

Open-Ended Art: Challenges and Solutions

by Tracy Galuski and MaryEllen Bardsley

Despite the promotion of open-ended art in the field of early childhood, teacher-directed crafts are still pervasive in children's classrooms. Examples of structured crafts, made from the same materials based on the model provided, can be found lining the hallways of child care centers. This article, based on field research, observations, and work with pre-service teachers, explores the value of open-ended art and responds to challenges faced by practitioners.

Open-ended art is defined as a project where children are free to use a variety of materials without a planned outcome. Depending on the ages of the children in the group, the teacher might provide a variety of materials in an art center and allow the children to explore them freely. New media would be introduced as children are taught different approaches. In contrast, closed-ended art, also described as *structured projects* or *crafts*, offers a very different experience. In this case, the teacher might provide a model, or limited supplies along with some direct instruction. The children use the

materials in tightly controlled situations.

Developmentally appropriate practice, defined by what research supports about development and learning, provides guidelines for best practices related to creative and aesthetic development (Coppel & Bredekamp, 2009). Rather than showing the children what to make, teachers make a wide variety of art media available for children to explore and work with, and demonstrate new techniques or uses for materials to expand upon what children can do with them. This might include a wide variety of collage materials, pastels, watercolors, paint and easels, scrap paper in a variety of sizes and textures, clay, natural materials, and glue (to name a few). Developmentally appropriate practice, in terms of art and aesthetic development, is widely accepted by state and national Standards (e.g., National Board for Core Art Standards, 2012; New York State Department of Education, 2011).

Observations of art activities in child care programs suggest that directors need additional support to respond to the questions posed by families and staff. The following scenarios depict challenges faced by practitioners around the definition of crafts, parents' concerns, and mess. Let's start with Jonah, a preschool teacher, who uses a theme-based approach.

CHALLENGE: The Internet offers such a rich and interesting variety of craft projects. If I'm lucky, I can purchase enough for the whole class and the children can make a quick and easy art activity related to the theme.

After selecting the theme of farming for his classroom, Jonah looks online for new craft ideas that relate to the topic. Using the planning chart provided by his program administrator, he finds enough patterns, crafts, and activities to fill in every block of the chart. He knows that it is not always creative art, but it relates to the theme and he believes that if the children can assemble crafts any way they want, isn't it open-ended?

In some cases, finding theme-related activities for the art center creates a roadblock for open-ended art in the form of crafts. Crafts are focused on a specific skill or concept, with a pre-determined look that is usually directed by the teacher. While it is useful for teachers to expand a theme or topic into different learning centers, structured crafts bind the children to a narrow view of their project: the outcome. Any search engine will lead you to a wide variety of theme-related craft activities and these can serve a purpose. For example, children make ornaments and other holiday decorations for the senior center, all using the same materials. Other examples might include lacing together



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a pre-cut puppet for a literacy game, or assembling a paper booklet filled with specific images of the weather. Some painting, gluing, or cutting may be involved, but the outcome has been predetermined.

Art activities, when compared to crafts, serve a very different purpose. They are open-ended, creative, and child-directed in a way that encourages independence and problem solving. Thinking back on Jonah: To facilitate more creative art in his classroom, he could:

- change the focus from what can be made each day to what materials could be provided.
- use the planning chart to list new or existing supplies, rather than projects.
- consider the different sights, sounds, and textures that are available on a farm and brainstorm ways to bring them into the classroom.
- provide dried corn, hay, or fresh fruits and vegetables to examine through science and art.
- encourage the children to develop their creativity with the materials provided, rather than imposing his ideas as patterns to be followed.

Before you consider providing a craft activity, carefully evaluate its purpose. Crafts are appropriate to meet specific learning objectives or outcomes, but they are *not* creative art. The theme should inspire, not mandate, what happens for children in the art center. Let's listen to Sheila.

CHALLENGE: Parents always ask their children, 'What did you make today?' I think that when I use patterns, parents like that the artwork looks like something they recognize.

Sheila's group of toddlers was studying Arctic animals recently. She began the day with a book about polar bears, followed by a craft of paper plates in the shape of various animals. Melanie approached the table when called and assembled her polar bear as instructed, based on the model. At the end of the day, the teachers laid all the completed craft projects out on the table for pick-up, along with the daily report and newsletter. As Melanie's mother admired the polar bear her daughter had made, Melanie pulled it from her hands and tossed it in the garbage can. She took her mother's hand and led her out of the classroom. The mother, clearly shocked, could not understand why the child had no interest in taking home her project.

Children feel a great sense of accomplishment when they complete their own work. When a teacher selects the project and cuts out the pieces and provides a model, there is very little effort required on behalf of the child. In turn, the child has lost the opportunity to create something that would result in a sense of accomplishment that comes from hard work: the accomplishment of running her hands through the materials, or gluing the collage items just where she wants them. Perhaps, in Melanie's mind, she didn't do the work — the teacher did.

Developmentally appropriate practice suggests that teachers and families make decisions together regarding learning goals and approaches to learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). While it's important to understand parents' perspective regarding the art projects that are sent home, it's equally important to help parents understand the developmental need for children to explore materials and develop their individual artistic talents.

High-quality programs place an emphasis on two-way communication

with parents. Teachers should use these opportunities to reinforce what children are learning, and share notes about the learning that occurs spontaneously in each of the classroom learning centers, including art:

- Documenting the children's process of creating, along with the product, will provide opportunities to describe for parents what children are learning as they create.
- Taking the time to write an explanation of the art, or taking story dictation for children translates the experience for parents: Black circles become sharks, circling around a banana boat as the children tell the story of their work.
- Taking pictures of children throughout the day and displaying them in digital frames or on a bulletin board communicates the value of the creative process to parents.

Cecilia has planned a detailed theme about trees that offer interesting activities in every learning center. From books in the literacy center, to the sand and water table, and on to dramatic play, the whole classroom is immersed in the topic and the children move freely from one center to another as they play. The theme even extends into the art center, where she has provided a model of a branched tree. Cecilia has cut out branches, leaves, and roots — everything children need to create a tree. As children come and go from the table, they make what is provided, but they don't stay long. Cecilia wonders if the activity is just too simple for her preschoolers.

CHALLENGE: They can make whatever they want in the art center, but I provide the basic materials and create a model so they know what it really looks like.

Some readers will wonder why Cecilia did not provide a variety of materials to encourage the children's creativity. Providing materials allows children to demonstrate what they know; this works well for science-based activities. Hendrick (2004) explains that Reggio teachers provide models to encourage children's observation skills, but don't expect children's work to be identical. What Cecilia (as a teacher) missed was an opportunity to bring the learning centers together. Instead of finding a pattern online and creating a model, she could have provided a *meaningful model* by placing something in the middle of the table and asking children to talk about what they notice. Some might notice the unusual texture of the bark, or the way that one side is smooth while another is ridged. She could help them find ways to paint what they see. As a follow-up, children could compare their observations to the knowledge they gained through their study of trees. Access to a variety of art materials would allow the children to explain their understanding of trees.

Open-ended art, where children explore materials without set goals, differs from goal-oriented crafts activities. Art-making for young children is about kinesthetic experiences and exploration (National Board for Core Arts Standards, 2012). Children are learning how to use materials and how to represent the world around them. Adults often want children's creations to look like something recognizable. Yet adults' insistence on decoding images may lead children to believe that experimenting with *how* to use materials (the action) is wrong or less valuable than creating something new.

CHALLENGE: I'm not sure how to apply open-ended art in my toddler classroom. They make such a mess.

This statement was made by Mrs. Williams, a teacher of young toddlers, as she was discussing the results of her ITERS (Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale) observation with her quality improvement mentor. She is a thoughtful, intentional toddler teacher. Her excellent ITERS scores reflect this *except* in areas where messes might occur. Mrs. Williams explained, "The kids make messes all around the room. I don't need them making more messes with art stuff!" She and her mentor, Doug, discussed art after a craft activity that ended with many crying children, crafts that looked nothing like the model provided, and a lot of clean-up. Mrs. Williams told Doug she was ready to think about adding an art area to her classroom. She finally realized, "This [directed craft] is not working!"

Mrs. Williams and Doug surveyed the room for possible space. Hidden behind some shelves they discovered a blackboard at the children's height. They cleaned up the area, hung some shelves, and added a table and chairs to create an art center. Mrs. Williams sorted fat, beginners' crayons, non-toxic chalk, glue sticks, and other materials into clear labeled containers and placed them on the shelves. This allowed the toddlers to access their own materials and see what the containers held, so they would not need to be dumped out. A collection of scraps of paper and construction paper was added. A few musical instruments were placed in a container in this area to communicate to children that noises and messes needed to be near each other.



Photos by the Authors



Although Mrs. Williams anticipated that the art center would add to the mess in the classroom, she was pleasantly surprised. After showing her toddlers how to use the materials and put them away, she discovered the children's creativity produced less mess. In observing the children in the art center, Mrs. Williams saw that it satisfied toddlers' need to feel and explore materials.

Intentionally planning an art center will increase children's successful use of materials. Educators should provide for exploration within a structured environment (National Board for Core Art Standards, 2012). Teachers can:

- select materials to make available and provide structure such as where art is created, the length of time allowed, and what clean-up procedures will be used. By providing guidance on using

the area, children, including toddlers, can use the materials and clean-up independently.

- focus on age-appropriate materials that consider children's fine-motor development in order to minimize frustration. For example, a large container of glue is heavy and often encourages squeezing all the contents out. Smaller bottles help children develop their fine-motor skills. Providing other opportunities to empty (such as pitchers in the water table) will help satisfy this developmental need.

Conclusion

Art is an important aspect of any early childhood program. Every day, teachers make a number of decisions based on their personal preferences and experience working with young children. Some teachers may argue that structured crafts are teaching opportunities, or that art centers are too messy for young children, while other teachers buckle under the perceived pressure to promote crafts to satisfy parent requests. However, these types of activities do not allow children to develop problem-solving skills, explore the materials in meaningful ways, or initiate conversations around creating art.

We must all work to create opportunities and spaces for children's meaningful exploration of materials that encourages development across all domains (Bongiorno, 2014; New York State Department of Education, 2011). Planning, predicting, and comparing materials and processes encourages their cognitive development, including language devel-

opment, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. As children interact with materials and each other they express their ideas and feelings, further developing their social-emotional skills. The benefits of open-ended art are many.

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