanayake, 1988) or a “treatment” (Santayana, 1936). The shape of experience itself is changed through the artistry of the child; the creaky old elevator is not a mechanical breakdown but an opportunity for delightful shudders and new stories. The ramps are a new adventure in the midst of an everyday walk back to the classroom. All of these tiny moments are artistic behaviors in the life of the young child, opportunities in which, much like the concept of the ancient Greeks, children may shape the nature of their experiences through an active use of artistic practice. Rusty scaffolding, clattering combination locks, and nondescript corridors are elevated to the level of art through the child’s artistic approach.

DIS-INTEGRATING AND RE-INTEGRATING: RELOCATING ART IN DAILY LIFE

The word *art* has come to mean something quite different in the minds and experiences of society. It has floated away from our behaviors and experiences, and become relegated to limited areas of subject matter, such as visual arts, music, dance, theater, and so on (Smith, 1993). Perhaps the most obvious evidence of this disintegration of the arts from experience is the school curriculum; art is not conceived of as a part of math, science, history, or English (Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 1991). Instead, it exists in its own space, perhaps an elective music class or a stolen moment in the painting studio. Even in more progressive research on arts education, we are limited by these subject matter categorizations. Nancy Smith (1993) writes:

Art has become separated from the mainstream of life for most adults, but it is not so for children. Artistic expression arises naturally in children’s development and is an effective mode of thought and communication for them. Thus, the primary goal of art education is to help children develop their ability and respond to meaning in visual imagery. (p. xiii)

Smith (1993) recognizes this isolation of art from the adult “mainstream of life,” yet she still limits the role of art education to the relationship to “visual imagery” in the education of the young child. These subject matter limitations are also reflected in most arts education texts on early childhood as well as on elementary education (Althouse, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2003; Douglas & Jaquith, 2009; Hurwitz & Day, 2007). Although perspectives on arts integration are evolving, even the most progressive researchers limit the concept

of art to specific content areas such as visual art, dance, music, and theater. This fragmented conceptualization of art lifts artistic practice out of the fluid experience of daily life and confines it to specific classrooms and materials. The artistic adventures with “spooky elevators” or the squeal-inducing ramps of the vignette in the beginning of this chapter do not fall under the purview of the adult concept of art. This traditional conceptualization of art conflicts with the child’s integrated learning experience, in which art is an active way in which individuals may approach experiences.

Art in the life of the young child, as it is conceptualized in this book, requires the inclusion of settings and experiences that we traditionally do not identify as artistic. If we return to the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, it is possible to see that the simplest walk down the street or corridor can be shaped into an art experience through the artistic practice of the child. The filth of the city scaffolding and the racket of clattering combination locks do not immediately lend themselves to the idea of artistic practice, and yet these are the most essential moments. These are the times that demand that we reconsider the parameters of our definitions of art in order to engage the creative inquiry of the young child. The subjects that Santayana addresses are “even the most repellent” (p. 167). We cannot limit subjects that might be “treated with art” to those that fall into the typical context of what initially seems attractive or appealing. Art might include both the appealing and the repulsive; art is the child’s description of “summer ocean blue” as well as his or her dramatic interpretation of the car crash seen on the walk to school today. Art is “prefigured in the very process of living” (Dewey, 1934, p. 24); it can include diverse parts of life experience, those that appear aesthetically beautiful and those that might appear ugly, morose, or unappealing. This inclusive reconceptualization of art allows that art may be a part of all experiences; it may include revulsion and appeal, joy as well as sorrow. This notion of art demands that the boundaries of artistic processes expand to include a broader repertoire of artistic engagement, including “spooky elevators,” magical ramps, and ever-stimulating construction scaffolding.

ART AS A VERB: RELINQUISHING THE PRODUCT

I begin this section with the story of an artistic behavior as it unfolded in my classroom one morning (Dissanayake, 1988). With this vignette, I offer glimpses of the concrete embodiment of these concepts of art and how they are enacted by 4-year-old Alexander in his experiences.