

“Look, There is Blue.” A Community of Artists, Teachers, and Children

by Alison Lutton, Ginny Spade, and Audrey DeCheser

“Close your eyes,’ said Frederick, ‘as he climbed on a big stone.’ ‘Now I send you the rays of the sun. Do you feel how their golden glow’ And as Frederick spoke of the sun, the four little mice began to feel warmer. Was it Frederick’s voice? Was it magic?”

If you don’t already know Leo Lionni’s *Frederick*, the mouse who harvests images and words that will get his family through the winter, then run to the children’s section of the nearest library to meet him. Introduce him to your children. Soon Frederick’s story will become a part of the culture of your community of children.

Recently Audrey DeCheser’s classroom took a walk through the art gallery in Communications Hall, home to the art department on our community college campus. One child sounded a little like Frederick as he drew attention to a particular work of art. “Look,” he said. “There is blue.”

Most of us read *Frederick* and feel the power we hold to feed or to starve artistic expression in young children. But this story holds a second, equally powerful message for our early childhood programs. This little mouse asks us not just to value and support the artistic development in children but also to reach out to the adult artists in our own communities.

Why you need an art partner

Finding the artists in your community doesn’t really take work — it just takes interest. It may mean becoming a local supporter and advocate for the arts. At its best, you will form a real partnership with others who care about the quality of life in your community. You might be surprised at how easily advocacy for the arts and advocacy for early childhood programs can work together.

Our children’s centers and associate degree program are home to the Art as a Way of Learning® professional development program. This program encourages arts-integration across the early childhood curriculum, with the help of an art partner. At first exposure, many students think this is not possible. Few programs already have an art partner and many cannot imagine how to get one.

Finding an art partner might begin with something as simple as bringing the authentic work of artists into your classroom. In our program we find that toddlers respond to the bold contrasts and lines of Picasso’s *Don Quixote*. This art print displayed near simple black paint and white paper stimulates bold work from two year olds. Preschoolers are often drawn to the brush strokes of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and to color blocks of Mondrian and Rothko.



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The goal in work with any art partner is not to teach children to copy the works of professional artists, but to notice and experiment with age-appropriate art techniques. Toddlers and preschoolers are very interested in experiments with varying brush sizes and strokes, color combinations for mixing, and the effects of paint on varied types of paper. An art print linked to selected materials for exploration can inspire a new idea and give children a connection to the way artists think.

Another beginning point is to think about what you need from an art partner. An art partner is invited into your program as a community artist, not as the art teacher. In partnership, you will support and stimulate each other, respecting each other as experts in your own fields. The artist will form partnerships with the program administrator and with the staff. Over time you will share beliefs about teaching, learning, and the arts. As you plan new ways to integrate the arts into your program, you will share your early childhood expertise, information, and techniques. The artist will share his or her artistic expertise, information, and techniques.

Potential art partners are in every community. You might find yours in a local gallery, a children's theater, a movement or yoga program, or in the art teachers and students at local colleges. Many communities have converted an abandoned factory or warehouse into artist studios open to the public. These community programs often seek community supporters and welcome the opportunity to connect with local educators. Students in our early childhood associate degree program often meet their first arts partner when they work with the art department faculty who teach our Art and Visual Thinking course.

Ginny's story

"The second semester in my early childhood education degree program brought a heightened appreciation for artists and the arts. Pencils were given numbers and density. I developed a feel for the media and creativity that are part of a real art experience. I began to think that I had the ability to bring this process to children. My staff now attend trainings that stimulate art opportunities with new and recycled materials. They bring these ideas back and introduce them to the children.

"My center supplies a multitude of media now as we learn to increase access to art materials in the classroom. This allows the



children to build their own ideas, processes, and imaginations. Simple tools and art as a way of teaching can bring out the spirit hiding in the children we serve. Bringing music and dance from different cultures into my classroom transformed the unusually energetic child into a dancer. The ultimate resource would be to bring an artist to the classroom, to touch and feel the artist's spirit."

Ginny's deeper goal was to build a collaborative relationship with an artist who would work with Ginny's child care center for a period of time. As she started to look more deliberately for art partners, they began to appear.

"I recently received a long awaited phone call. For many years I envisioned murals in my center. This day sent me a true gift of partnering. A muralist, Shari, agreed to create murals for my program.

"In my excitement, I spoke to another artist about my good fortune. Ann, a local oil painter, got caught up in this prospect of mural

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painting. She offered to paint a mural on a portable board for us. My art professor suggested the mural on one side of the board and using the other side to display children's art. This art board could then travel throughout the center and add its special touch wherever it stands.

"Ann also enlightened me about a unique artist-child partnering that already exists in my own community. Artists are recruited to participate in 'Arts Day' held at a nearby school. The artists share oil pastel painting, dancing, bagpipe music, origami, collage making, and watercolors with the children. The eager children spend the day learning many new experiences from generous artists who give this time to share their knowledge. A mountain of wealth can be received when an artist is given the opportunity to share their gifts with children. They bring to the children what they love to do. In enjoying the arts and sharing them, the artists become a resource to children and to the community. The artist's own media builds the bond. Whether pencil or paint, clay or tissue paper, engaging in art with artists will leave an impression and perhaps bring out talent in our youth.

"The arts unite us in so many ways."

The stages of collaboration

As in any collaborative work, an arts partnership tends to develop in stages, a little like children learning to play. The Art as a Way of Learning® program has identified these four stages of arts partnerships.

1

At first, early childhood teachers and artists *coexist* in the same space and time. The early childhood teacher may take the children down the hall to the artist's space, or step aside in her own classroom as the artist takes over. They may watch each other work, but do not yet share information and ideas.

2

In the next stage, the artist and teacher begin to *cooperate*. They begin to share some common short term objectives and to value each other's work. The teacher and artist begin to share information as the teacher learns more about the arts and the artist learns more about young children. The program supports the artist's presence.

3

The third stage, *coordination*, begins when the teacher and the artist begin to adapt to each other. They begin to see a long-term relationship ahead and begin to feel a harmony in their work together.

4

Finally, the teacher and artist begin to *collaborate*. They have built a truly reciprocal relationship based on trust and shared goals. They know each other's work styles and needs. They plan together to design, implement, and sustain projects.

Projects over time support development

One of the benefits of working with an art partner over time is that teachers and children learn



PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHORS

about art materials, skills, and techniques. Creative play and exploration are, of course, the goal. But that does not mean that free throwing of paint is the key to artistic development. Artists can teach us about the creative process — nurturing an initial idea, turning it around, playing with it, learning about it. Artists teach us that there is no one right way. One artist develops her work in meticulous thumbnail sketches. Another plays with quick sketches using a lot of movement and revision.

Artists teach us that simple high quality materials offer deeper learning than pre-fabricated activities with “children’s materials.” Artists can teach us the goal of an art experience. When an artist displays one of Van Gogh’s *Sunflower* paintings and then carefully selects paints, brushes, and paper for children, the goal is not to draw sunflowers. It is to explore texture, color, and shape and to help each child learn about the art process, language, and materials. All children don’t need to produce or get the same thing from the experience. Sunflower painting may lead to painting the sun. The goal is not to get children to like famous works of art — it is okay for a child to not like a famous painting or piece of music.

For the past few years we have been fortunate to work with Gail Herring, a botanical illustrator who serves as our current artist in residence. She partners with our teachers on curriculum projects, documentation, and displays. “That’s the real collaborative part . . . gaining a deep respect for each other and what we each do. Often the learning goals are the same, both want the same thing for children but come at it in different ways.”

Artists teach us to have high expectations. Teachers tend to think children cannot do *real art*. Artists help us make the connection to each child’s ability to see and represent, to look and to create. Artists help us to see a child’s picture or song as a composition with an interesting approach to balance, harmony, or texture. Artists bring a new seriousness to designing and hanging a children’s art exhibit.

Audrey’s story

“The campus art gallery is one of the stops we make on our daily walk. The children are familiar with looking at and commenting on



the art collections. This time the work displayed was textured paper. Most of the children’s comments and questions were about the color and the wrinkles.” Christin focused on color. ‘Look, there is blue.’ D’Lanie on texture. ‘How come the paper is wrinkled?’”

“When we returned to the classroom, we discussed what we saw, how the paper looked, and imagined how it felt. We don’t touch the art at the gallery out of respect for other people’s work. I asked the children how we might be able to make wrinkled paper. We decided that squeezing and stepping on paper might work.

“Over the next three days we worked with paper. We submerged brown paper and construction paper of various colors in water. As children squeezed the water out, the paper wrinkled. We put the wet paper on trays to dry in a sunny spot in our hallway. On the third day, we painted on the wrinkled paper. Each day we returned to the art gallery to look at the wrinkle paper exhibit.

“Taking young children out in the community where they can experience things outside of the classroom setting is a rich experience for the teachers as well as the children. Bringing the experience back into the classroom through hands-on exploration provides an environment rich in discovery. To limit what you do because you don’t think the children will understand is to disrespect the capabilities of a young child.

“Bringing children to our campus Art Department gallery to view exhibits throughout the year is a learning experience for me as much as it is for them. To witness their sense of wonder and know that we can build on the experience together is awesome. I learn what they

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would like to do from them. I learn how to do certain types of art right along with them. We have learned together about background, middle ground, and foreground, sequence of work, that a painting can be done in different parts, working over time to create the whole. We have learned a variety of tools and techniques for painting, collage, and sculpture.

“After attending the opening of an exhibit of Outsider Artist’s work at a local gallery, I felt a new excitement about art as expression. I felt the excitement of the people who worked so hard to present the artists’ work. I began to see my children as outsider artists — community artists without formal training. Each day I wonder where my little outsider artists will take me next.”

The halls of our Children’s Center were busy this week as Audrey and Gail worked together to create displays documenting our children’s visit to the Art Department gallery and their subsequent art work. Children’s art pieces, photos, and captions were spread out on the floor as Gail and Audrey considered possible arrangements. Layers of construction paper on the bulletin board created complimentary colors as a background and matting for children’s work. The texture of the children’s *wrinkle art* pops from the walls. My favorite child quote is Matthew’s: “What do you see in this picture, Mrs. D?” He expects his teacher to see and to think like an artist.

Artists and teachers have much in common. We choose our work for its meaning rather than choosing our work to maximize our income, and we have periods of financial crisis. We know that what we do is important to the survival of our

community, but we also have periods of uncertainty and deep questions. On our best days we look at our communities and we know what matters. On our best days we can dream something beautiful and express it to others. In partnership, we have much to learn from each other and much to give.



References

- Pinciotti, P. (2001). *Art as a Way of Learning®: Explorations in Teaching*. Bethlehem, PA: Northampton Community College.
- Lionni, L. (1967). *Frederick*. New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

A Place to Begin: Lutton recommends the perfect starting place — bringing the authentic work of artists into your classroom. Museum gift shops are great places to begin. They have reprints of famous art pieces in postcard to poster sizes at reasonable prices. To make this a shared experience, plan a field trip to the museum gift shop for teachers to select the artwork that appeals to them. Complete this learning experience by brainstorming ways to use the art examples teachers selected in the classroom.

Experiments Galore!: Your teachers may not be comfortable with working with various brush sizes and strokes, mixing colors, or the effects of paint on various types of paper. Set up an artist studio so they can try them out! Experience is the best teacher; and after experimenting with media, teachers will be more willing to let children do the same.

Four Easy Stages: There they are, on page 40, four easy stages to forming arts partnerships. So, what are you waiting for? Get started by looking for an artist to consider sharing the process with you. Enlist teachers’ support to poll parents, family members, and friends to see if anyone can uncover a potential artist in residence to start the process.