

# Changing Lenses: It's All About Art!

by Patricia Pinciotti

Two days before I am to leave on a US study tour of Reggio Emilia schools my glasses break. Now, I just need them for reading, but I did not want to miss a single moment of this experience. My new glasses became a metaphor for my journey and its connection to my beliefs about children, art, and learning. My encounters with teachers, artists and children, both here and abroad, who understand that *it is all about art* never disappoint me. Their classrooms are filled with inspiring ideas and a bounty of visual and tactile delights. Teachers and children are engaged in careful observations and stimulating dialogue about real learning. In these classrooms, children, parents, teachers, artists, and community members confirm my belief that the early childhood experience is *all about art*. Not art as a noun, a product defined by medium, materials, and size, **but art as a verb**. Art as a verb honors its original meaning and intent, which is to put things together (Booth, 1997).

Here in the United States, our view of art as needing specialized training or our concern with art as something precious or expensive leaves most of us with only an external role in the act of *putting things together*. Most of us approach art as “passive outsiders,” ready to be entertained and then critical and disappointed when we are not. We view the art of children as *less than*, cute, or lacking in skills; and unfortunately, what children experience as art and then often what we see is indeed — less than, cute, or lacking content and skills.

Research identifies three different orientations to art in the schools (Bresler, 1993). The *complementary* approach, found most often in early childhood and special needs classrooms, views the arts as self-expression; and therefore anything a child does is considered precious, creative, and worthy. The teacher's role in these classrooms is to supply materials and let children make art. The teacher's involvement in children's art making is supportive; however, the type of artistic

guidance or engagement in the process of *putting things together* is very limited.

Another method is identified as *imitative*, approaching the arts as product oriented entertainment. This approach is based on the notion that there is a correct form for art and therefore children's work should look like the example provided by the teacher. Primarily a cut and paste on pre-designed activity, the children and their ability to *put things together* are literally bound by patterns, step-by-step directions, and mediocre examples of a product.

An approach consistent with the work done in arts rich schools such as the preschools of Reggio Emilia and those that take an arts-infused approach to teaching and learning is the *cognitive* approach to art. Here children use art as a language to communicate thoughts, ideas, images, and feelings through various artistic media. Their work demonstrates knowledge of the arts as a discipline, a repertoire of media with artistic reasoning woven throughout the process. In these classrooms children are guided to use art as a way of learning and develop artistic knowledge, skills, and dispositions about visual thinking and ways to put things together (Pinciotti, 2001).

## Everyday works of art

A life-affirming view of art, evident in early childhood centers that approach art as a way of learning, is presented by Eric Booth in his book *The Everyday Work of Art* (1997). Booth describes the everyday work of art as the process of making things with meaning, exploring the things others



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have made, and encountering daily life with a work-of-art attitude. At the heart of the ART experience is the respect and confidence given children as curious learners. These are learners, not unlike artists, who ask questions, explore, compose, and construct with materials and media to understand themselves and their world.

In classrooms where it's all about art, teachers, artists, and parents believe with conviction that this process generates learning both on their part and the children's. They are adamant that children have the minds, hearts, bodies, and hands to explore, hypothesize, test, and make visible a world that is personally meaningful. As Loris Malaguzzi (1990) says, children have a "hundred languages" to grapple with making worlds, exploring worlds, and reading worlds as they construct physical models of their knowing. This is exactly what artists do when they *put things together*, whether with words, their bodies, with voices, or musical instruments, paint, clay, or pencil.

What is it that children do when *it's all about art*, when they are involved in this constructivist approach to making meaning with words, bodies, voices, instruments, and artists' tools? We know from research that students who attend "high arts" schools are able to do certain things better than students who attend "low arts" schools (*Champions of Change*, 1999). That somehow making *it all about art* does something to how students think and act as they individually or collectively *put things together*.

## Expressing ideas and feelings openly and thoughtfully

We are beings of communication. From our very first entry into the world we scan faces for responses. We learn to cry and coo various ways to convey different feelings and desires. The significant adults in our lives learn to read and understand our sounds, movements, thinking, and feeling. How can children continue to communicate their emerging quantity of complex ideas and feelings if they are not given multiple languages to communicate well? How can they *put things together* for someone to understand if they are required to use only words or numbers?

Describe a spiral staircase or a helicopter just using words? Impossible! Significant involvement in the arts provides a repertoire of tools to communicate ideas and feelings openly and thoughtfully. Artistic choices are made so these ideas and

feelings are expressed with care. We know learning is impeded in the absence of personal interest. Schools where learning is infused with the arts have higher attendance rates and less vandalism (Fowler, 1994). An environment where children are required to *put things together* mentally and physically gives them reasons to come to school, reasons to exist. Maybe it's all about art.

## Layering and forming relationships among different items of experience

We know from research on the brain that the search for meaning is innate and this searching occurs through patterning. The arts offer a direct path to seeking patterns, layering experiences, and making meaning. Meaningful learning engages feelings, experiences, relationships, and the ability to see clearly with our eyes, hands, and bodies.

Children become problem posers in art-rich environments. They call on their personal life of images and experiences to solve problems. The answer to the question, "What color is this?" or "How does this animal move?" is not moment specific, but tied to their whole life as a learner in the world. Ask someone who has experimented with color, who knows how color mixes and interacts with other colors, someone who has multiple images for the color "orange." Check with someone who has watched ants at work for a long time, or has been caught off guard by a cat leaping from the floor to a table, someone who has run or spun around really, really fast. Becoming better readers and writers, understanding numbers, forming successful personal relationships involves *putting many things together*, layering experiences to solve word, number, or people problems. So maybe it's all about art?

## Imagining different vantage points and working towards a resolution

Art is messy! Recall your last attempt to *put something together* — a great dinner, a bicycle, your early childhood portfolio, or your taxes. Didn't it get messy first before it made sense, before it came together? The problem-solving path is not always straight — clean — clear — neat. Children in high arts programs are able to see or imagine things from different vantage points. Working in the arts, children come to know that the same steps, notes, or colors may lead to dramatically different results depending on their individual vision.

The arts are essentially about diversity. Art is about you and me and how we see both similarly and differently. Whether I

am working *to put things together* to show you what I see from my perspective, or how you and I have to work collaboratively *to put things together*, the arts always value differences. In dance or drama, we must share and negotiate our individual perspectives to create one idea together, working toward a consensual solution. Consensual means the joining of the senses to agree together on a perspective and a direction. When one works in the arts he or she truly appreciates individual efforts. Even as young artists, children know different is good. Real art is always about communicating and sharing how we see the world collectively and uniquely. Maybe it's all about art?

## Constructing and organizing thoughts and ideas into meaningful units

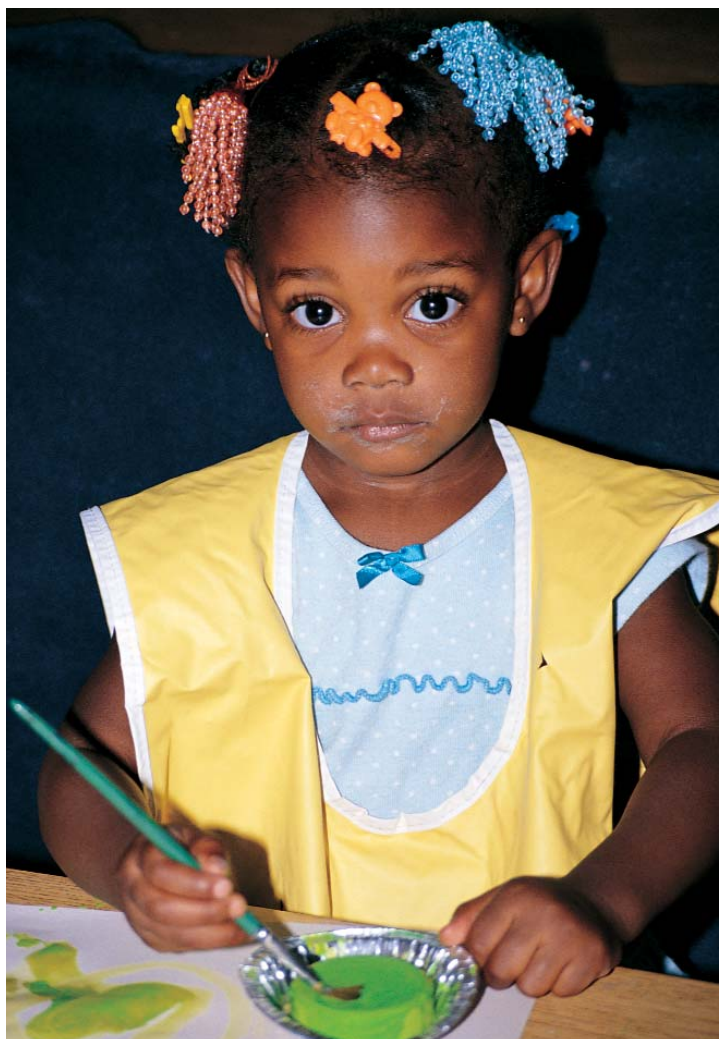
Frank Wilson in his book, *The Hand* (1998), puts forth a radical idea about cognition. He believes that the work of the hand leads the mind. Constructing occurs not only in your head, but also through your hands and body to develop your mind. Constructing and organizing — *putting things together* — physically is at the heart of mind making. Through art explorations the eye, the hand, and body work together to create the mind. What are children's hands doing in your classroom? How much time do bodies sit? The hand — thought — language — culture are inextricably connected. Through the physical medium of the arts, whether it is clay, voice, paint, movement, paper, or wood, children construct and share meaning in a social environment. What if it is what you do with your hands that creates your mind? How do children use their hands to know their world — *to put things together* — to make meaning, to create something that they value and share with others. The brain has the capacity for language, but the body is the tool of language. Learning through the hands and body is what is remembered, constructed, and organized. Maybe it is all about art?

Children from high arts schools are able to focus perceptions on an aspect of an experience and sustain this focus over a period of time. Sustained perceptions! Not rushing — giving time for learning. The arts need and use time to awaken the senses, to relaunch an idea, or to focus perceptions over time. One of the things the arts do is slow down time (Sylwester, 1995). We have all had one of those “zone” or “right brain” experiences. Maybe it happened as you began rearranging your classroom, your exercise routine, or working in your garden, when you lost track of time. When

was the last time the art of reawakening your senses took over and you gave yourself up to a sustained perception?

Real learning engages the entire physiology — the senses, hands, mind, and body. The arts by their very nature involve engagement — focused perceptions. One of the complaints of classroom teachers is that doing art takes so much time, particularly in this world of academics and high stakes testing.

Maybe this is why the arts are essential for learning, to balance the one answer with in-depth learning in and through time. Take time with your children. Make your classrooms a real learning place, a place for wonder, curiosity, and perceptual awareness, a place where children have time to construct, to make a mess, to organize, and *put things together*. And ultimately be learners in the act of creating themselves! Maybe it is all about art?



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As early childhood educators we believe that children are resourceful, curious, and competent, with a relentless desire to interact and communicate with others. Challenge yourself to break set and “see” with an artist’s eye and embrace a culture of teaching and learning that values and believes in the work of the hands in the act of *putting it together*. What if the work we do is all about art? What do you need to learn today to set the stage for artistic learning in your classroom? What would that mean for children and our view of teaching and learning if everything we did was all about art?

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## Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

**Which one describes your program?:** Pinciotti reports three different orientations to art in schools. Convene teachers to explore which one describes your program and whether orientation is what they really want. If not, explore the steps to change it, using the articles in this issue of Beginnings Workshop as a study tool.

**Do you have the conviction?:** The author reports that classrooms where it is all about the arts have parents and teachers who believe that process generates learning. Do your teachers have this conviction? Do parents and other family members? If not, explore why and what you might do to share your convictions!

**The work of the hand leads the mind:** Explore with teachers the wonderful questions posed about hands and how children use them to construct what they know about the world. Analyze your curriculum to make sure children’s hands are creating, constructing, and putting it together every day.