



Snowflakes:

Developing Meaningful Art Experiences for Young Children

Elisa de la Roche

Walking along the streets of New York City, I gaze at the myriad of architectural styles and the brightly colored murals on the buildings. Among the structures I am able to identify are the municipal buildings: courthouses, police stations, hospitals, and schools. I especially notice the elementary schoolhouses. The windows are filled with identical brown, red, and yellow turkeys fashioned from handprints, or white cutout paper doilies posing as round or square snowflakes, or 10 or more kelly-green shamrocks all in a row. Each season has its theme, repeated every year without fail. I can travel from the Bronx to Staten Island, from New Jersey to Long Island, and see the same window dressing.

When I was in elementary school 35 years ago in New York City, I carefully cut along lines drawn for me on folded construction paper to produce snowflakes. Teachers justified this activity as important for developing fine-motor skills and for making the room cheerful—but at what expense? Could the same skills be developed by cutting on lines created by a child's drawing?

Must all snowflakes and shamrocks and turkeys be the same shape? Do they have to be prepackaged and regular to be lovely enough to be hung up in the window? Is regularity and sameness what we want from preschool, kindergarten and first-grade children? Snowflakes are not regular. Under a microscope they appear in countless shapes, sizes, and formations. Making them the same misrepresents their true nature and spoils a wonderful opportunity for science and discovery in the classroom.

A school day has limited hours and many skills must be taught within the allotted time. Moments for teaching and learning should not be wasted. Since learning can and does take place across several disciplines, each lesson should include as many avenues for learning as possible—and should foster growth, not detract from it. Creating a snowflake from paper can be an exciting experience for a young child. Observing snow, feeling it, tasting it, and making snowballs and sculptures with it give the child experience and knowledge. The teacher can encourage the child to observe and describe.

Creating a picture of a snowflake is an opportunity for children to synthesize prior experience and knowledge and to express feelings as well as ideas. The teacher can use the drawings to assess each child's conception. After completing the drawing, the children can use their fine-motor

skills to cut out the snowflakes and tape them to the window. One child, a natural poet, may want to make a blue snowflake, representing, perhaps, the sky peeking through. This should not only be allowed but encouraged. The teacher can ask the child about the blue snowflake and learn about how the child thinks, observes, and senses the world around him. Through this interaction the teacher gains a new way to look at the world and is enriched and enlightened through the experience.

Teachers do not realize the potential harm that can occur from requiring children to work with prefabricated pictures. When a child is given a pre-formed object to cut out or color, she is subliminally being told that this is the *proper* or *best* way to construct the object. Studies show that children coloring V-shaped birds in their workbooks no longer draw original birds but substitute the check-mark birds as symbols in all their subsequent drawings (Lowenfeld & Brittain 1987). They no longer think about the bird's natural beak, eyes, body, wings, tail, and feet that they have observed. By quickly drawing a check, they give the bird no more thought. This could happen with any object.

Young children express themselves and communicate through drawing. This is especially important when their vocabulary is limited. Art, drama, and music are not merely aesthetic; they are functional. Children make sense of their world and express feelings and notions through the arts.

Encouraging critical thinking

In the process of constructing a picture the child thinks about an experience and mentally organizes before and during the actual drawing. The child chooses which features are most important and what forms and placement they will have in the picture. These activities parallel the steps of critical thinking: first choosing and organizing information, then placing it in context. Encouraging original ideas in artwork reinforces self-concept and builds confidence and motivation. Creative expression develops creative thinking. The child learns to value her original pictures and to reflect upon their meaning (explained to the teacher and/or class).

A child derives great pleasure and satisfaction from seeing his artwork on the window or bulletin board and feels a sense of accomplishment in having completed the task assigned by the teacher. When the assignment involves the child's original work, there is pride in and recognition of the child's expression and communication. The main goal for the child should be not to please the teacher but to communicate an idea. Children must be given the opportunity to think for themselves, to explore materials, and to discover, share, and create.

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Teaching diversity

Activities that encourage creative thinking and tolerance for differences cause children to accept diversity more readily. When children learn there is only one way to draw an apple or snowflake, they become intolerant of different ways and approaches. Many children come to school believing there is only one way to behave or do an activity and thinking that their own family practice is superior. Activities that encourage many possible solutions help children overcome their prejudices. Every exercise in school should encourage thinking and discovery. Teachers should strive to provide an atmosphere of openness and tolerance. Creating original arts and crafts allows children to plan, execute, and share their unique thoughts and expressions and to observe similarities and differences in thought and action.

Some objects given to children to draw may be inappropriate in public schools. A teacher should contemplate the reasons for assigning a particular picture. For example, how does St. Patrick's Day pertain to general education? Does shamrock construction teach appreciation for Irish American culture, or is there now the assumption that St. Patrick's Day is synonymous with American tradition? Is making shamrocks a springtime activity? Why not suggest clover, flowers, or other objects that might represent spring? Teachers must consider the purpose of each activity and not thoughtlessly repeat lessons from previous generations and/or teachers.

Spring pictures in many schools are synonymous with Easter. Constructing bunny rabbits with cotton-ball tails, a yearly event in many schools, is not necessarily a meaningful learning experience and may be detrimental to the learning process. If the rabbit is associated with the Christian holiday of Easter, it may not be appropriate to the religious background of all children in the classroom. And if everyone makes the same rabbit image, children may come to believe that there is one "proper" way to draw or construct a rabbit. The opportunity for children to explore and expand their understanding of the rabbit and its attributes is lost. Young children need exposure to diversity to become critical thinkers and to feel comfortable in a diverse world (see King, Chipman, & Cruz-Janzen 1994 for more opportunities to foster diversity).

Choosing alternative models

It's autumn, and you want to make your classroom more cheerful to reflect the appropriate season. What can be done to creatively engage the children? Why not let them have input into the decision? It's their room, too. This will give them practice and experience in choosing options and making decisions. Carefully choosing the words to frame the questions for children is important. Some questions provide minimal thinking on the part of children and result in stereotypical responses. "What should we draw for our windows?" may provide limited answers. The children will relate all the things they might have seen in a window in school, at home, or in the store. However, they should be urged to explore further. They should be asked about their thoughts.

Images come from all types of sensory memory that children can recall. To celebrate autumn, for example, ask children to describe what they see around them at this time of year: "Are there any colors, activities, or events that stand out? Is there any scent or odor that you smell only in autumn? How does the air feel against your face? Is it colder than in summer? After an open-ended, nonjudgmental discussion of the children's experiences and memories of autumn, children can draw pictures of favorite images and subjects. The pictures either can be cut out or left intact and placed on windows, bulletin boards, walls, or any other appropriate place. Each child should have the opportunity to talk about her drawing and to listen to the other children talk about theirs.

All kinds of artwork—wire sculpture, collage, and stained-glass-type pictures fashioned from cellophane, gelatin, or tissue paper—can be displayed in the windows and around the classroom and halls. The more variety the better, reflecting the infinite possibilities for expression and communication. Explore a different art form each season. What is most important is to ensure that each child grows and develops, learns to think and express his feelings and ideas, and creates new and original responses within an environment that is supportive, validating, and inclusive.

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