

VALUING CHILDREN'S EXPRESSION: A FIRST ATTEMPT AT DISPLAYING PRESCHOOL ART IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRE

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ABSTRACT. A local childcare centre embarks on a first-time project to exhibit preschool children's artworks, acknowledging the importance of art-based activities in the development of young children. In the planning and implementation of a successful afternoon event, the centre's children, along with parents, other family members, friends, and educators, were able to appreciate the variety of techniques and materials used to create the skillfully-planned exhibit. The author provides insights into the challenges of undertaking such an endeavor and makes recommendations to promote its success.

VALORISER L'EXPRESSION CHEZ L'ENFANT: PREMIER TENTATIVE D'EXPOSITION D'ART PRÉSCOLAIRE DANS UN CENTRE DE LA PETITE ENFANCE

RÉSUMÉ. Un centre de la petite enfance d'une communauté entreprend pour la première fois d'exposer les œuvres d'enfants d'âge préscolaire. Ce faisant, ce centre reconnaît l'importance des activités artistiques dans le développement des jeunes enfants. C'est en planifiant et en mettant en œuvre cet événement d'un après-midi que les enfants du centre, leurs parents, les membres de leur famille, les amis ainsi que les éducateurs ont pris conscience de la variété de techniques et de média utilisés pour rendre possible cette exposition soigneusement planifiée. L'auteure apporte un éclairage sur les défis rencontrés au cours de cette entreprise et formule des recommandations pour promouvoir ce succès.

From April 14th to April 19th, 2013, Montreal's Centre de la petite enfance du Centre Communautaire Juif held an exhibit on Children's art. An article in the local community newspaper reporting on the exhibit reads as follows:

On Sunday, April 14, the Centre de la petite enfance du Centre Communautaire Juif (CPE CCJ) located on Westbury Ave. in Snowdon held an exhibit of art created by the children. The afternoon gathering was open to family members and friends. More than 200 pieces were on display, both

individual and collective artworks, which demonstrated the way young children created original works using a variety of materials. Many of the children, age 2-5, were stimulated by a preceding visit to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where they experienced different art forms and learned the concept of exhibiting and appreciating art. For their own exhibit, all of the works were professionally installed and accompanied by information on the artist/child, the techniques and materials used, and the inspiration for the work. And to further the actual art gallery experience, elegant food and drink service was provided accompanied by subtle Chopin piano music (The Suburban, April 24, 2013).

ACTIVE LEARNING THROUGH ART-BASED ACTIVITIES

As I walk through the Centre's corridors on any given day, I notice many simple crayon drawings that are left in cubbies and not necessarily considered worthy of taking home, not even considered valuable enough to exhibit by the classroom educator. These artifacts, however, represent valuable and telling expressions of a child's world and experience. It is quite breathtaking to see what happens when simple crayon drawings are packaged and exhibited differently.

As one of two directors of a Montreal early childhood education centre, my colleague, Alegre Mizrahi, Director of the CPE du CCJ and I had often discussed and dreamt about the idea of organizing an exhibit of preschool children's art in order to showcase the natural and innate abilities of young children. Through this form of expression, we hoped to elevate the level of appreciation for preschoolers' proficiencies and communicate to educators and parents alike how children's art-based activities reveal much about their realities. As educators, openness to this form of children's representation can be a way into understanding the minds and thoughts of preschoolers, and help reveal and affirm their special creations, imaginations, and ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

The CPE du Centre Communautaire Juif, a government-subsidized, \$7-per-day early childhood centre in Montreal, offers educational childcare services to 178 children, ages 18 months to 5 years old. The educational program includes the following basic principles: each child is unique; the child is the primary agent of his/her own development; the development of the child is a global and integrated process; the child learns through play; cooperation between the educator and the parents is essential to the harmonious development of the child.

The educational component of this program sees children as active learners, supported and challenged by the adults around them. Children plan and implement their ideas, and then reflect on what they have learned, promoting initiative and independence. The belief that children learn best through play, social interaction, and hands-on experience is at the root of this approach.

With the main focus on the child and his/her identity, the recognition of the child's social and cultural reality within the family are seen as key for proper development. Much emphasis is placed on meaning-making for the child, in his/her family, within his/her peer group at the childcare service, and within his/her social and cultural context.

Expression through art activities for preschool age children has long been recognized as a process that encourages creativity, inspires imagination and supports and enhances problem solving. The language of artistic expression is validated in the Reggio Emilia approach, an approach that is interested in the competent child and in offering environments where children can have time in small groups to explore a variety of diverse materials. While our centre has adopted and promotes this philosophy of education, we had several hurdles to overcome in order to integrate this approach into our day-to-day activities.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHALLENGES

The first challenge was the cohesiveness of our team. In 2006, we went through some significant changes in our educational staff. Our staff includes 24 full-time educators, and eight were replaced that fall for various reasons, at the beginning of the new school year. As one third of the staff was now new to our centre, we had much work to do on a very basic level in order to integrate them as part of our team. Much time and effort was devoted to initiating the newcomers to our ways of being, our basic philosophy, and to explaining the purpose behind all of the rules and regulations of our CPE as well as policies and procedures. We understood the importance of time with respect to relationship-building with our more seasoned educators, and we knew that this process could not be rushed. It was critically important for our team members to build trust, confidence, and affinities toward one another. It was only in such a climate that the art exhibit, or any other team initiative or endeavor, could flourish.

Secondly, we needed to emphasize the importance of observation and documentation of young children and allow educators to develop and test their own styles in this process. Observing and recording has been a topic of many regular staff meetings and educators have becoming more open to experimenting and improving their methods. An appreciation and profound comprehension of our own documentation of children helped in setting the groundwork for the awareness of children's own documentation through artistic expression.

Thirdly, as administrators, we needed to do much research before embarking on a project of such significance. We attended workshops and visited other Reggio Emilia-based centres over a two-year period prior to our decision to plan and execute the exhibit. We brought examples to our educators of the things that we encountered and how we interpreted them. We brought in books, photographs, articles, and anything that we could get our hands on

that might inspire the staff to look at children's natural capabilities to use art as a medium to communicate about themselves and about how they understand the world.

We met with a former parent of our CPE, an art historian and curator of many art exhibitions throughout her career, who provided us with an array of ideas and asked us many questions that helped to define and crystalize our own thoughts and ideas. Calling on this kind of expertise proved to be an essential asset.

GETTING STARTED

We wanted to make sure to give this process the time and attention it deserved and we wanted to ensure to have buy-in from all of our stakeholders: educators, children, parents. Through our deeper understanding of the importance of art-based curriculum, we wished to explore, at a more profound level, the infinite scope of art-based activities.

At our centre, a vast and diverse selection of standard art materials has always been available to the classroom educators for use with the children. A variety of types of paper, paint, glue, markers, crayons, etc., make up the customary fare. In some of the groups, educators have used some recyclable materials, usually in the form of food cartons or containers that parents are asked to contribute, to build and create classroom projects. These initiatives have been mostly sporadic, and lacked a true richness in the depth of the types of materials used. It seemed as though the staff's limited collective experiences in exploring their own environments may have contributed to this more superficial and "for obvious uses only" approach. The deeper exploration of materials by the educators would be necessary in order to transmit to the children, the importance of interacting with one's environment. Focusing our in-house training activities provided this forum for investigation and exchange. Educators were given the opportunity to spend meeting times with their colleagues engaged in their own creative endeavors. This allowed for a hands-on learning experience that was to be provided to the children as well.

At one of our team meetings, my colleague presented an activity where a vast array of materials was provided and we observed the different personalities and creative minds of our staff, some whom were unsettled by such a generous selection of usable items and others who were quite happy to dive in and use all that was offered. This too can be relevant when thinking about the choices that children make when materials are presented.

This type of activity shared amongst colleagues allowed for clearer consideration of an interactive approach in art education where the interchange of skills, ideas, and knowledge can create an environment of cooperative learning. Supporting educators in this way allowed for a process of self-reflection, which may take place alongside or separately from the children.

The recent renovations of our classroom environments supported a more serene and reflective surrounding. At this time, the classrooms received permanent art activity work stations: a custom-built, child-friendly desk that could display a variety of materials with plenty of shelving, making it easier for young hands to select and manipulate the supplies.

THE MUSEUM AS INSPIRATION

What began as an initiative to create a more meaningful recycling materials project developed into an inclusive CPE group project to hold an art exhibit and display children's art to promote and demonstrate the value of art and art-based activities in the early childhood centre experience. In the early stages of the planning process, we received an invitation to the opening of the new children's education wing at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where we could explore the new spaces created for children. These spaces included new materials, techniques, and art-based learning. This evening at the museum left us with new ideas and the notion of using recycled materials to improve and enhance the art-based projects in our childcare centre, which eventually transpired into something quite extraordinary and most memorable for educators, parents, and children alike.

As the museum's new program catered to groups of school-aged children six and up, it took a considerable effort on the part of my colleague to negotiate a visit to the education program for our children. As our children had already begun preparing works of art for our exhibit, the objective of this outing was to provide them with a basic idea of what to expect in a gallery, museum, or art exhibition setting. Before the visit, we asked the children if they knew what a museum was and many of the four year-olds were unfamiliar with the term. Some of the children thought that they were going to see animals (we had recently had a visit to the Biodome and the children were quite taken by the penguins). The visit allowed the children to walk through a portion of the permanent wing of the museum and to draw what they saw, right in the presence of the works of art.

DISPLAYING THE WORKS OF ART

As the art activities continued in full force, we began to question how we would frame and present the works: in which space, at what time, etc. We thought of using a large, grandiose hall and quickly decided that we would be best off to keep this valuable project close to home, in the centre's own spaces, enabling more control over the many decisions that would present themselves. We have the luxury of two multi-purpose rooms, with a simple corridor in between them, and we believed this space would be sufficient for our exhibit. However, one of the rooms had old cinder block walls, impossible for securing nails. We began talking to several people about our project

and were surprised when an employee of the community centre in which we are situated suggested a method to hang the artworks by chains, suspended from curtain rods attached at ceiling height. Better than merely describing it, he took us to a nearby Maison de la Culture to see how it was done and its effect. We knew that this would suit our needs and within days we had the rods installed and the chains purchased.

When looking for frames for the artworks, we started out at the dollar type stores and general merchandise establishments. It quickly became evident that frames were rather costly if they were to be anything larger than 8 x 10. We were, again, fortunate. A member of our board of directors connected us to a generous family member who owns an import company that carries various sized frames. The company was kind enough to provide many frames as a donation for the event and other frames were sold to us at a very reasonable cost. We also sent a letter home to parents to check their homes for frames or old pictures that they no longer used and could donate to our centre. This resulted in a variety of frames from which educators were able to gather and use at their will (see Photo 1).



PHOTO 1. *A variety of themes and materials on display*

It soon became evident that the entire centre was working feverishly to be ready for the upcoming event. While children drew, colored, painted, glued, sculpted, and created, educators encouraged, observed, documented, photographed, and framed.

In consultation with one of the museum's education directors, a former parent in our centre, we explored the details of presentation and display and discussed the kind of atmosphere and event that we envisioned. This was yet another example of how moving together in one clear direction, where

much discussion and exchange by the team members, allowed for a satisfying process. The goals were well-defined and the engagement of each of the staff members was indisputable.

Since our primary objective was to value children's expression, we chose to explain the artwork of each child and every collective work, and tagged each and every piece with an information card that gave the child's name, age, size of the work, materials used, techniques explored, and inspiration for the work. Many of the educators included children's comments about their own works. Each information card was also accompanied by a photograph showing the child engaged at the time that the work was created. These detailed explanations accompanying the work increased the appreciation of each one of them. They included the child's "real time" thoughts, feelings, and expression while engaged in executing his creation. This allowed the child to continue to value his own work well after its creation and to tell about it to others, such as parents, educators, and peers (see Photo 2).



PHOTO 2. *Children examine works of their peers with their educator.*

THE ART EXHIBIT

The exhibit was held on a Sunday afternoon from 1:00 – 4:00 pm, and prior to the event, I have to admit that we were concerned about the potential turnout. We sent many e-mail reminders and a printed invitation card was mailed out to each family as well. We also sent a letter out to parents explaining the expectations and rules to follow during the event, such as: no strollers allowed; all artworks to be distributed when the exhibit was taken down, and so on.

On the day of the event, a steady stream of children, parents, and grandparents took their time to appreciate the wonderfully inspiring exhibition. There were volunteers serving beverages and canapés, and the background piano music allowed for a distinguished and elegant atmosphere. We were thrilled with the reactions from all of those who attended. Many questioned how we could possibly put something of this caliber together within what seemed to be such a short time frame. It is important to note that the success of the event was not only in the careful planning, but in the continuous process of evaluation and re-evaluation that we incorporated during this time. We questioned, asked for opinions, consulted, conversed, and it is most likely due to this open and evaluative process, and our good fortune, that we arrived at success. It was a sincere team effort during which we kept our commitment to an art-based approach to learning in mind.

It was quite magical to observe the interactions between parents and children when looking at the works of art. There were very tender moments between adults and children when a child talked about what he or she created. It was impressive to notice how engaged the children were in the space, and they all seemed very well prepared to appreciate looking at the variety of works (see Photo 3).

The artworks themselves were childlike, simple, and beautiful, incorporating scenes of family members, the family home and yard, and other meaningful things, people, and events from the child's world. The value and importance of the child's art as an expression of him / herself and what is most important and special to that particular child is seen in these works. The mostly-abstract works found to be the most basic, those of the younger children, showed joyfulness in their use of the material in itself.

There were very few who missed the event and we chose to leave the works on display for the entire week so that parents, educators, and children, could take more time to return to these magical spaces. Many parents spent time after dropping off their children, while some of the classroom groups took the time to visit together. The pride of all of the centre's children, educators, parents, family members, and friends was unmistakably evident. The level of self-esteem of those stakeholders who experienced the event and all those related to the planning and undertaking of this experience was raised to a significantly higher level.



PHOTO 3. A child and his classroom educator are proud to show his work to mom

END RESULTS

Once the exhibit was concluded, we took some time as a team to reflect on the event. What was most striking was that no one, in either of the two sessions, had anything negative to mention nor were there any ideas for improvement suggested. This made us all believe that we had accomplished a considerable success. Since the event, it has been clear that children's art has taken a more important place in the daily activities of our centre. Displays have become more focused and elaborate and those drawings once destined for the cubbies, are now given the attention they deserve.

For any centre or school wishing to plan such an event, the best recommendation would be to set the groundwork with the educational staff to cultivate a climate of camaraderie and support, for without this essential element, the results would not have been the same. It has been our experience that the level of awareness and understanding of art-based pedagogy seeped through our centre throughout the preparation and implementation of the exhibit and, as well, significantly raised the standard by which our educators regard children's art (see Photo 4).



PHOTO 4. *The team of CPE du CCJ educators at the opening of the exhibit*

NOTE

1. All photographs were taken to document the educational process of the art exhibit project by the CPE du CCJ and written consent was given for their publication.

REFERENCES

Valuing children's expression. (2013, April 24). *The Suburban*, p. 27.

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