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Becoming the 'Art Lady'

by Julie Rose

My journey of joy with young children, exploring the arts and the wonders of the natural world, led me to a discovery about myself... that the journey was not *just* about what children were learning, but also about the lessons' nature, the children and the teachers who support them, had in store for me.

The children at my granddaughter's preschool had come to regard me as the 'art lady.' I realized how that honorary title boosted my confidence by acknowledging an inner voice that reminded me of *my* own creativity. After all, that was *part* of the reason I had been volunteering for the past two years, schlepping my stash of clay, paints, interesting tools, music, and books to explore with the children.

Undoubtedly, I wanted to spend as much time as possible with my four-year-old grandchild Avery, as well as the teachers I admired, but I also recognized that the time with children was a gift for me; an opportunity to fulfill something in me that needed fulfilling. I believe that if we deny ourselves the opportunity to embrace and immerse ourselves in those things we truly care about, something in us dies. Volunteering was a great opportunity to stay current with early childhood education, my grandchild, and my passion for the arts. I would be proud of my newly acclaimed title and celebrate our time exploring art together, despite the fact that I have never *really* considered myself an artist. I would now embrace the privilege of viewing this opportunity to work with some

very competent and capable young children, not through the lens of a former teacher or mother, but as Avery's Nana... the art lady.

Setting the Stage

The philosophy at Avery's school is that children need access to open-ended materials (loose parts) that invite them to generate their own creative ideas. The school believes that learning with nature in rich, well-designed settings helps children gain valuable skills across all learning domains. Picture a nature-rich outdoor play environment filled with colorful flowers that spark children's imaginations; trees celebrated for their beauty and shade; spectacular butterflies; striped and dotted insects; and a variety of wildlife for children to safely explore. In addition to the proliferation of nature's beauty, the space has also been designed to support whole-child learning, offering activity areas inviting experiences in art, music, large motor construction, gardening, building, sand and water play, dirt-digging, and climbing. Children are also actively engaged in caretaking tasks, knowing they have a responsibility to keep their classroom alive and healthy.

The Reflective Teacher

On my first day volunteering, I arrived to see Avery sitting on her teacher's lap, plopped down on the grass in front of a cluster of sunflowers, deep in observation and conversation. It was a great image of a caring relationship between teacher and child, celebrating the beauty of nature together. At that moment I realized that experiences with 'art' can happen in a multitude of ways. Enjoyment modeled by teachers, particularly as they are exploring artistic experiences involving the natural world, has tremendous impact on what children believe and appreciate. Teacher Holly reinforces this idea:



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A Holistic Approach to Arts Education

To fully support children's creative expression, it can be helpful to divide the arts into categories: Creative Dramatics, Music, Purposeful Movement, and Visual Art. The process of experiencing and expressing or creating art is a way children can synthesize all that they are learning about the world, especially the natural world.

Creative Dramatics

Dramatic play can be interpreted and understood through the ways children engage in elaborate, imaginative play showing us what they are thinking about and how they are making sense of what is happening around them. Many adults today are concerned that children's play is dominated by commercial media, wherein they mostly act out stories they have seen on television or in movies. When children use natural 'loose parts' such as stumps, sticks, and pinecones, that play often takes on new richness by requiring them to think of their own ideas and create their own props. Sometimes they dive into a delightful world of fantasy for a while and at other times we get to sample mud cakes or tour the Grand Canyon dug in the Sand Area.

Music and Movement

Nature, music, and movement work so well together. We know that all children, but especially those really kinesthetic ones, need to move to learn. Helping them learn what their bodies are capable of and how to regulate it is powerful. A natural outdoor classroom provides the space for children to engage in a wide variety of movement, even including real work such as digging holes and raking leaves. When musical instruments are available every day, children often tie their movements to music. They might hop as a friend pounds on a drum or float around like a butterfly, dancing scarves in hand, while others play a melodic metallophone.

Another unique opportunity the outdoors affords is practice in close listening. Children develop valuable musical understanding when they try to match notes played with their voices or experiment with pitch and volume. One child I observed in an outdoor classroom regularly watched and listened for birds and then tried call-and-response with them, hoping they enjoyed her songs as much as she enjoyed theirs.

Visual Arts

Consider how the aesthetics of environments support creativity. The beauty of nature inspires so much of the art we see in museums and elsewhere, so it shouldn't surprise us that children respond in much the same way. Developmentally appropriate practice calls us to focus on the process of creation rather than the product, and outdoor art areas can truly inspire children's processes. Processes might include stone mosaics, mud paintings on easels and sidewalks, and snow sculptures awaiting the warmth of sunshine to melt them into new shapes. The big, messy artistic work that can happen outdoors with materials such as these can ensure that art creation is a very sensory experience.

As Mary Lou Cook says, "Creativity is inventing, experimenting, growing, taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes, and having fun." Learning to interpret the world around us so that we can find our place in it and are able to contribute to it is what education is all about. Creativity is the way children express their uniqueness. When they act out stories, make music, paint or draw, they make visible what they know, what they feel, and who they are. It can be a way of communicating that is reliant on words so that we can learn from all of children's "One Hundred Languages" as the Reggio Emilia approach describes it.

"This nature-rich environment is totally infused into all their senses. It becomes them. It's like they are eating the dirt!" Children begin to understand that they are a part of the environment, too, and artistic experiences help them express loving appreciation and connection. As Holly said, "What children encounter each day in the natural world impacts what they are building, drawing, painting, singing, creating."

The Power of Observation

Children need the opportunity to slow down and pay closer attention to the world around them. In fact, don't we all? In his book *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv coined the term "nature-deficit disorder" to describe the children of today, making the case that much beauty is overlooked because of the frantic pace of life. Avery's teachers believe

they can help children practice slowing down by giving them chances to closely observe and explore the wonders of nature together.

One day when I volunteered, the children had just finished reading a book called *I Took a Walk* by Henry Cole. It invites children to carefully hone their observation skills by looking for specific details found in the book. Because the children had been practicing close observation, I discovered that their creative artistic expression was greatly enhanced by first inviting them to take plenty of time to make careful observations of the natural world.

From the time Avery was an infant, she was exposed to art galleries and museums of natural history. One day when we were at a local art gallery Avery said, "That artist likes to paint nature. He likes trees just like you, Nana." I couldn't help but appreciate the fact that at a very young age Avery understood something about me and could relate that thought through her observation. "Sometimes artists like to paint pictures about the beauty they see in nature or things they care about to help tell their story," I responded. Remembering that experience led me to intentionally pose this question to Avery's three-, four-, and five-year-old classmates:

"Do you think artists get inspiration from nature?"

To support this provocation, I invited the children to explore pictures of famous artists' works, including Georgia O'Keeffe's *One Hundred Flowers*, Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water*, and Andy Goldsworthy's *A Collaboration with Nature*. Along with these well-known pieces, I also included enlarged photos of monarch butterflies and a photo of one child's pink dress with interesting, curvy lines that I had taken on an earlier visit. Enlarging the images allowed the

Inspiring Installation Artists

Andy Goldsworthy is a British sculptor, photographer and environmentalist producing site-specific sculpture and land art: www.ocula.com/Artists/AndyGoldsworthy

Patrick Dougherty bends sticks and twigs into whimsical, enveloping 'stickworks' that inspire delight and awe: stickwork.net

Michael Grab engages in a process that boils down to contemplative stone arrangement; involving patience, adaptation, slow breathing, steady hands, and a plethora of other practiced skills: gravityglue.com

Questions We Considered in Our Reflective Practice:

- What are children trying to communicate about their understanding of the natural world through the creative process?
- How do the aesthetics of the environment support creativity?
- How do children reflect the beauty of nature in their artistic expressions?
- Could creating art inspired by the natural outdoor environment influence children's attitudes about wanting to care for their space?
- How might children's experiences practicing 'looking closely' impact their creative expression?



Photographs by the author

children to see only a portion of the butterfly and dress in greater detail, introducing perspective.

As we explored together, I was reminded of this quote by Marcel Proust: "The real voyage of discovery is not in finding new landscapes, but in having new eyes." As we looked at the monarch image, I asked open-ended questions to invite all responses... "What do you see?" "What do you know?" "What do you wonder?" "What do you like?" Responses were varied and led to discussions about the shapes, textures, colors, and patterns they were observing, along with speculation about the identity of the monarch butterfly that had been frequenting their outdoor garden. By posing these questions, I also discovered more about the children's understanding of the world and what deeply interested

them. When we looked at the enlarged image of the pink dress, many children thought it was another Georgia O'Keeffe flower... but Violet, who had worn the dress, stated with great enthusiasm, "That's my dress!" The children laughed as they discovered they had been tricked! What they thought was a flower was *actually* Violet's pink dress. Another child said, "They made that dress look like flowers."

We continued practicing 'looking closely' by making simple view finders out of 2" x 6" pieces of paper, carefully designed by each artist and then rolled up like a tube to be used as a tool for 'seeing with new eyes.' As children were intensely looking through their viewfinders to unveil new discoveries, teachers modeled their sense of wonder and delight in these sightings. When Avery discovered a large, bright green

Supporting Children's Experiences with the Arts and Nature

The following four questions can be used to facilitate children's deep engagement with artistic experiences inspired by nature. The questions help children attend to their perceptions and thoughts in ways that deepen their awareness and appreciation for all that touches their lives. These questions validate everyone's thinking, and all responses are accepted and valued.

"What do you see?"

Always start with this question. It asks children to begin a conversation based on their own observations and helps them focus their awareness on the world around them. Observation can become a multi-sensory experience if children are encouraged to observe and then explore natural objects that allow them to use all of their senses.

"What do you know?"

This is a natural follow up to "What do you see?" as children have already begun to put the new object or experience into the context of things they have already encountered. John Dewey believed that we learn something from every experience we have, whether that experience is positive or negative, and that each experience influences future ones. Talking together to make meaning of a new experience in relation to what we already know helps the new experience become part of our long-term memory.

"What do you wonder?"

This may be the most important question to ask, because it models the positive benefits of divergent thinking. It is different than asking, "Do you have a question?" Asking the children what they 'wonder' encourages contemplation, curiosity, and dreaming about possibilities. There is an old saying that children enter school as question marks and leave as periods, but this does not have to be so. Young children are masters at asking questions, but statistics show a steady decrease in the number of times children raise their hands as they progress through the grade levels in school. Not only is it important to teach children that we value their answers, but above all, we must show them that we value their questions.

"What do you like?"

The last in the series of questions inspires children to share their own thoughts and feelings. Children are invited to make statements of interpretation and personal preference. This question can also provide teachers with an opportunity to talk to children about the value of having their own opinions (which may be different from someone else's), as well as the importance of listening to different perspectives and respecting the views of others. It is a springboard for learning tolerance and appreciating diversity.

grasshopper, she described it as being 'brilliant green.' I was amazed at how this grasshopper, found in the garden area, was not at all frightened by us, but rather seemed equally curious. "Avery," I questioned, "can you believe the way the grasshopper seems to be inviting us into his world?" With that, I left Avery to continue her discoveries and began walking through the outdoor classroom. I found that one group of children who had been closely (and safely) observing bees were building a 'beehive' structure out of fabric and large sticks. One boy, Kendall, yelled out, "We're the bee guards and we're protecting the queen bee from the bears. We're using honey as a trap for the bears." I wondered if Frank Lloyd Wright ever played at building beehives as a child, using those experiences as later inspiration in his work.

Another child, Charlotte, was holding a caterpillar in her hand. I heard her teacher suggest that a way of honoring the caterpillar, without handling it, would be to document it by painting its picture. Charlotte seemed very satisfied with that suggestion and began creating with the watercolors she found available to her. What a lovely way to respectfully help a child understand how fragile nature can be. The teacher never said, "We don't pick up caterpillars," she simply offered an idea of how to honor a living creature in an interesting way.

After quite a bit of time had passed, I was surprised to find that Avery was still observing the grasshopper. To assist in her close observation, Avery had gone to the greenhouse on her own initiative and grabbed a bughouse. She had found a small stick and carefully invited the grasshopper to enter the bug house. He did. He climbed up on the stick and seemed very happy to be entering his new home. As Avery sat in the corner of the art area with her new friend, I could hear her singing a song to this brilliant green creature.

The world seemed so full of promise at that very moment, in an environment that fully supported the authenticity of children's play. All of the reflective questions we had asked



Photographs by the author

together would be answered as we all became witnesses to the way children's learning was made visible through their creative expression. Soon the children were calm and ready to transition from the outdoors to the indoors. As I began to gather my things to leave and head for home, a little boy yelled, "Hey art lady, can you bring clay next time?"

Ideas to Spark Purposeful Movement and Body Awareness

- Local performances such as Cirque du Soleil often inspire our children to move in creative ways after they attend with their families.
- Local sporting events or those popular on television such as the Olympics. During the last winter Olympics I saw children building hockey rinks in the snow and performing medal ceremonies on our outdoor stage.
- Breath awareness and simple yoga practices encourage mindfulness and self-regulation. Imaginazium.com is a source for children's yoga pose image cards.