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Seeing Children Fully Immersed in Sensory Exploration

by Jess Guiney, Sheena Wilton, and Deb Curtis

Jessica and Isabella were immediately drawn to the new chalk available on the patio. As soon as they saw the big basket, they found an open space and began testing the colors. They seemed attracted to the brighter shades — choosing to use them first. They began experimenting with differing amounts of pressure as they filled in the space with chalk. Isabella worked slowly, noticing the brightness of her colors. Jessica worked quickly, examining the amount of chalk dust that was accumulating as she moved her chalk across the ground like a windshield wiper.

As the girls continued to fill the space around them with different shades of chalk, they noticed more about how the colors blended and spread.

As they spread the dust with their hands:

“Look at how much pink there is now!”

“The blue is so big now!”

As they mixed the dust:

“We can make a new color.”

“Yeah, a new kind of pink!”

Jessica also looked at Isabella and saw that her black pants were covered in the chalk she was sitting in, “Your pants are now that blue!” Smiling, Isabella stood up to examine herself, then made a deliberate choice to sit in the red chalk dust. Happy with the way her pants looked, she filled the ground with the two colors and stretched her legs on top of them!

After Jessica moved on, Isabella stayed engaged with the chalk, continuing to watch the amount of chalk dust grow, and mixing it with her hands. Using different colors and creating little piles, Isabella waited to gather a certain amount before blending them together. “I’m making a wish,” she shared, “‘cause it just looks like it!”

Later, Jessica and Isabella returned to the chalk, and began to fill in a large portion of the patio with the same vibrant colors that had been so attractive to them earlier. The two used the chalk in a variety of ways, rubbing it on its side, holding it upright and making lines, and using their hands to spread the dust around. As they worked, the girls discussed their drawing:

“It’s an ocean. We’re drawing the whole ocean!”

“And there are so many colors in the ocean that we’re putting pink and blue!”

“And you can see, here, the waves,” Jessica said as she moved her hands through the chalk dust representing the movement of the ocean.



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When Jessica pointed out how much colorful dust had gathered around them, Isabella was intrigued to slowly and quietly explore it. First, she moved a little pile around with one finger. Then she swished her entire hand back and forth over the dust, mixing the colors together. Finally, Isabella blew the chalk dust across the cement, moving it in yet another way. After most of her work was beautifully blurred, she looked up and said, “It looks like a wish.”



Sheena, Deb, and Jess work together as teachers at Crescent Park Child Development Center in Palo Alto, California, where they are fortunate to spend time each week observing and thinking together about the remarkable things that children do.



Jessica studied the chalk she was using. “Look,” she observed. “They’re shrinking! They’re getting smaller and smaller!” “Yeah,” Isabella agreed, looking at the chalk. “And this one is the biggest ’cause I didn’t really use it yet. And the blue one is the smallest ’cause we used it for the whole, whole ocean!”

The girls continued to make comparisons about the qualities of the chalk:

“This one is smoothest.”

“This one is pointier than the others.”

“This one has the most dust!”

Soon, they were deliberately changing the shape and texture of the chalk by rubbing it against the rough concrete.



“This one is shrinking again! It’s smaller and smaller!”
“Now I can make this one have a point!”

As Jessica looked closely at the chalk, she acknowledged the color of her hands — pink with chalk dust — for the first time: “Look at my pink, pink hands. They’re pink from the ocean, and a little blue.” She then made note of the chalk dust on Isabella’s face. “It’s like make-up! We’re putting on make-up!”

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Jessica spread the chalk dust from her hands onto her cheeks, and used a finger to gather some blue dust from the ground for her nose. "Look," she and Isabella called together. "Look at us! Will you take pictures to send to our moms?"

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A Drawing Experience or a Sensory Experience?

We recently brought this story to our planning time with Deb, to share the photos and notes we had collected of Jessica and Isabella working with the chalk. As we discussed what unfolded, we became more and more fascinated with the chalk work of the children. We were particularly struck by how the girls immersed themselves in the chalk, covering their faces, hands, arms and bodies. Was this a sensory experience rather than the drawing experience we had planned? Our conversations greatly expanded our ideas about the nature of sensory exploration for young children.

Before these conversations, we thought of sensory experiences in typical ways: water play, play-dough, sand play and finger-paint, where children mix, spill, splash, and make a mess. We didn't consider chalk a sensory activity. But observing Jessica and Isabella's immersion in the chalk helped us go beyond the usual way of seeing. Deb suggested we expand our idea of sensory experiences to study the notion of aesthetic experiences.

Webster's definition of *aesthetics* is an abstract concept meaning 'perception' in Greek. Aesthetics offer a focused and metaphorical way of knowing and experiencing the world that involves engaging with your senses, feelings, attitudes, processes, and responses to objects and experiences. Aesthetic experiences involve awareness and appreciation of the beauty found in the world and allow us to become totally lost in the moment. This definition certainly described the girls' experiences with the chalk.

Space and Materials as an Aesthetic Experience

As Isabella and Jessica explored the chalk, their experience was informed by the space in which they worked. The chalk was carefully presented in a large basket with a handle. As the girls worked, they scattered the many pieces of chalk around themselves, making all of their options visible, and each color easy to reach.

The patio is large, and boasts a sizable patch of pavement that is free of traffic. Additionally, there are many variations in the texture of the pavement, some spots being rougher than others. As the girls explored, the fact that the surface they were



drawing on was large and that it changed subtly, seemed to enhance their experience.

The quality of the chalk also added to the girls' explorations. The intensity of the colors and the large amount of dust that the chalk produced contributed to the girls' deep focus on the materials and to the long period of time that they were engaged.

We noticed the girls experimenting with each piece of available chalk and ultimately settling on those that were the brightest. Later, we were struck by the girls' almost exclusive use of 'hot pink' and 'bright blue.' In our observations, we noted the girls were filling a huge space with chalk marks with great variation in line quality, with big, solid patches of pavement being filled. They used full body movements to make the chalk marks and move the dust around the space and to apply pressure to change the chalk from solid to dust. They delighted in covering themselves with the colorful dust. The girls showed us that chalk offers much more than a drawing experience. As they immersed themselves in the chalk, we learned that chalk also provides a rich sensory experience.

Uncovering Emotion and Metaphor

The apparent change in Jessica and Isabella's intention in the course of their work with the chalk intrigued us. Initially the girls were eager to explore the chalk, to discover its many possibilities and, if you will, to befriend it: to get to know it as intimately as possible, physically and emotionally. At this time, they didn't seem to have a sense of ownership of the space where they worked, and instead appeared entirely focused on being with the chalk. We observed that the girls used the chalk deliberately, drawing a vast ocean, comparing the dust to wishes and sharing their discovery of

the chalk as 'make-up.' They understood each other in a deep way, fully sharing the emotional and physical experience of the chalk with each other. These joyful connections seemed to transport them to a rich aesthetic world of wonder and imagination.

As we continued to discuss our observations of Jessica and Isabella, we recognized that their work exemplified a value that we both hold dear: it is imperative to get to know materials well before they can be used to their fullest potential. The girls' deep investigation of the chalk and our curiosity about their process informed the rest of our dialogue. We are grateful to Jessica and Isabella for showing us how much more children see and engage with the sensory world than we imagined. We are now committed to presenting materials with an awareness of their fuller aesthetic possibilities and making time for children to explore them fully as Jessica and Isabella did with the chalk. Whether we observe children using paint, glue, clay, or chalk, we will be eager to see children covering their hands, arms, and faces and then reaching out to each other. From the initial dip of a finger to the colored water running down their arms at clean up, children see that life is meant to be experienced with all of their senses!

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