

## PRELUDE

For generations, most North American children spent their preschool years at home, particularly if those homes were middle class and graced with two parents, only one of whom worked outside the home. Preschools were of two varieties—compensatory programs for the children of the poor, or enrichment experiences for children of the privileged. In the great majority of cases, children simply stayed at home until it was time to enter kindergarten, playing with siblings or the children down the block, and relying almost exclusively on family and neighborhood to mediate between them and the culture. The music children listened and danced to, the poems and stories they learned, the images they saw on walls or in books or moving across video screens, the materials and toys available for their use, all the elements that contribute to children's artistic experiences, were selected and introduced—and, at least tacitly, endorsed—by parents. No matter how insular this situation might seem, however, it is impossible to keep all external influences at bay. As parents of children who spent their early days with Mom, Dad, Aunt, or Uncle, we remember our surprise when they began to use phrases whose source we could not readily trace or attribute. The world rushes in quickly.

The tremendous increase in children's participation in preschool education—a necessity for many families in which one or both parents are employed outside the home, a condition of contemporary life in the United States and much of the world—has expanded the life worlds of preschool children exponentially. Not only do the great majority of young children spend their days in education or care settings outside the home or in the company of paid caregivers; they spend their days increasingly in the company of other children, in a culture of their peers, absorbing rhythms and routines far different from those their parents may recall. The social changes in adult lives that have brought about these corollary changes in the lives of children have effects we have scarcely begun to recognize. As Joe Kinchloe (1998) puts it, “In the context of childhood education the post-modern experience of being a kid represents a cultural earthquake” (p. 172).

Advocates for the arts have contributed significantly to the philosophy and practice of early childhood education throughout its history. Yet the nature, value, and purpose of arts experiences in the lives of young children seem to remain puzzling and problematic to those most directly involved in teaching the very young. Conversations between scholars and teacher educators in the arts and in early childhood education occurs all too infrequently. It seems, in fact, that each group can and sometimes does forget that the other exists for generations at a time.

With the emergence of more inclusive sociocultural perspectives in education and psychology has come a recognition that young children are capable of far more than previously supposed and that the developmental process itself is far more idiosyncratic, culturally specific, and malleable, than we had thought. Recent attempts to define developmentally, or educationally, appropriate practice in early childhood education

acknowledge the possibility of actively teaching young children while preserving the element of individual exploration which has been the hallmark of excellent practice in Western early childhood education throughout much of the century just past. Many early childhood theorists and practitioners continue to perceive visual arts experiences as an inviolate realm of self-expression which should be immune to adult intervention or influence, or as a temporary expedient, a developmental phenomenon that children are destined to outgrow and discard as they develop greater facility with written languages, or as purely illustrative or descriptive in function, having more to do with science than with art.

At the same time, art educators, still relatively unaccustomed to teaching preschool and kindergarten children, frequently misjudge the terms of relationship between art and children's lives, focusing on elements of form to the exclusion of issues of meaning, and forsaking opportunities to build upon children's interests as the basis for early artistic learning. Recent developments and discussions in the fields of early childhood and art education indicate that these two groups, who between them bear primary responsibility for interpreting children's artistic experiences to the culture at large, maintain divergent, even conflicting attitudes about art and children. Despite considerable activity and interest in the arts and children in both fields, we frequently find ourselves speaking at cross-purposes.

We are in a period that is particularly promising, and at the same time perilous, for the arts in early childhood education. New perspectives on children have emerged, revealing hitherto unsuspected degrees of competence and immersion in the social world. Many early childhood educators influenced by the ideas of Bruner (1990), Vygotsky (1962, 1978), Gardner (1980, 1991), and others, have been persuaded that the arts can function as symbolic languages and, as such, can be considered central to the process of early learning. When the arts are viewed as intellectual and interpretive activities, and thus more closely related to the central aims of schooling (Bresler, 1995; Thompson, 1997), substantial possibilities for integrated learning become apparent. Simultaneously, the true complexity and intrinsic virtues of each art form seem to become increasingly well-defined.

The purpose of this anthology is to generate renewed dialogue on the role and the significance of the arts in the education of children from age 3 through age 8, at a time when such dialogue is likely to evoke substantial interest among arts educators and early childhood specialists alike. Sixteen authors whose work represents the best of contemporary research and theory on a constellation of issues concerning the role of the arts in young children's lives and learning contributed to this volume.

Exemplary early childhood programs emerge and prosper in many parts of the world, and interest in learning from the childcare and educational practices of others is high within the field of early childhood education. Many of the most innovative practices, which tend to attract the attention of researchers and teachers worldwide, are the result of a complex interweaving of circumstance, custom, deeply ingrained cultural assumptions and practices. Yet, as the world becomes increasingly accessible to each of us, the possibilities of appropriating and adapting the best of others' practices become increasingly real. The significance of the fact that our ways of parenting, teaching, and understanding of young children are inevitably filtered through a series of

personal and cultural lenses cannot be overestimated. The more familiar we become with the ways in which similar incidents can be viewed from different frames of reference, the more fully we understand that even the most basic things that children learn are socially and culturally mediated.

*The book is organized in three sections:*

1. **Context.** The settings in which children's earliest experiences with the arts occur inevitably shape those experiences and to a great extent determine what children will learn from them. Chapters describing the cultural contexts of early arts experiences amplify the cultural perspective maintained throughout the book, as authors from several cultures discuss how a particular art form and its practices are transmitted, valued, and perpetuated in the countries and communities which they have studied most extensively. Chapters describe the ways in which children's experience is mediated by the immediate culture of the schools they attend, the micro and meso levels, as well as by the culture at large.
2. **Development.** The process through which children's abilities to participate in particular art forms evolves has served as the foundation of arts education practice in early childhood years. Contemporary interest in the relationships between development and learning, and in development itself as a socially mediated process, influence interpretations of the nature of development and its centrality to early education. Chapters on development review established knowledge within a particular field, explore recent reconceptualizations of the relationships between development and learning, and offer promising directions for research and teaching.
3. **Curriculum.** The identification of arts experiences that are both artistically authentic and developmentally appropriate is a primary concern for early arts education. The tendency to sacrifice one goal for the sake of the other has been responsible for much mutual discontent between early childhood educators and arts specialists. These chapters describe exemplary approaches to conceiving and presenting art experiences that resonate with the "human sense" (Donaldson, 1978) that young children require and enhance their abilities to participate in the arts as creators, participants, and beholders.

Historically attempts to subsume all the arts in discussions of their educational integrity and prospects were motivated more strongly by political expediency than by philosophical conviction. In the United States, "arts" projects tended to attract federal funding more readily than similar undertakings, which involved only one art form. A few pedagogical texts which appeared in the 'sixties and early 'seventies (Dimondstein, 1974, e.g.) presented a search for deeper similarities of intention or structure, or presented experiences in the arts as exemplars of experiential learning. For the most part, however, the legitimacy of the notion that the arts can be grouped for educational purposes has remained largely unexamined.

Recently formulated National Standards for Arts Education (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994) recognize that the ties that bind the arts are deep and fundamental, having to do with the broad purposes and functions of

creation, performance, and reception of art forms. But in the schools and beyond, each field has its distinctive concerns, its own ways and means. The four art forms typically recognized in such discussions—dance, music, drama, and visual arts—have unique histories, purposes, and pedagogies in schools and preschools throughout the world. Interactions among arts educators are rare, often short-lived, initiated and pursued at the local level. This volume is an opportunity for arts educators to learn from one another, and an occasion in which similarities among the concerns and convictions that preoccupy educators in each art discipline may be considered for their relevance to others' situations. The inclusion of literature as a fifth art form which children encounter in schools provides an additional opportunity to compare and contrast methodologies and meanings, and perhaps to discover new possibilities for thought and practice that can be adapted for use in other disciplines.

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