eye on*research*

Innovative Program Studies Role of Art in Education

Dr. Shelby Wolf, a professor in the School of Education, recently completed the first half of a four-year study funded by Creative Partnerships of England. Designed to be the most important program in a generation, Creative Partnerships brings artists, children, and teachers together in innovative ways, enhancing children's creative learning through myriad artistic endeavors. Wolf and her colleague, Shirley Brice Heath, recently completed a set of booklets for each of their two study sites: *Visual Learning in the Community School* and *Dramatic Learning in the Primary School.*

"Working with a government initiative that highlights children's creative potential is a unique opportunity," said Wolf, "especially because the arts play a much smaller role in American schooling. When we think of the arts in school, we too often think of creativity as playful and relatively undisciplined. Although the arts welcome imaginative play, they also call for serious cognitive work, as children learn to plan, problem-solve, and ultimately produce a final product. Most important, the arts offer children opportunities for *serious seeing*."

## Visual Learning in the Community School

This set of booklets narrates the first year of the study, following the four-, five-, and six-year-olds at Hythe Community School in Kent. Although the project covered a range of artistic encounters, the children's work with visual artist Roy Smith made a deep impact on their creative thinking. Roy worked with small groups of students, emphasizing the attention needed to draw complex objects, from a self-portrait to a sheep's skull. Each lesson featured a professional artist's work, then children were instructed to create a drawing before progressing to paint or sculpture. Roy felt that artists need to "draw with detail" before tackling more vibrant media. Roy's emphasis on complex objects demonstrated his belief that intricate shapes could command children's attention, and within the first few months of the study the children went from drawing for less than 10 minutes to attending to the details of their drawings for over an hour.

Roy repeatedly emphasized that art is all about looking, for as children work to create art, they gain practice holding their attention. It wasn't enough for a child to stab at his paper with his pencil to depict the spots on a banana; instead, he needed to capture the unique shapes of the splotches. It wasn't sufficient for a child to draw her eye as a circle; instead, she had to pay attention to the spoke of lines emanating from the pupil. In one of his sessions, Roy had the four-year-olds draw a figure on their own. Then he gave them a doll to help them observe more detail and instructed them to draw their figure again. One example was Leanne's work:
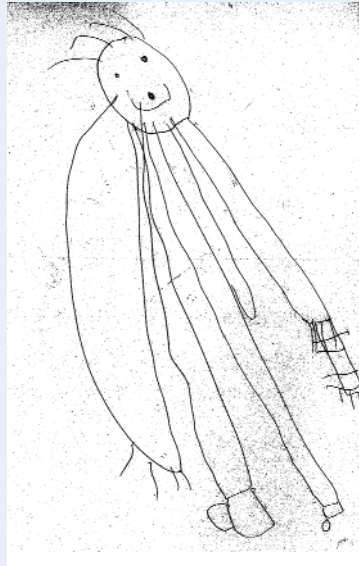
Leanne's drawings

Leanne's initial figure has all the appendages extending directly from the head. The fingers are skeletal, the hair sparse, and the features the simplest circles and lines. Her second figure—done only a few minutes later with the aid of an Action Man prop—shows that Leanne is learning to look. The eyes include the iris and lashes, and ears with detailed inner lines have appeared. The entire figure is filled out, and the fingers have taken on a more realistic shape. For a child who writes her name so neatly in reverse, taking the time to look is a critical step.

In the second year of the study, Roy and the children were invited to exhibit their work, and the focus shifted to the powerful combination of visual art with poetry. Using the sea as their central theme, Roy taught the four-year-olds photography and taught the older children the art of assemblage—compositions using a juxtaposition of objects to create a desired effect. The photography and assemblage initiated the poetry, and the poetry helped to complete the art. Moving from one sign system to another, often called transmediation, is deeply engaging work, for one must look and look again to see if the meanings created in one system are *explaining* and *enhancing* the meanings in the second system (Wolf, in press).

Dramatic Learning in the Primary School

This set of booklets follows children's connections with drama among all students at Bexhill Primary School in Sunderland. In the first year of the study, Bexhill worked with a variety of artists, yet one of their most successful partnerships was with the adult actors of County Durham's Theatre Cap-a-Pie. Together the actors, teachers, and children learned that dramatic work goes well beyond its traditional role of entertainment or serving as a curricular "extra."

Instead, the children's extended participation in the development, production, and performance of drama proved essential for their development in language and mental agility. Drama gives young players practice in critical academic skills; they must learn to think quickly, see the world through the eyes of others, and integrate an array of different types of information into one's character.

Mark Labrow of Theatre Cap-a-Pie was especially deft as he constantly reminded the children to think and feel as their characters might. He narrated what he was interpreting from their actions to show *why* their characters were taking certain actions and *how* they were feeling, and he asked questions that prompted the children to do the same. In multiple discussions with Mark as well as with other artists, the teachers considered how they could incorporate drama into their classrooms in substantive ways. For example, Linda Nesbitt, a teacher of seven-year-olds, combined it with her own method of developing children's language through engaging activities and thoughtful questions. Reiterating the goal of understanding character intention and motivation, she worked to draw her children deeper into reflective and justified explanations of why characters behaved as they did, helping them to analyze text in critical ways.

She and colleague Lesley Watson organized a drama club for their students, and the focus on analysis continued. The club also opened up social worlds for the children, expanding their perception of the roles they could play. They learned to play the princess as well as the peasant, and they learned that a seven-year-old boy could link arms with a girl and live to tell the tale. For a community where the perception of parents was initially that "lads don't do drama," linking arms with a girl or taking on a female role were giant steps.

In the second year of the study (Wolf, in preparation), the six- and seven-year-old children continued to work with Theatre Cap-a-Pie, and when they were asked to playwright a script for the adults to perform, they immediately jumped on board. This action was appropriate, for they were asked to help write a pirate play. From a *theatrical* point of view, the children, their teachers, and the actors worked to create an ensemble—the spirit of an acting troupe or company—to develop a sense of mutual responsibility for every aspect of their play. From a *literary* point of view, the children's voices combined with those of the adults to script the play, and their process had strong links to Mikhail Bakhtin's (Emerson, 1997) description of polyphonic creation. Still, there were tensions in the process. On one hand, the adults in the study sought the "surprise" that Bakhtin was so fond of—they listened to the children's voices and incorporated their words into the play. On the other hand, it was difficult to achieve Bakhtin's notion of "unfinalizability," for they had deadlines to meet, characters to develop, settings to stage, and plots to resolve. Thus, the openness and surprise of polyphony battered up against the very real constraints of putting on a play. In essence, the tug of children's voices combined with the pull of adults putting on a performance highlight the very real transformation of children's lives as they learned about drama.

Summary

Sir Ken Robinson (2001) emphasizes the absolute qualities of the arts in developing creativity. He argues that to be truly creative: (a) people have to find their medium (whether in the visual arts, music, writing, architecture, etc.), (b) people have to learn to control their medium (and the techniques, tools, and technical language of a particular medium can be taught), and (c) people need to have the freedom to experiment.

He explains, "Facilitating creative development is a sophisticated process that must balance learning skills with stimulating the imagination to explore new ideas" (pp. 132–133). Yet, how often are children given the opportunity to find out who they really are, what they really like, and who they really might be? The children of Hythe and Bexhill are starting to form critical answers to these questions, for they are learning to see themselves as artists.

References

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