

Symposium Arts Education in Early Childhood

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[Stinson, S.W.](#) (Ed.) (1993). Symposium on the arts in early childhood. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 94 (6), 9-34. DOI: [10.1080/10632913.1993.9936935](https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.1993.9936935)

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Article:

These articles, while focusing on young children, explore central issues in arts education: what is it about arts education that makes it educational, and what is it that makes it art? All four authors find unguided self-expression limited or inappropriate as a goal for arts education, even during early childhood. Each article also implies intriguing questions that stimulate further questions for the reader.

The Getty Center for Education in the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts have joined many less well-known organizations in contributing to the current recognition of the importance of student encounter with great works of art as a way of understanding art, artists, and civilizations.' Many have questioned whether such activities are appropriate for young children. The articles by Daniel Walsh and Bernard Spodek encourage us to bring students into meaningful relationship with good art. While Spodek suggests that we judge the quality and appropriateness of early childhood arts experiences by how much they contribute to the sense children make of the world in which they live, his specific curricular suggestions emphasize the child's making sense of artworks. His discussion of developmentally appropriate ways to bring art history, criticism, and aesthetics into the early childhood classroom is convincing, although it also raises questions for me regarding what is most important for children to learn and do during the preschool and primary years.

Walsh also asks us to recognize art as a way that children construct the meaning of their world and suggests that we might think of art as a way of telling stories about ourselves. While he writes that children should tell their own stories as well as listen to those of others, he leaves out children's own creations in all of his examples. He tells a powerful story of how his young daughter came to appreciate rivers and songs about rivers by sharing music and the Mississippi with her father; I found myself asking why making her own painting or dance about rivers was not part of this story. I also found myself questioning whether constructing meaning and telling stories are really so different from expressing oneself, as long as one understands that the self is a social construction.

Patricia Pinciotti does not reject the goals of creativity and self-expression but instead reveals how creative drama teachers can take their students beyond simple pretend play and help them to become more skillful at expressing their own "stories" about their worlds. She seems to view the creative drama class as a laboratory in which children can develop not only dramatic skills but life skills. Perhaps because she is writing about drama, and not theatre for young children, she does not discuss the issue of how and how much children should encounter theatrical productions produced by others.

Liora Bresler makes clear that arts education reform has not trickled down to the early childhood classroom, where the overall school culture and the lack of teacher preparation in the arts have reinforced the status quo. Of the three approaches to arts education that she identifies, she advocates the "guided-exploration orientation," which sounds much like what Pinciotti describes in creative drama. Bresler does not reject creativity and self-expression as goals but notes that they require more than nonintervention by the teacher. She finds these other conditions--an aesthetic environment in which the arts are valued and aesthetically perceptive teachers--to be

lacking in schools. Bresler suggests that the guided exploration orientation, in which students are given support in developing skills so they can better express their own ideas, is also a useful way to think about what primary teachers need in order to become better arts teachers. While I am drawn to this orientation for teaching both children and teachers, I found myself pondering the sometimes thin line between guidance and control. I wonder if those who give up overt control because of its lack of effectiveness simply find subtler ways to manipulate, under the guise of "guidance."

The stimulating questions provoked by these papers are an indication of the complexity of the issues they discuss. They also assure the vitality of the field of arts education for young children.

Notes

I am indebted to Liora Bresler, who organized a symposium on arts education in early childhood for the 1992 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. The authors in this section were among the participants in that symposium.

1. Getty Center for Education in the Arts, *Beyond Creating: The Place for Art in America's Schools* (Los Angeles: Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1985); National Endowment for the Arts, *Toward Civilization: A Report on Arts Education* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988).