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The Mermaid's Purse: Looking Closely at Young Children's Art and Poetry

Young children create poems, digital photographs, and other artistic creations that reveal the cognitive work, imaginative play, and problem solving that comes as they learn to see themselves as artists.

Wreck¹

The sailors prayed to come to land
And their good ship's wreck soon made it,
And sat on the rocks like a one-man band
While the stormy sea still played it.

Now through many a winter's weathers
Many a summer hour
Under the cliff there blooms and withers
The sea's rare-rust flower.

One collection of poetry by Ted Hughes (1999)—the late Poet Laureate of Britain—is titled *The Mermaid's Purse*. In 28 lovely poems, the secret surprises of the sea swirl around the wreck. The octopus waves, the eel grins, and the whelk wonders, while gulls glance overhead dipping and diving above the spray. Creatures sing their sea-soaked poetry, from the stones on the beach, to the crabs in their tide pools, to the sea monster rising suddenly above the surface. In reality, a mermaid's purse refers to the egg cases of skates and sharks, but in Hughes's imagination, a shark leaps from the mermaid's handbag to cure her headache by taking her head.

That Hughes would devote an entire book to the sea makes sense, for England is, as Shakespeare penned in *Richard II*, "This scepter'd isle . . . This precious stone set in the silver sea." The fact that the collection is a children's book also makes sense, for young poets are as drawn to the sea as old masters. In this piece, I explore the multimodal poems, digital photographs, and three-dimensional artistic creations of very young children who live by the sea. Encouraged by their teachers and adult

artists, the children learned to look closely at the sign systems of art and poetry to open up worlds of image creation and metaphor making.

SERIOUS SEEING

What do very young children know of images and the words they generate? Research in visual metacognition (Flavell, 2004) suggests that infants quickly learn to follow their caregiver's gaze, knowing that an object of interest will result. They direct and check the gaze of adults, pointing to an object and then looking back to make sure the adult is following their focus. Finally, infants understand social referencing, knowing that objects are linked to emotional response, from a beloved blanket (Ahhhh!) to an overturned cup of milk (Uh-oh!). As children enter school, their links between seeing and knowing become more refined. They learn that people standing in different positions see the same object differently, and eventually they learn to see an object not only from their own perspective, but also from another's. Thus, young children learn what they see and what they *might* see, and they can envision the emotions attached to the seeing as well.

Children's ability to see becomes even more refined when they are engaged in artistic activity. In the visual arts, they must take what they see and feel and put it to paper, pencil, paint, or photography. Perception is heightened as children make conscious and unconscious choices in line, shape, and color. And emotions are heightened as well, for in making their choices, artists focus our viewing, showing us where to look and what to look for because they want to guide us in ways of feeling (Wolf, 2004).

Serious *seeing* is akin to Maxine Greene's (1991) plea for being "fully present." She argues, "If we can enable more young persons to arouse

¹"Wreck" from *Collected Poems for Children* by Ted Hughes, pictures by Raymond Briggs. Text copyright © 2005 by The Estate of Ted Hughes. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

themselves in this way, to notice, to make sense of what they see and hear, to attend to works in their particularity, they may begin to experience art as a way of understanding” (p. 37). Serious seeing is thus linked to seeing symbolically, for keen observation enables the mind to not only see details, but also envision emotional connections, images, and metaphors. Certain artistic endeavors narrow the focus even more while simultaneously widening the symbolic view. In photography, for example, one looks through the eye of the camera, shutting one eye, and framing in. Yet with close-ups and telephoto lenses, the view widens substantially to reveal the unique, the unusual, or even the expected that, when viewed closely, becomes the unexpected.

Poetry is similarly focused. Choices in words, syntax, line breaks, rhythm, and rhyme accumulate in images that direct the mind (Graham, 1997). As Eleanor Farjeon (1951) explains, poetry is “Not a rose, but the scent of the rose . . . Not the sea, but the sound of the sea.” Thus, poetry captures the essence of an object, idea, or feeling. Taking large concepts and compressing them into highly compact forms shows the strong links to serious seeing in poetry. For to seriously consider a rose or the sea is not simply to see the details, but the symbols.

Teachers and artists who work with young children to help them see symbolically often move back and forth among the arts, and this is the case in the work I document here. While one adult may work with poetry and another with the visual arts, all are focused on the integration of words, images, and emotions, and all share a profound respect for children’s meaning making.

LEARNING TO LOOK

The setting for this research is the small seaside town of Hythe, which is bordered by the English Channel, a stony beach, and a wide promenade. As the sun rises over the Channel in the early morning, elderly citizens amble slowly along the promenade. But these retirees are soon replaced by parents and children walking along the narrow streets off the promenade, inward from the sea toward Hythe Community School.

For the past two years, I have been studying the Hythe children’s interactions with resident artist Roy Smith (Heath & Wolf, 2004). Between four

and seven years of age, the children are learning to view the work of professional artists—both classic and modern—as well as draw, paint, and sculpt their own pieces. Unlike the “shortsighted disregard of the arts in American schooling” (Fowler, 1996), Creative Partnerships, based at the Arts Council of England, is investing time, energy, and resources to bring artists and schools together. Their goal is to “animate the national curriculum and to enrich school life by making the best use of the United Kingdom’s creative wealth” (see <http://www.creative-partnerships.com/aboutcp/>).

In the first year, Roy worked with small groups of children, emphasizing the attention needed to draw complex objects, from a self-portrait to an elaborately whorled piece of driftwood. Each lesson featured a professional artist’s work, then moved to drawing before proceeding to paint or sculpture, for Roy felt that artists need to “draw with detail” before moving to 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 moved from drawing for less than 10 minutes to attending to the details of their drawings for over an hour.

Roy repeatedly emphasized the fact that art is all about looking. It wasn’t enough for a child to stab at his paper with his pencil to picture 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 (see Figure 1). Thus, Roy’s talk was filled with reminders to look closely at an object while drawing, to look and draw, to look again and draw again, and to perform this process repeatedly during drawing.

In the second year of the study, the Creative Partnerships offices in Kent (the area where Hythe is located) invited Roy and the children to put up an exhibition of their work, and the focus shifted from a sole emphasis on the visual arts to the powerful combination of the visual arts with poetry. Reception (preschool) teacher Deb Walkling, who taught the four- and five-year-olds, as well poet Claire Smith, who worked with the six- and seven-year-olds in Year Two (first grade), supported the children in writing their poetry. In thinking about the

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Figure 1. Intricate shapes command children's attention

exhibition, Roy, the children, and their teachers decided to make the sea their central theme. In addition, Roy changed his focus—to photography for the Reception children, and to the creation of three-dimensional “spy boxes” for those in Year Two. It is to the results of these multimodal explorations in poetry and art that I now turn.

Through the Eye of a Camera

When the four- and five-year-olds first began their look at the sea, Roy and Deb took them down the promenade and along the stony beach to sketch the sea in their art books. As they worked, the adults encouraged them to talk about what they saw and stressed metaphoric language: “What’s that like?” “What do you think it’s saying?” and “How does that make you feel?” As always, Roy encouraged close observation. Deb explained, “Roy’s all the time saying, ‘Look at this closely.’ Pointing out interesting little things like some rusty hooks in the ground that looked like a face when you looked closely. And just drawing their attention.”

As the children drew and talked, Roy documented their work with his digital camera, and he later made a video of their trip to show in his next lesson. But the experience got him thinking about letting the children take photographs. On the next

trip to the beach, Roy bravely placed his expensive camera into the children’s hands. Still, it came with specific advice. Roy showed them how to hold the camera steady by squeezing in their arms and pressing the button with care.

Once the children mastered the mechanics, Roy called attention to composition, asking: “What do you see that interests you on the beach?” Most of the children took photographs of things on the beach’s *surface*—a fish skeleton, a tangle of net, a mix of stones and shells. Roy explained, “It was interesting to see their choice of subject matter. Because they are so small, they have massively different viewpoints. This meant that a lot of their images were close to or at ground level.” But taking a picture of something fascinating on the ground required more than pointing, squeezing in the arms, and shooting. Roy also showed them how to frame a shot in unique ways:

They wanted to take pictures straightaway. And I was saying, “Hold on. Let’s see what happens if you frame it in different ways, so just move around and think about what it’s going to look like. See when it feels right and then take the picture.” And so right away, they took a little bit longer with the photograph, which of course draws the attention.

Roy’s directions align with Booth’s (1999, cited in Grumet, 2004) reminder that we often revert to “gestalt default,” when we “grab something we notice and snap it onto a previously placed guideline. Artists learn to delay the mind’s snap to a previous guideline long enough to perceive the specific feature of what is really there. They can intentionally disrupt, postpone, surprise, and challenge the matching process to allow for new understandings” (p. 53). Rather than fly to the quick, the easy, or the *known*, artists slow down to pay attention to the unique qualities of an object or its potential for metaphor.

Of course, what one sees in a piece of art depends on the viewer. And composition—whether in photography or poetry—is equally individualistic, especially if the looking is not hooked to the predictable. One of the boys in the Reception class, Ashley, was fascinated by a piece of undulating rubber and worked his way around the piece until it felt right (see Figure 2). Studying the picture, Roy explained: “There are other technical aspects that people are really caught up on: like that the horizon has to be straight. Particularly with this one with the shark’s fin—You don’t see that it’s twisted. Yes, the horizon’s twisted, but the



Figure 2. Ashley's "monster"

shape is actually fairly grounded. That makes that composition. You see it as a study of a shape."

Yet, while Roy saw a shark's fin, when Ashley sat down with Deb to study his photograph closely and create his poem, he saw:

A monster in a scary hole.
He'll take me to the scary castle.
And the witch will get fire on my shoe.
"Whoo," says the monster,
"Scrabbly, scrabbly."

Deb put the finished photographs back into the children's focus because she felt strongly that young children need props—things they can see and touch—to help them remember their experiences and aid them in writing poetry. At such a young age, few of the children put pencil to paper in writing their poems. Instead, Deb scribed their language through multiple questions, explaining, "Every line really is a question from me. I just thought all these things were really helping them make connections in the world, but through language." Asking four-year-olds to actually write their pieces was less important than inviting them to think poetically, helping them shape the ordinary into the extraordinary. Thus, in the creation of Ashley's poem, Deb asked: "What's this shape? Oh, where will the monster take you? What will happen then? What does the monster say?"

Ashley, who had had a complex operation to improve his vision, was learning not only to see intriguing shapes on the beach, but also to envision an entire narrative poem complete with frightening set-

ting and evil characters doing foul deeds, accompanied by chilling sound effects. The poetic repetition of the word "scary" combined with the repetitive use of the "sc" blend in his invented and doubled word "Scrabbly, scrabbly" added to the effect. Graham (1997) suggests that the best of poets rarely hesitate to invent and invert language, arguing: "This juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar forces us to hear and to consider afresh things to which we would otherwise pay little attention" (p. 7).

Deb stressed the potential in personification, and the children easily took to the idea. Madeline took a picture of a rope blocking entry to an area of the beach, and one line of her poem read: "The rope says, 'Don't touch!'" Misha wrote about another rope and a boat's resistance to leaving the sea: "Stop pulling me, rope!" In trying out personification, many of the children's poems used imperatives as well as personal pronouns. Samuel took a photograph of an empty beer bottle (see Figure 3) and wrote:

I used to have fizzy beer like lemonade in me.
The bubbles were excited and tickly and cold
like the sea.
Someone drank me and now I'm sad.
Like a person with a cold prickly.

Samuel's central personification was the bottle, whose emotional attitude depended on its state. When happy and full, the personification doubled, for even the bubbles were excited. Once drunk, however, the bottle's mood sadly drains. Although the word "cold" is repeated, its meaning is drastically different in the two lines. The first cold is like a breathtaking dip in the sea. But the second is a bitter cold, for in Deb's class, the children discuss their



Figure 3. Samuel's beer bottle

emotions about playtime each day. Following the work of Claude Steiner (see <http://www.emotional-literacy.com/>), a warm fuzzy indicates they had a grand time. Yet, a cold prickly comes with feelings of isolation or indicates bullying. The difference between the two couplets is stark. The first rhymes (me/sea), while the second doesn't. And the line length is telling as well, for when happy, Samuel uses a string of descriptive words, but once the liquid is gone, Samuel empties out the enthusiasm with two brief but telling words: "I'm sad."

The fact that Samuel used the word "like" so often was the result of Deb's emphasis on simile in her question: "What's that like?" Indeed, many children used "like" in their poetry. Ione studied a photograph of a tangle of thick braided rope and wrote that it was "Like a knotty snake sniffing for food." Madeline wrote that rocks under a tarpaulin were "Hot like kettle smoke." When Jacob took a photograph of white fish bones (see Figure 4), Kyle became so fascinated that he chose Jacob's photo for his poem and wrote a series of similes:

Stripes like a cat.
Sharp like a shark's teeth.
Pointy like a dragon.
Grey like a whale.
Square eyes like shapes.
A biting mouth biting the rocks.

Graham (1997) calls this poetic device "the accumulation of imagery" (p. 8). Yet in this accumulation, note how Kyle doesn't once mention fish or bones. In looking closely at the photograph, Kyle called forth a host of other animals, but not the original fish. And the bones are described as striped, sharp, pointy, grey, and square, but never named. What's most intrigu-



Figure 4. Jacob's photo inspires Kyle's simile-filled poem.

ing about Kyle's poem is when he breaks the pattern of constant comparison. In his last line, Kyle goes straight to the metaphor, without the need for "like," and he uses "biting," a much more active verb. Indeed, the line bites out a bigger line length, and the use of biting as both adjective and verb enlarges the image even more. In earlier lines, Kyle is describing specific parts of the fish bones, but in his last line, he provides a picture of the whole.

In looking over the photographs and finished poetry of the children, Deb often felt that the children's individual personalities and learning styles were evident in their pieces. Deb explained that Abbey showed strong interest in things that rotated, from hula-hoops to automobile tires.

We've noticed it in the outdoor area specifically; she is interested in how many different ways you can make the hoops spin—round her body, pushing them, throwing them, and making them wheel around in the air. We put stones into the tires, and she was amazed as they were turning to see the stones falling. When we went to the beach, she was lying on the stones and just rolling her body over and over.

One of Abbey's photographs was of the pulley system, which pulled the boats up onto the beach, and a line in her accompanying poem read: "Round like a spinning top." Another featured two crab traps with circular openings ensnared by a tangle of rope in loops and swirls.

The children not only followed their interests, but they revealed their emotional lives. Instead of the close-to-the-ground perspective adopted by most children, Bowie looked up and took skylines, with the land only a sliver and the silvery sky dominating the view (see Figure 5). Bowie's interest in the sky had close associations to her father's death. All the children in class had diaries that traveled between home and school with photographs, artifacts, and notes scribed by both Deb and the children's parents. Bowie's diary had many, many entries about her father. As the two-year anniversary of her father's death approached, the following exchange occurred:

Deb: "Bowie solemnly told the class that her dad died because he smoked, and she warned them not to smoke. Bowie was offered a balloon to release in memory of her dad. Bowie said she'd like a balloon to take home and send a message on the special day tomorrow."

Mum: "Two years ago Daddy died on 2nd March. To remind us of Daddy we played some



Figure 5. Bowie's skyscape

'David Bo-Bo' music whilst we ate breakfast, and Bowie drew a picture remembering Daddy's picture with her new pink pen. [While drawing she said:]

"We celebrate Daddy's life."

*"Daddy liked to tickle Bowie and say,
'Give us a kiss.'"*

"He loved going to the beach."

"Daddy loved his 'Beautiful Bo Bo.'"

The seriousness of Bowie's stance was evident in her solemn warning about smoking, but the exchange between Deb and Bowie's mother highlights the merriment within the sadness—tickles, kisses, and David Bowie music to boot. When Bowie let loose her balloons, she celebrated her father's life with love.

Bowie's other photograph was also a skyscape, a strange hole in the clouds high above the telephone wire (see Figure 6). This was the photograph she studied as she wrote her poem:

My head is in the sky.
The wind is cold like ice.
Only the birds are with me.
Their feathers are cuddly and soft like a bear.
Their feet are hard and scratchy like branches.
I can hear laughing from the earth.
It's someone's birthday.

The unnamed narrator of the poem literally has a head in the clouds. Yet, Deb felt that it didn't mat-



Figure 6. Bowie's hole in the clouds

ter whether the narrator was Bowie, her father, or someone else; the poem captured Bowie's essence: "She has a spiritual awareness. I think she walks around the world with her head up high, and then all these photos of the sky! And that, to me, just reflected her. Not looking down, but always up and open to new experiences."

Like the diary entries, Bowie's poem has a quality of contemplation and celebration. The wind is cold, and the narrator has only birds for company with hard, branch-like feet. Still, the birds offer comfort, for their feathers are cuddly and soft. From this tall perch in the sky, the narrator finds other voices to fill out the empty spaces. The laughter marks another celebration. Yet, it's not the anniversary of a father's death, but a *birthday*, the beginning as well as an annual festivity in the cycle of life. And if you look at the photograph closely and imagine deeply, that strange hole in the clouds allows not only the spirit of life to enter into the next adventure, but also resembles Bowie's balloon sending love up to her father.

Through the Eye of a Spy Hole

Roy took a different approach with the six- and seven-year-old children in Year Two. Still, the theme of the sea was consistent as was the need to look even more closely through a lens. The children built three-dimensional sea scenes in old ammunition boxes through which Roy had punched a spy hole. Using ammunition boxes may sound unusual, but it's actually appropriate. Hythe has a long history of defending the English coastline, and today the Military Rangers use a section of the beach for target practice.

As an artist, Roy is intrigued by the art of assemblage—compositions using a juxtaposition of objects to create a desired effect. He showed the

children the work of artist Joseph Cornell who hunted and haunted New York's flea markets daily for intriguing relics—photographs and pharmacy bottles, mirrors and marbles, buttons and stuffed birds—to arrange in astonishing shadow boxes. One of his most famous boxes is titled *Object (Roses des Vents)*, which took him 11 years to create with a combination of coastlines on ancient maps, waning moons and constellations, fish, and 21 compasses, all with their needles pointing in different directions. Critics of Cornell's work most often liken it to poetry (Gopnik, 2003).

Roy explained that by creating their sea scenes and by making audio recordings of their accompanying poetry, the Year Two children were “going to make a ‘theatre’ of sight and sound.” When the children's work went on tour throughout England, the theatrical possibilities became clear. Each of the children's boxes was bracketed to a panel that held hidden audio recorders, and atop each box was a pair of headphones. As viewers peered into the individual boxes, they listened to each child read his/her own poem on a tape. The children's readings were often doubled from their regular reading into a whisper, and their voices, accompanied by seaside sounds—the splash of water, the call of gulls—were singular or doubled, loud or whispered, depending on the poem.

Each box had a series of design features the children needed to contemplate and create, and they worked on them over a period of several months, sketching on their trips to the beach, collecting and crafting things from the sea, planning their designs. A long rectangular strip of paper held a background panorama drawn and then colored with oil pastels. The inside lid of the box held the sky or the surface of the sea. The floor of the box served as foreground and could be the floor of the sea or the beach itself. And in the middle ground, the children could sculpt and place clay figures or found objects of their choice.

In Danni's box, a tinsel-haired mermaid reigns on her half shell, one arm uplifted as if beckoning (see Figure 7). Rainbow-striped fish are floating, suspended on wires from the lid, while the background contains a fishing boat and multiple pink, cotton-candy clouds. Jay's box is lined on both sides with clamshells in thick perpendicular clusters, accompanied by one large crab claw rising from the floor of the ocean. The background features a snail-like, multicolored boat reminiscent of *The Snail* by Matisse, an artist the children had been studying.



Figure 7. Danni looking through a spy hole

As they worked, the children had to constantly shift perspective, opening the lid of the box to arrange their objects and then looking through the spy hole to check the effect. And as the boxes neared completion, Roy hung twinkle lights in each—tiny electrical lights along a string—so that when the boxes were closed, viewers could see sparkling glimpses of the children's scenes. The very focused nature of the boxes forced viewers to look closely and listen well.

In creating their boxes, the children worked with Roy, but in composing their poems, they worked with Claire Smith, a visual artist and poet that Roy invited to the school. Claire came while the children were nearing completion of their boxes, but still had time to make changes and additions. Intriguingly, though the boxes were the sparks for their poetry, their poems often had the effect of encouraging the children to reconsider their boxes and add refinements.

Ryan's box initially featured a surfboard rider on the height of a blue net wave. In the background, a ship approaches a cliff and low clouds stretch across the horizon. Then he wrote his poem with Claire:

“Hello, bye-bye,”
Said the waves to the sand.
White and blue blanket that is the sky
To warm you up on a cold, cold day.
With the sun like a hot potato,
Perfect with fish and chips.

Claire worked in much the same way as Deb. She asked multiple questions, scribing the children's

language, seeking out metaphor, personification, and emotional links.

Claire also had some tantalizing tidbits of language that the adults had scribed from the children's talk when they went on their beach trips. She collected the children's short phrases into lists that could serve as word banks for them to lean on as they wrote their poetry. In analyzing Ryan's poem, Claire explained:

"Sun like a hot potato" was in the book. And that was the most amazing statement, and we had to have that in his poem. And then we got onto talking about things looking and sounding like food and the associations that you have. And I said, "Well, if you're on the beach and the sun is like a hot potato, is there anything else at the beach to do with food?" And he said, "Well, perfect! Fish and chips!"

Thus, the children's poems arose from beach walks, sketches, scribed images, and box building, but the poems helped the children cycle back into their art. In the next art session, Ryan added clay fish and chips to the front of his box.

Ryan's poem is thick with images. He captured the continual ebb and flow of the sea in the witty call "Hello, bye-bye." He depicted the equally quick change of weather that often comes with a day on the beach. Though Claire gave all the children a choice, Ryan was not interested in rhyme, and he created his images with highly poetic language: "White and blue blanket that is the sky." Graham (1997) suggests, "distorted grammatical constructions force our attention on what is being said" (p. 8), and this is certainly true of Ryan's phrasings.

Part of the poetic quality of the children's language came from the fact that Claire worked with small groups of children, and they got to hear an entire set of poems being constructed as they worked. Another factor was that she continually read their poetry back to them to help them hear the sound of their creations and decide on revisions. She also offered grammatical choices: "Do you like, 'I am the sea' or 'The sea I am'?" If the children asked, she provided lists of rhyming words.

Charlene had a clear interest in rhyme. She had recently been to the beach with her family at night, and she wanted to capture the sea before bedtime. Her box reflected a similar twilight

mood. She lined it with tufts of cotton, and one piece undulated across the back like an animal in flight. In the middle ground, Charlene built a ship of clear acetate and balanced it atop a pile of rocks to show how boats are brought into the beach at night. With oil pastels, she created an equally elaborate ship coasting along the background panorama on a sea of green under the darkening sky.

The clouds move slowly
Across the sunset sky.
They look like animals as they fly.
It's getting close to night
And the sea feels deep.
Time to go home
And get some sleep.

Claire explained that one line came "because she wanted it to rhyme with sleep. So we went through as many words as we could find." But the image went beyond the rhyme, for Charlene's family had been swimming in the sea at night. Claire remembered:

"We talked about that, and I said, 'Well, you know, I've been swimming at night, and I found it really scary.'" Thus, the line captures the depth as well as the danger of the sea.

The dangers of the sea were also highlighted in Paris's work. Just as Hughes (1999) wrote the poem "Wreck," Paris was drawn to the plight of a ship lost to the sea:

The shipwreck was sad,
As he wanted to go home.
On the bottom of the sea
He was all alone.
The waves look like horses
Jumping, jumping, jumping
The clouds are grey dragons!

In Paris's box, the wreck of a ship lies foundering underneath the sea among rocks and shells (see Figure 8). Five jellyfish (made with the canisters the spy holes came in) hang suspended from the lid of the box with netting, yarn, pipe cleaners, and sparkling tinsel tendrils. A long horizon that includes Dungeness at the back stretches sadly along the coast with scalloped waves and black clouds hovering above. Of all the boxes, Paris's was the darkest, and Roy explained: "It's so dark that you really, really do feel that you're underneath, *inside* there."

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Figure 8. Paris's shipwreck through the spy hole

In "Wreck," Hughes describes the ship withering as "The sea's rare-rust flower." But in Paris's poem, we feel the emotional tide in his decision to personify the shipwreck. His choice of rhyming words—"home/alone"—show the sad juxtaposition of wanting what we cannot have. Still, the poem not only captured the isolation of the sunken ship, but the drama of the sea, and it's intriguing that Paris broke out of his more structured rhyming pattern for the last three lines, for while the ship is stuck, the sea is constantly on the move. Paris accentuated that movement by animating the waves into horses and the clouds into spectacular dragons! As in Hughes's poem, Paris's shipwreck may never go home again, but the sea and clouds roil above him with the promise of a rollicking adventure.

SUMMARY

Perhaps it's presumptuous to compare the work of a Poet Laureate with the poem of a six-year-old boy, but if Hughes were alive today, I feel he would enjoy the compliment. Besides, Paris had plans for further artistic accomplishments. When I asked him whether he had considered being a visual artist or poet when he grew up, Paris seriously explained: "I would be both. I would be an artist on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, and a poet on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday." Although Paris compartmentalizes different arts to their designated days, this project instead *combined* the arts. The visual arts of digital photography and assemblage initiated the poetry, and the poetry helped explain or enhance the art. Like the twinkle lights in the boxes, creativity traveled along an electric circuit, illuminating words and images along the way. And the added drama of audio recording their poetry heightened the total experience.

This is what Marjorie Siegel (1995) stresses in her discussions of transmediation. She ar-

gues that moving among alternative sign systems encourages the learner to see the commonalities in different expressive modes, but since the commonalities are not givens, they must be explored and justified, which asks the learner to work at a more metaphorical level. Moving from one sign system to another 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. And in creating their art and poetry, this is the stance that these very young children were taking.

Of course, their stance was enhanced when they went to see their work in the opening at the Outfitter's Gallery in the nearby town of Margate before the exhibition went on tour. When I asked the children about their responses, they wavered between excitement and awe:

Shelby: *What did it feel like to go into a gallery and see that your work was there?*

Riley: *Exciting!*

Shelby: *How so?*

Riley: *[Long pause]*

Paris: *You're a bit speechless, aren't you?*

Chorus: *[Laughter]*

Riley: *Yeah!*

Shelby: *That's because it was so exciting.*

Riley: *COOOOOL!*

Yes. Engaging children in the arts is cool. Still, making an argument for the arts on the basis of children's enjoyment is a dangerous choice. In the general public view, the arts are all too often associated with *feelings*. And that is, no doubt, why the arts are so often expelled from schools—cut from a curriculum under constant pressure from test preparation and the first thing to be cut when a budget crisis looms. Making the argument that children are having fun—no matter how true that statement might be—simply does a disservice to the impact of the arts on children's thinking.

Indeed, the arts provide powerful opportunities for cognitive work as well as imaginative play. As the children of Hythe thought about how to communicate their seaside home to others, they learned to transform the ordinary objects in their everyday worlds into the extraordinary. Along the way, they gained practice in holding attention for sustained periods of time, and they had multiple opportunities to develop competencies in planning

Fostering Creative Expression

In *Poet and Dancer*, novelist and screenwriter Ruth Praver Jhabvala (1993) explains that she once examined a sheaf of poems written by a child poet:

They were very, very simple, in thought and vocabulary. I would say that they were naïve except that they were imbued with something that was not naïve. Perhaps all the poems written by children are like that: lucid to the point of being translucent, so that the light of another world appears to shine through them. (p. 4)

But how can teachers foster such creative expression in young children?

- *Persuade children to look closely and wonder about the possibilities in their observations.* Children who learn very early to note details within their context and to think about these in the structuring of something much greater are beginning to practice vital habits of mind.
- *In your writing conferences, encourage imaginative thinking.* All exemplary teachers use questions to stretch children's writing, but questions that seek out metaphor, personification, and emotional links are especially effective: "What's that like?" "What do you think it's saying?" and "How does that make you feel?"
- *Learn more about poetry and poets and, of course, read more poetry with your children:*

Heard, G. (1999). *Awakening the heart: Exploring poetry in elementary and middle school*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Heard, G. (1989). *For*

the Good of the Earth and Sun: Teaching Poetry. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Heard bemoans the fact that "Many people don't believe children have their own ideas, their own lives to express. After a while children begin to believe this is true" (1989, p. 14). These two books affirm a larger truth about how to help children connect to their poetic lives.

Janeczko, P. B. (1990). *The place my words are looking for: What poets say about and through their work*. New York: Simon & Schuster. This is a wonderful anthology of poems that provides explanations of inspiration by the poets themselves. If you ever "wonder how poetry happens," this book offers a variety of insightful answers.

Janeczko, P. B. (2005). *A kick in the head: An everyday guide to poetic forms* (C. Raschka, Illus.). Cambridge, MA: Candlewick. Janeczko presents 29 poetic forms from the everyday (the couplet) to the esoteric (a villanelle unveils a villain). The clever illustrations by Caldecott award-winning artist Chris Raschka punctuate the poetry and offer clues to further understanding.

- *Learn more about children and photography.*

Briski, Z. (2004). *Born into brothels: Photographs by the children of Calcutta*. New York: Umbrage Editions. View their website: www.kids-with-cameras.org.

Ewald, Wendy. (2000). *Secret games: Collaborative works with children 1969–1999*. Zurich, Switzerland: Scalco.

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and design, metaphor making, rhythm and rhyme. They learned to shift perspective and to see things as others might; they acquired key ideas in foregrounding and backgrounding, proportionality, and dimensionality. They learned to shift back and forth from one medium to another in ever-expanding meaning making. And they solved problems—considering, revising, and rethinking their work, all in the creation of a final product.

Sir Ken Robinson (2001) highlights the absolute qualities of the arts in developing creativity. He argues that in order to be truly creative: (a) people have to find their medium (whether in the visual arts, music, writing, etc.), (b) people have to learn to control their medium (and the techniques, tools, and technical language of a partic-

ular medium *can be taught*), and (c) people need to have the freedom to experiment. 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?

Capable teachers can offer these opportunities to children if they look to the landscapes surrounding schools as well as in their children's communities. And although the children of Hythe were young, students throughout the elementary school years and beyond can benefit from multimodal interpretations of their everyday lives. When children are engaged in serious seeing, they learn to hold sustained attention, to see detail, to view alternative perspectives, and to perceive the poetry that exists in the objects they are

viewing and creating. As Maxine Greene (1995) suggests, we must avoid the tendency of “seeing things small.” Instead, we must learn to be open to and validate “the passion for seeing things close up and large. For this passion is the doorway for imagination; here is the possibility of looking at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 16).

Seeing big also involves seeing the potential for art in one’s life. What might it be like to be an architect? A photographer? A filmmaker? An actor? An author? A poet? Exploring multiple media allows children to look over the available range of possibilities in the arts, all of which build children’s capacities for flexible thinking and new ways of seeing. And experimenting with the range of possibilities may lead some children to the medium that could turn into a lifelong passion. As Robinson (2002) reminds us: “How many people never discover their creative capacities because they don’t find their medium? Too often they conclude that they’re not creative when in truth they may not have found *how* they are creative. Not finding their medium, they haven’t found themselves” (pp. 131–132).

In Sue Monk Kidd’s (2005) luminous new novel, *The Mermaid Chair*; the protagonist is an artist who assembles small scenes in boxes, but she finds that her art, like her life, is too confined, too predictable. After her life takes a dramatic turn, she shifts her medium to painting and in an astonishing series of diving women and winged mermaids, she discovers the artist she truly is and finds herself. Thus it can be with children. For it is in multimodal and multimedia aesthetic opportunities guided by creative and caring adults that they may find their own medium and learn to see themselves as artists.

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2006 NCTE ELECTION RESULTS

In NCTE’s 2006 elections, Middle Level Section member **Kylene Beers**, Senior Reading Researcher in the Comer School Development Program, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, was chosen vice president. Beers will take office during the NCTE Annual Convention in November.

Elementary Section members also elected new officers. Elected to four-year terms on the Steering Committee were **Barbara A. Lehman**, The Ohio State University, Mansfield, and **Katie Wood Ray**, Waynesville, North Carolina. Elected to the 2006–2007 Nominating Committee were **Ruby Clayton**, Cold Spring School, Indianapolis, Indiana, chair; **Danling Fu**, University of Florida, Gainesville; and **Wendy C. Kasten**, Kent State University, Ohio.

On the NCTE website, see the “Election News” area for additional election results and the “Nominations” area for details on submitting nominations for the 2007 elections (<http://www.ncte.org/about/gov/elec>).