"FRAGILE MOMENTS": Artists Co-Constructing Creative Experience with Children, Parents and Early Childhood Educators

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It's almost as if we're showing them the little room inside themselves.
(Dawn White Beattie, artist)

The Artists at the Center Project brings together professional visual artists with children, teachers and parents in twelve settings for early learning and care (including parent resource centers, inner city and suburban child care programs, and early childhood programs at a local university and college) in the city of Hamilton, Ontario, an industrial center built on steel manufacturing. The artists' media range from watercolor painting to large-scale sculpture in stone and steel, and several have connections to the steel industry, either as former steelworkers or sculptors who weld iron. The educators in these programs are involved in ongoing reflection and professional development to explore the Reggio Emilia approach. This project to bring them together is in its fifth year.

External grants from the Hamilton Community Foundation, the Ontario Arts Council, the City of Hamilton and the Province of Ontario pay for the involvement of these carefully selected artists to engage with all the participants in the early childhood programs. Each artist works in one or two programs twice a week. Since the parent resource centers and early learning centers involve changing casts of children and parents daily - they come when and because they want to - a particular challenge for the program has been how to sustain an investigation, a question, an interest when the children are present sporadically. We have found, in some centers, that parents make a point of attending on the days the artist is present because the quality of the results has been so profound for their children and for their own understanding of their children's capabilities.

The Artists at the Center Project is based on the conviction that bringing artists into the work life of centers for children not only enhances experiences of children and teachers, but also has the potential to alter the quality of thinking, feeling and imagining that participants encounter there. The artists were first introduced into four programs in 2001, when it

seemed as if the educators had reached a plateau in their attempts to construct their own interpretations of Reggio philosophies and practices in ways that meet our own cultural necessities. As interest in the approach grew, additional funding was sought to allow more programs to benefit from this support. The artists work in these centers without any particular space set aside for them; that is, they don't have a "home" in the settings, a space that reflects their personae and sensibilities in the way of programs that have developed with *ateliers* or studios (Gandini, Hill, Cadwell & Schwall, 2005). Yet the belief has been that even as "itinerants," the impact of the artists can be remarkable and their integration into centers produces a new and formerly unknown connectivity, a sort of protective alliance among children, teachers, parents and artists and, possibly, a protective alliance within the self, as children and teachers discover the creative self within.

What does a professional artist bring to work with young children that is different from what early childhood teachers and parents bring? Our research together set out to look at what difference artists might make, and took the form of a series of conversational interviews over a two-year period with both artists and early childhood personnel (teachers and administrators) on the impact of the artists. In addition, the artists and programs involved prepare an annual spring exhibit of the work produced with the children. Our research includes thinking about the exhibits and the valuable documentation created by the artists to follow the children's design processes, as inspired by the pedagogical documentation of the Reggio Emilia approach (Malaguzzi, 1996; Vecchi, 2002). What we would like to share here are several examples of *surprises* - things we might not have thought could happen with very young children. We will link these stories of surprises to skills and capacities, dispositions and knowledge that these professional artists have brought to our programs. These skills, capacities, dispositions and knowledge concern three themes that emerged from our study: 1) artists are specialists in design and creating and, *when carefully selected*, can support design and creating in others; 2) artists are specialists with materials in ways unknown and appreciated by teachers; and 3) artists bring their personal aesthetic sensibilities that broaden and anchor our understanding of the world.

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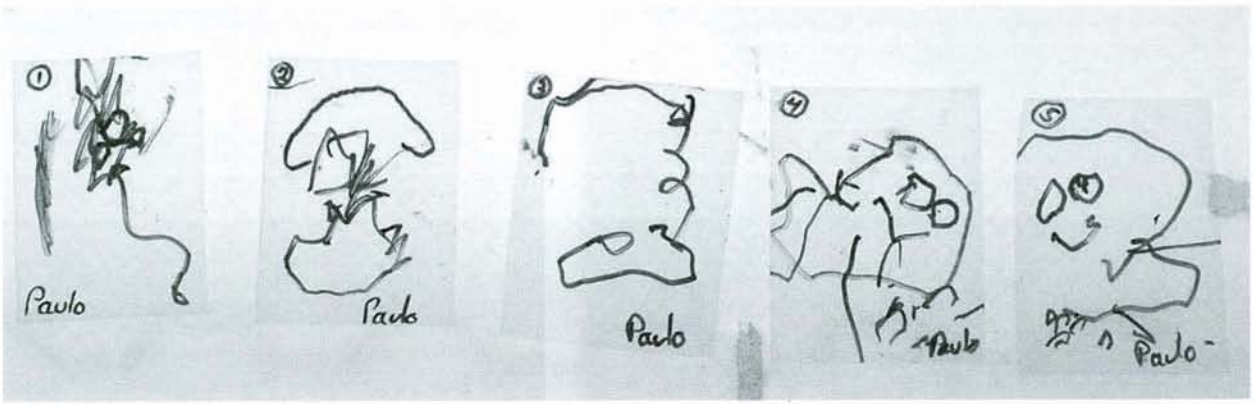
Mixing Paint: Simplifying Material and Focusing Attention

We notice that artists have a different relationship with physical materials than most early childhood teachers, although we recognize that some early childhood teachers, parents and administrators also bring these qualities to the field. What our teachers noticed was that they themselves had fairly set ways of using a standard array of materials considered appropriate for young children, perhaps learned in training programs or on the job. The artists offered materials far outside this range. For example, Jason Avery, an assemblage artist, plucked brown wrapping paper out of the recycling bin, folding it into a prototype for a "house" and used the folded paper as a provocation with a child, asking, "What does this house need?" Sometimes the artists would amplify materials, allowing a child repeated use of a material far beyond what a teacher would consider "normal." One artist, a sculptor and former steelworker, was playing at making cameras and having "negatives" come out of little cardboard structures, and a three year-old boy repeatedly asked for more of the tiny acetate squares. He gave the child one each time he asked. When he later looked at the series the child had created, he saw the child had moved from scribbling marks to a recognizable face form over the course of the experience. In another instance, Monica Didur, herself a painter, found a child was so stimulated by a color mixing exercise, dipping strips of absorbent paper into liquid color, that she repeated it 48 times. At one point, the artist asked her to wait so other children might participate in this exercise, which the child did, returning after to carry out more attempts. We recall Montessori's observation of the high number of repetitions of an activity in which a child will be motivated to engage when on the verge of (or just past) mastering a process or skill (Montessori, 1966).

Sometimes the artists introduced "strange" materials and invited highly exploratory uses, and other times, paradoxically, they insisted tools be used as they were intended and taught techniques for successful use of tools - like how to hold a thick brush to paint on a vertical easel (painters may hold it with the thumb on top, near the bristles for greater control). When teachers put out glitter and pom-poms to interest children in activities, artists pointed out that they don't change materials in their own work every day, but continually refine it by using the same materials over and over to master a process, an idea, a feeling, a value. They did not see novelty in itself as very helpful to the development of ideas. On the other hand, sometimes they introduced materials teachers said they never would have thought to use. Dawn White Beattie, a painter who does installations, went to the hardware store and came to the program with an interesting collection of tapes and foams (which teachers checked for safety) and when the children quickly had their own ideas about what they could make as props for their play, supported their inventive uses for these non-conventional materials: "They immediately had these wonderful ideas and started wrapping themselves, using the tapes to make costumes and hats."



Paradoxically, the artists often simplified materials, removing much of what teachers thought was necessary to stimulate children and offering a highly restricted "palette." Jason once offered a palette simply of polished black and white stones on black

construction paper, and watched the designs emerge. Several artists reduced colors available for painting and taught children to rinse their brush between mixing colors. In particular, we see that the artists introduced techniques - how to use tools and materials - but were very supportive of ideas emerging from the children. They did not introduce or impose *ideas to be learned*, as teachers so often feel compelled to do with conceptual material such as colors, numerals and the alphabet.

In one program, the teachers had said the children were not interested in painting. As a result, Sandy Greenblatt, a graphic designer, spent much of a fall term exploring color with children. An example of the sort of surprise that resulted from introducing artists, who work with ideas and materials differently from teachers, happened during an exploration of color mixing. Part of this exploration concerned how you could make many colors with just a few and part of it was the utter delight all painters experience when

various mixtures of pigments transform into a color different from their beginnings. It is a moment both of magic and, perhaps, of understanding that the transformations of substances (chemistry) is a fascinating aspect of the world.

This color exploration developed to the point of generating fascinating questions, such as: "Where does color come from?" "How does color get into - and out of - things such as an orange, tea, green grass, Swiss chard, blueberries?" Thinking about color in nature led to thinking about blending colors, about animals hiding and how they blend into their environments. One boy said he was wearing "army pants" and talked about camouflage.

Karyn: *What does camouflage mean?*

Child: *It's so you can hide.*

Karyn: *Why would you need to hide?*

Child: *So you won't be seen.*

The idea of invisibility, both as an animal and a soldier, led the teachers to find books on camouflage with images of animals blending in with their surroundings. The concept of camouflage was deeply exciting to the children. The artist and teachers offered a provocation to the children. They looked through old copies of nature magazines such as *Owl* and *Ranger Rick*, and cut out "all kinds of animals" and then invited the children "to choose ones they would like to use to camouflage" in a painted environment they themselves created. Sandy, the artist, found it an "incredible exercise" because the interest spread to the entire group of children with great excitement about the idea. Many children tried to mix colors and to paint an environment that would conceal their chosen animal. The children were working with the primary colors plus black and white. Sandy was particularly impressed by a boy who chose a sea urchin and a turtle, and mixed colors attentive to each image -- a burgundy red and a deep forest green. Sandy found it intriguing that the boy chose complementary colors although he did not formally know about them or the fact they work well together.

In this case, the artist had simplified materials, reducing the 16 tubes of color normally available to a basic palette and inviting serious investigation -- not merely once or twice -- but over many days during a term, so children could get to know what happens when three primary colors and black and white are combined in multiple permutations. "Color mixing was just one of the most fascinating things in the world for them. It was magic to them," said Monica, a painter. This knowledge of color produced some extraordinary paintings, including one that a child painted for close to two hours. Sandy commented on her documentation, "I have [a record of] maybe 12 steps of how he got to this. He worked methodically, filling areas as he moved through the paper - he filled the whole paper, very deliberately. He is four." We argue such results do not come without considerable exploration, investigation and preparation. When children themselves choose how this new knowledge and skill will be applied, we see passionate commitment and intention (such as two hours spent painting) combined with skill to create surprisingly mature products.

Design and Creating

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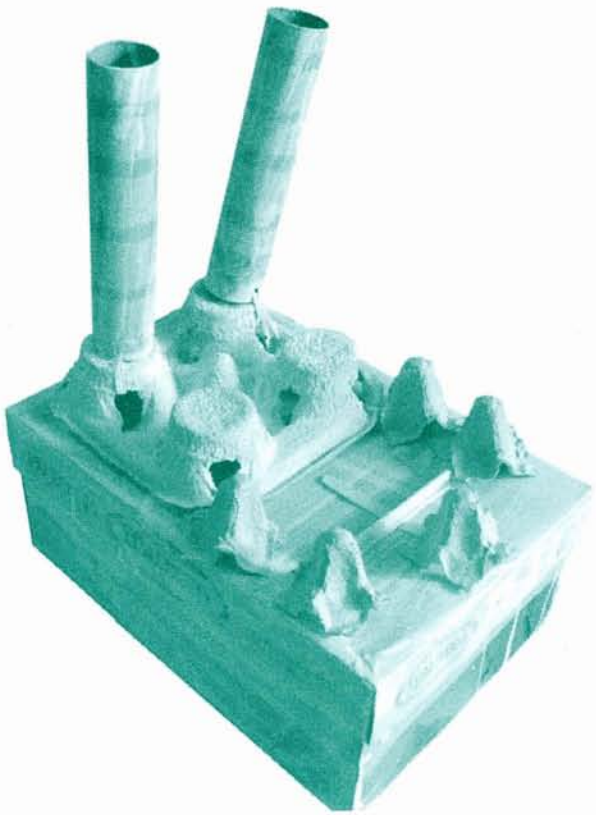
fragility of the beginning point, that a child's thinking can so quickly shut down if a teacher or parent interferes with the emersion of an idea, in order to *teach* the child something. Dawn spoke of "the cone of silence" she tries to construct around herself and the children to prevent interruptions: "I get so focused on what I am doing with the child and sort of make this cone of silence around us. People get the hint when we don't respond to them [their interruption] that something more important is happening than their question. Right after, I always try and say thank you for letting that happen, and tell them how excited I was and show them [what the child did]."

Another said he would even physically place himself between a child and a hovering teacher or parent to try to protect the moment when an idea, some tiny thread of thinking or feeling, is starting to emerge. The fact such possibilities can be so easily lost - think of the poet Coleridge and the knock on the door that made him lose a magical poem that was coming - led Dawn to call them "fragile moments." These ideas are like fireflies that glimmer briefly and then move elsewhere in the night. If the idea can be guided out of the mind through a pencil onto paper or into clay or into movement or song or words, there is a trace of it that we can return to and develop. The external trace is the covenant of a thought.

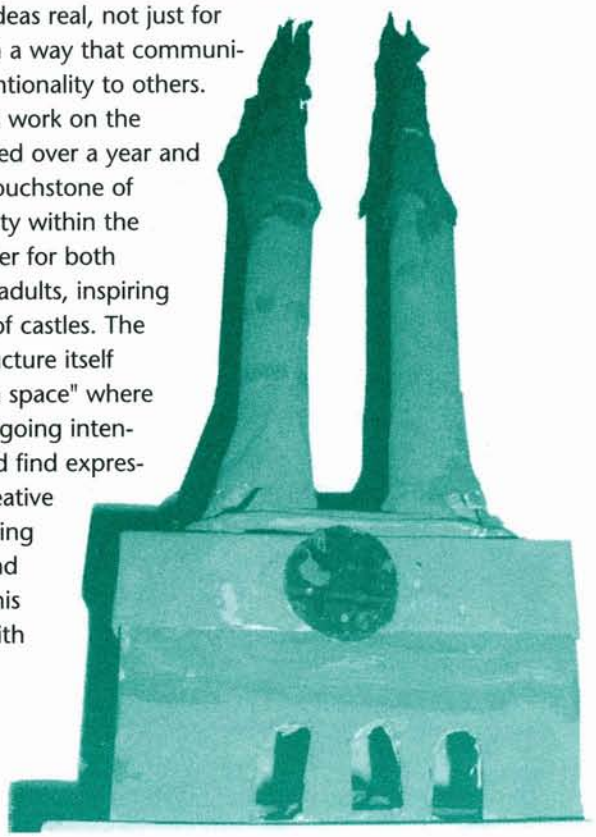
We make the inference that artists recognize when creative activity is opening up but that teachers and parents, who have not had supportive opportunities to experience their own creativity, may be less able to recognize these without living the experience themselves. We cannot protect what we do not know. Working with the artists, we find interesting episodes of growth in understanding in parents. Out on a ravine walk after a heavy rainfall, a group found deep gullies carved into paths where water coursed downhill. A child, who had been coming to the family resource program with his dad for two years, asked, "How can something as soft as raindrops do this?" An educator, excited by his question and its possibilities for inquiry, shared it later with his father, whose initial response was, "So Daniel, do you still want to know that? I'll tell you." Then he stopped himself, having so often seen the teachers and artist interacting with his son, and rephrased his response: "Maybe you have some ideas about that. Let's talk about it." We see this as a profound shift in a parent's image of his child as a thoughtful protagonist.

We found that when such incipient openings were supported, when "a space was opened up," in which a child might have an interesting thought and try making something connected to that thought, then surprising persistence emerged in children, a persistence to sustain an intriguing investigation and representation that went far beyond what is considered "developmentally appropriate" for four to six year-old children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). One remarkable instance was four year-old Jason, who had a preference for looking through architecture books when at the library with his mom because he liked buildings. He particularly liked a photo of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York with its two spires, and brought it in to announce to the adult Jason, the assemblage artist, "I want to make this." Together they found a box with a lid and some paper towel rolls and egg cartons, and young Jason began. After several weeks work, the box bore two spires, some egg carton humps, and the transept carefully indicated by two popsicle sticks crossed at right angles. While the structure was unremarkable at this point in time, you could nonetheless see what the child noticed and considered important to denote in the cathedral. The assemblage sat on the shelf of the resource center, and young Jason would see it from



time to time and notice something else he needed to make for it, such as arched doors in the front, then a stained glass window over them. Each of these additions involved considerable problem-solving support from the artist, and sometimes required searching the Internet for images. The older Jason suggested that the family might visit a cathedral in the city, where they might be able to take photos. This event launched renewed interest. The process of creating this cathedral was documented by the artist and teachers, and these records were revisited with Jason from time to time. Sometimes weeks went by before young Jason indicated a desire to work on some additional aspect of his cathedral. Hand-drawn arches inside were one addition, to be replaced later when he saw someone cutting folded paper, and made the connection that he could thus fold and cut identical arches for his cathedral. He made "pews" to go inside and painted them with a friend. Almost a year after the initial work had begun and after revisiting the photos from his visit to a cathedral, he became interested in lighting his cathedral.

He wanted real lights, so the teachers purchased a string of lights designed for a doll's house. When he expressed his concern that the wires would show, it sparked an investigation of how wires are hidden in classrooms - up under the acoustic tile in the ceiling. With the artist lifting him, Jason was able to look into and discuss this cave of infrastructure. Young Jason grasped the notion of a false ceiling and, with very little help, built one for the underside of the lid that holds the spires of his cathedral, carefully counting how many lights should go on each side so there was symmetry, positioning the holes and poking the bulbs through. He also asked for help in making the towers into spires rather than columns, a task for which they constructed a wire armature and covered it with papier maché. As a finishing touch, he made people to sit in the pews. The resulting creation is a record of the young child's thinking about what matters in his cathedral, a relationship between his thinking and the cathedral itself, and also a record of the artist's careful technical support to scaffold possibilities for the child to make his ideas real, not just for himself but in a way that communicates his intentionality to others. Young Jason's work on the cathedral lasted over a year and remained a touchstone of creative activity within the resource center for both children and adults, inspiring the creation of castles. The cathedral structure itself "opened up a space" where the child's ongoing intentionality could find expression in his creative ideas for making something and for showing his fascination with architecture.



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An Aesthetic Sensibility

It is extremely difficult to articulate the aesthetic sensibilities that artists bring to programs. In one of our conversations with the artists, Karyn Callaghan contrasted aesthetics with anaesthetized.

Karyn: Thinking about where the artist lives metaphorically in our society, it's a much more aesthetic existence, based on the senses and being very sensitive to aesthetics. Our society is anaesthetized - without aesthetics - without feeling, divorced from that sensitivity. I think part of our work is to encourage the aesthetic sense in children.

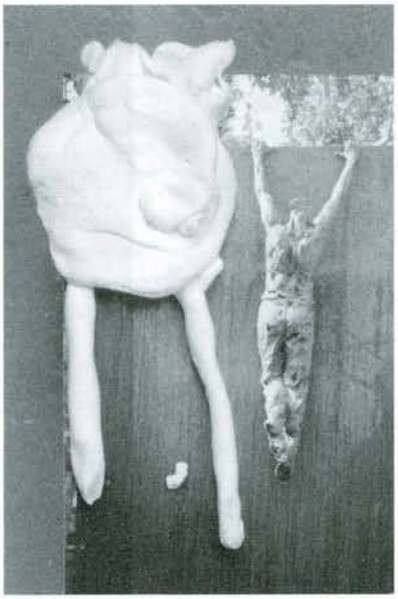
Carol Anne: How would you describe anaesthetized?

Karyn: Not being attuned to the richness of sensory experience. I think some artists hurt a lot because they just don't turn feeling off. What I see happening in Reggio Emilia is that they constantly challenge their own community to maintain an aesthetic value.

We think the aesthetic sensibility of Reggio Emilia offers a particularly warm intelligence in its response of thinking, feeling and valuing, and in its responsible attachment to the world. It seems as if those with aesthetic sensibilities take responsibility for responding to the world in creative ways, not simply out of conformity or convention. So an aesthetic sensibility is both reactive and active. It is not passive; it creates a response. We also think that artists may be less able to shut out the world because of their visual and sensory receptivity. The numbness so many of us suffer from witnessing frequent media reports of tragedies of war, terrorism, natural disasters and intentional cruelty to others reflects our incapacity to bear the unbearable. Such continual violence is unbearable and we do not know how to respond adequately to it. Artists do not, perhaps, protect themselves by becoming numb but may have a capacity - as the work of the Reggio Emilia approach repeatedly shows us - of going beyond pain to expression that can open spaces of communal healing.

Joan Urquhart, a clay potter and sculptor, suggests that mass marketing of corporate products entices children at a very early age to prescriptively embrace a logo-centric language that conditions children in their thinking. Children are "just covered in logos," and the language of Barbie or Spiderman is very difficult to mediate because it is so powerful in the scale, sophistication and massiveness of its marketing. This, too, pains those of us working with children. Joan said, "It seems to me that influences like those from Reggio are trying to work against that." We see the experience in Reggio as a powerful counterpoint that unlocks brand-name mindsets within the child and sets them free to generate their own expressions, to develop habits of mind (and values) that are uniquely and idiosyncratically theirs. "Reggio gifts children with the ability to become designers more than consumers of culture through the power of their creative process." We see the example of the Reggio Emilia approach and what it has been able to sustain over a generation as a remarkably hopeful example of a community with a highly developed aesthetic sensibility expressed in its philosophy of living (Davoli & Ferri, 2000).

In our work, we see small moments of bringing together difficult learning with the power to respond with creative activity, and how the child's meaning-making becomes a gesture of communication back to the broader community. For example, one artist, a sculptor, planned a sculpture walk with the children in a downtown program. This area contains several public sculptures, for instance, one of a family that the children enjoyed. But adjacent to this was a huge



black wall and hanging by his fingertips from the top of it was a sculpture of a headless worker. Known as "Day of Mourning," this was the piece in which the children were most interested. What sense can children make of a figure with no head? To the children, if he had no head, that meant he had no eyes, no ears and no hat. Their questions were matter of fact. The artist commented that he had expected to talk to the children about sculptures and suddenly he was faced with trying to explain the concept of a memorial built because many industrial workers are injured on the job: "It's a powerful place and people really have issues with injured family members, so they have a place to go and find solace." It was difficult to know the sense that four to five year-old children made of this sculpture, but the idea of people being hurt had resonance for the children. Back at the center, the teachers framed some photos that they had taken of the sculptures. One child, on his own initiative, retrieved the photo of "Day of Mourning," molded a replica of the headless man and hung it on the edge of the photo frame.

The same artist noted that we don't often take our children on a tour of the town, that they tend to accompany adults on errands, such as shopping. We find this tendency to offer children entry points to the community in which they live appeared to be part of the artists' aesthetic sensibility - which we define as a looking out into the world in an unflinching way, embracing the pain along with the joy in what is found, and creating out of that connected chemistry of knowledge and feeling, something that represents both. What is created has a tone, a coloring or timbre, a stance all its own, which is connected to the feeling sensibility of the maker, and this is what makes the creation a unique cultural production. It shows the artist's feeling embedded in a thought structure.

Within the experiences we have described and in many others, we believe the children's ideas would not have developed in the same way, nor found expression in ways that went beyond initial exploration, without the sustained participation of these professional artists. In other words, their presence was not merely an enhancement to early childhood education but actually changed the pedagogy of the settings in which they worked. We hypothesize that such work helps children to find and treasure the "little room" inside themselves in which ideas may spark and grow into paintings, sculptures, dances, music, stories and writings that give children the confidence of being protagonists of ideas and creators of culture for their own communities.

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Research for this article was funded by the Hamilton Community Foundation.

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