



a place for the arts

Lessons Learned from an Afterschool Art Experience with Reclaimed Materials

by Angela Eckhoff, Amy Hallenbeck, and Mindy Spearman

Afterschool programs are becoming an increasingly important part of many elementary students' educational experience. Though individual afterschool programs vary, arts experiences are often a part of the curriculum. Historically, craft-related activities such as woodworking, carpentry, basket weaving, beadwork, clay work, and drawing were often included in post-World War II afterschool

programs (Halpern, 2002). More recently, the visual arts have served an integral role in successful afterschool programs serving homeless children (Shepard & Booth, 2009), students with special needs (Schwartz & Pace, 2008), and struggling readers (Bryan, Owens, & Walker, 2004). Visual arts projects in afterschool environments have included such diverse experiences as comic book illustration (Khurana, 2005), painting murals on a school cafeteria wall (Merrill, 2008), and embellishing a life-size pickup truck with art inspired by Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (Wheeler, 2001). As Andrews (2001) notes, "the arts are flourishing out of school—and the way in

which participation can enhance achievement across the curriculum as well as giving children a sense of belonging to the school and to the community is very powerful" (p. 71).

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We conducted action research in a school-based afterschool setting to explore how a meaningful arts experience could be integrated into a program that did not include an arts-focused curriculum. Unencumbered by restrictions surrounding formal classrooms, afterschool programs can offer exploratory art activities that support young learners' artistic creation, arts viewing, and aesthetic experiences. Though challenges emerge in designing and implementing arts experiences in programs that do not already include arts components, children can benefit from inclusion of visual arts experience in general-focus afterschool programs.

Perspectives

Though the arts are increasingly included in afterschool programs, the content of arts activities and students' roles in those activities can vary widely. What constitutes meaningful, high-quality arts experience in afterschool settings that are not explicitly designed as arts-focused programs? In its 2008 advocacy statement *Visual Arts in After School Programs*, the National Art Education Association (NAEA) presents 21 best practices for incorporating meaningful, high-quality visual arts experiences in afterschool environments. The recommendations center on the key ideas of student choice, supportive instruction, exploration, and meaning making. The NAEA encourages afterschool visual arts programs to allow students to make choices about the content of their work, their materials, and their processes. It also recommends that afterschool arts instruction provide opportunities for self-expression, thoughtful solutions to challenges, and exploration of novel ideas. The recommendations highlight the importance of hands-on and "minds-on" experiences as well as the need for staff to understand arts-related content and pedagogical practice (NAEA, 2008).

The NAEA recommendations guided us in developing this project on arts learning with reclaimed materials. Creating original and inventive artworks from what once were objects of waste gives students unique opportunities to connect ordinary discarded objects with their own artistic creations (Eckhoff & Spearman, 2009). Fostering the creation of art using reclaimed materials may help to develop a learning environment rich with challenging, expressive visual arts experiences.

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We focused in this project on reclaimed materials and found objects for both practical and pedagogical reasons. Practically, the use of reclaimed materials was important because the afterschool program did not have a budget for arts materials. Pedagogically, the use of reclaimed materials provided students with an arts experience combining the novel with the familiar. We hypothesized that the novelty of working with found objects would prompt student interest while the familiarity of the materials and of the process of creating art would tap students' prior knowledge and experience. Both interest and prior knowledge are important components of supportive informal learning. In addition, reconceptualizing the meaning and purpose of reclaimed objects required students to think creatively. Arts education scholars assert that the complexity of the visual arts provides a powerful means of engaging students in critical and creative thinking (Efland, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Perkins, 1994).

The reclaimed materials also challenged students to construct three-dimensional works. The limited body of research on children's three-dimensional artistic endeavors (Golomb, 2004; Golomb & McCormick, 1995; Pavlou, 2009) indicates that young learners readily engage in such work and attend to the representational issues inherent in three-dimensional art, such as form, uprightness, balance, stability, complexity, and movement. The rich experience of creating with reclaimed materials allowed us to examine the possibilities of multifaceted arts exploration in an afterschool environment.

Methodology

This research explored the possibilities of introducing a visual arts experience in an established afterschool program. Our vision for the project was twofold: We aimed to explore not only how students' experiences reflected the NAEA recommendations for arts learning but also which aspects of the afterschool program challenged or supported the success of a non-outcomes-based art endeavor.

Two research questions are explored in this article:

- What programmatic challenges and affordances manifested themselves in a multi-day afterschool art project?
- In what ways did project components related to engagement, content, and learning environment contribute to the student experience?

Research Setting and Participants

The afterschool program in which we conducted this action research is a 21st Century Community Learning Centers organization with a mission to serve at-risk students by providing homework support, tutoring and academic assistance, and non-academic enrichment programs. Located in a small rural community in the southeastern U.S., the program's Title I school serves fewer than 200 pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students. Afterschool program attendance is voluntary. During a typical afternoon, students first receive a snack and complete homework assignments. Then they participate in activities designed to support the academic components being covered in their classrooms: academically oriented games, supplemental lessons, computer-assisted instruction, tutoring, and extended group practice and discussion. Before our project, students' afterschool visual art experiences included free time to draw or color, occasional teacher-planned craft projects, and assemblage of pre-packaged, theme-related craft kits. Thirty-nine students in grades 1–5 participated in the reclaimed materials project. Our discussion highlights findings from 13 students who participated in the entire project.

Nine afterschool teachers or teacher assistants were involved with the reclaimed materials project on at least one of its three days. Before work with students began, the project team led a 20-minute training session with these nine adults. The training explained the project and encouraged the teaching staff to support rather than direct students as they planned and created their artworks.

The project was blended into the existing program structure during three consecutive sessions. Students thus were working on their reclaimed materials art projects with their regular cohort of teachers and children. In the first session, students worked in small groups to explore images of found object art that uses materials similar to those available to the students. The images included Shari Elf's *Flower Power* (2008), Sarah Klockars-Clauser's *Strawberry Confusion* (2009), and *Pink Spoon Flower* (2009) by Tricia Courtney and Mary Larson of Lemon Oak Studio. In the second session, students surveyed the available materials and planned their projects. In the third session, students created artwork based on their previously developed plans.

Reclaimed Materials

Though generally artists working with found objects gather their own materials, we took on this task as project investigators because both time for the project and storage space for materials were limited. Our work was

inspired by the renowned REMIDA center of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The REMIDA center supplies discarded materials to local schools and groups interested in reinventing the materials and giving them a new life. Using a REMIDA list of reclaimed materials (Reggio Children, 2005), we collected items from recycling centers, freecycle groups, and local businesses. We collected 21 kinds of manufactured or utilitarian items, including plastics, glass, textiles, metal, paper, and ceramics, for students to use in creating their artworks.

Analysis

Our study draws on four main sources of qualitative data: transcripts of audio recordings of whole-group and planning sessions, transcripts of student interviews, student project plans, and photo documentation of student work. Semi-structured student interviews, introduced through informal conversations, prompted students to talk about the materials they chose for their artwork and about the previous and current functions of those materials.

We began the process of data analysis with narrative data from student interviews and whole-group sessions. We carefully read each transcript and recorded our views related to the research questions, thereby creating an initial coding system. We then identified portions of the transcripts that dealt with student engagement, project content, and the afterschool learning environment. We refined our initial coding system through an iterative pattern of observation and analysis. The coding system included codes for materials used in student project plans and artworks, student use of functional or representational materials, student definitions of recycled materials, themes evident in students' artworks, and students' creative and constructive procedures. We then triangulated image data—photos of student project plans and artwork—with the findings of the narrative data analysis. Three investigators coded all data; differences were discussed until the raters achieved 100 percent agreement.

Engaging Children in Found Object Art

Our qualitative data enabled us to develop rich descriptive accounts of the interactions among students, afterschool and project staff, reclaimed materials, and the artworks students constructed during the three-day project. Through iterative cycles of analysis and evaluation, we not only examined how the project related to students' art experiences but also uncovered some of the benefits and difficulties of fostering artistic creation in afterschool settings.

Two Students Engaged in Making Art

Two of the students who attended all three days of the project illustrate the ways in which students engaged with reclaimed materials to make art.

Caden, a fourth-grader, decided early in his planning session that he wanted to make a three-dimensional car using a candy tin as the body. He chose the candy tin “because it was one of the closest things that I could find shaped like a car.” Caden’s plan (Figure 1) clearly identifies his material choices and desire to “make the car stand up.” Caden described his work:

It’s a car and I used these [washers] as wheels and the mirror. I wanted to make them stay and I used the hot glue so that I could make everything stay ‘cause it didn’t exactly work with the other glue. I also put these . . . metal pieces on the front and the back so they’re like bumpers.

As Caden’s description and final artwork (Figure 2) illustrate, Caden was trying to replicate the appearance of a car using materials that resembled car parts. When he worked to make his two-dimensional plan into a three-dimensional piece, Caden encountered the challenge of constructing the car so it could support its own weight. He tried unsuccessfully to attach the metal washers he wanted to use as wheels to the candy tin with an epoxy. Then he sought assistance from a teacher, who suggested hot glue. As Caden described the process, “I had a few pieces but it was still hard.”

Another student, Greyson, a second-grader, experienced different challenges when constructing her three-dimensional artwork from her two-dimensional plan. Greyson’s plan (Figure 3) was a mix of planning with materials and a cartoon-like sketch of a girl dressed in a shirt and skirt. Unlike Caden’s plan, Greyson’s plan did not clearly show an intention to develop a three-dimensional work.

However, this intention became evident as Greyson worked. When asked whether her piece was going to be flat or stand up, Greyson replied, “I maybe wanted it to be tall.” As she held the blue fabric she had selected for the shirt, she said, “I’m not sure what to do with this.” Expressing her desire to work in three dimen-

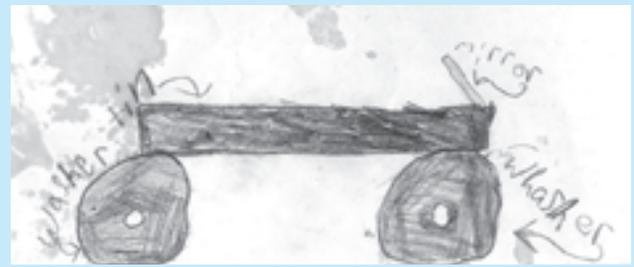


Figure 1. Caden’s Plan

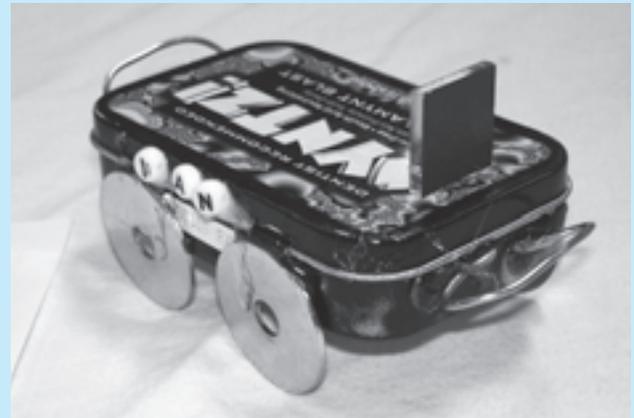


Figure 2. Caden’s Artwork



Figure 3. Greyson’s Plan

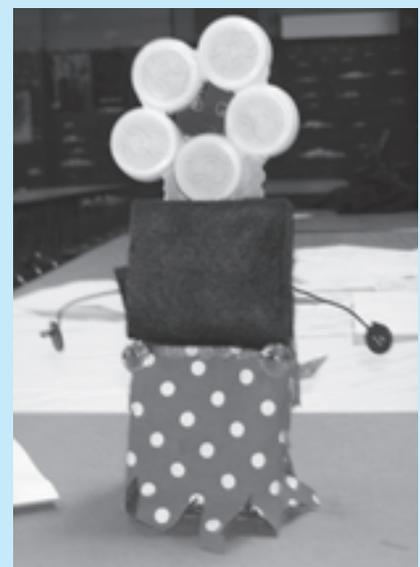


Figure 4. Greyson’s Artwork

sions, she went on, “Because I have to make the top of it. And that’s just the point.” Greyson built a structure of two small cardboard boxes that she stacked one on top of the other, and then she covered each box in a different fabric. The final piece (Figure 4) bears little resemblance to the sketch Greyson developed in the planning phase.

However, Greyson turned her two-dimensional sketch into a three-dimensional work that attended to complex representational issues and could be appreciated from a variety of perspectives.

Student Engagement in Meaning Making

Greyson's and Caden's processes and final artworks illustrate many of the challenges and successes students experienced as they explored materials and planned and constructed their artworks. Working with reclaimed materials posed challenges to which students developed their own solutions. Without the need to make a grade or meet a requirement, they could develop the creative resourcefulness and confidence that more highly structured arts activities might not afford. From responding to object-centered questions to creating with objects they freely chose, children had opportunities to expand their understandings of reclaimed materials and to think through unanticipated challenges, showing what Eisner describes as "...the ability and a willingness to surrender to the unanticipated possibilities of the work as it unfolds" (Eisner, 2002).

As Caden's choice and subsequent use of the candy tin demonstrates, students were cognitively and personally engaged in decisions to use and modify materials. On the day students constructed their artworks, two project investigators conducted informal semi-structured interviews in an effort to gain insight into each student's understanding of reclaimed materials and assemblage art. In these brief interviews, students offered detailed explanations of their choices of reclaimed materials and explanations of the objects' past and current functions. Students' engagement was both personally meaningful and thoughtful; they chose a given material for its unique perceived affordances, as in Caden's choice to use the candy tin because its shape resembled that of a car.

The planning and construction phases were iterative; students often decided to modify their initial material choices as they learned about the materials through experiencing them. The way Greyson translated her project plan into reality illustrates the evolving nature of students' work. Analysis of student project plans and final artworks indicated that the planning session helped the students to think about working with reclaimed materials to create their own pieces. The majority of students successfully developed a project plan that they realized—often with modification—in their final artwork.

The open-ended nature of the assignment and the opportunity to work in three dimensions often required students to attend to representational issues such as up-

rightness, balance, stability, and complexity. Though not all these issues were relevant to every piece, complexity—the number and arrangement of different elements—was integral to each student's work. The median number of reclaimed materials in the students' final artworks was seven, as compared to a median number of four materials in the students' plans. Greyson's plan identifies two materials while her completed artwork is composed of seven different materials. This difference indicates that actually manipulating objects in the construction process created situations in which students realized the need to modify original plans to create a desired effect. In addition, nine out of the thirteen students modified one or more objects in their final artworks by altering size, color, or shape, though only four students had initially planned such modification. Students who did not modify objects were using their reclaimed materials to create decorative collages.

Practicalities of Creating a Supportive Arts Learning Environment

Analysis of transcripts of the planning and creation sessions enabled us to explore some of the practical challenges of implementing a multi-day art project in an afterschool program. One important programmatic issue was the role of non-art staff in the art project.

Before the project began, we presented a 20-minute training session for afterschool teaching staff that explained the project and briefly covered the teachers' role during planning and creation sessions. We advocated for a "guided-exploration orientation" (Bresler, 1993) that would encourage students to work as individuals; to learn to observe, listen, and communicate their sensitivities through artistic expression; and, most importantly, to consider the aesthetic qualities in arts. We chose this approach not only because it would support student exploration with found objects but also because it echoed NAEA's recommendations for afterschool arts learning (NAEA, 2008). However, analysis of the group session transcript revealed that program staff faced challenges in working with students during the construction phase. When we saw program staff directing student work, we intervened to remind both staff member and student of the importance of student choice. In these cases, the staff appeared to be focused on the final product rather than on supporting student exploration and expressive creativity. The example of Keira and Ms. Newman illustrates this challenge.

Keira, a first-grade student, did not attend the afterschool program during the first two days of the project,

so she had not engaged in the exploration or planning sessions. On the third day of the project, Keira faced the challenge of deciding in one session which materials to use and how to use them. A project investigator talked briefly with Keira before the session, encouraging her to complete as much as she felt comfortable doing and to ask for help whenever she needed it. The project staff member suggested that Keira draw on paper as means to begin thinking through the possibilities. Keira sat quietly at a table with a blank sheet of paper for several minutes, drawing the attention of one of the regular afterschool teachers, Ms. Newman. Ms. Newman began to speak with Keira about her ideas and the materials available for use. Keira had not established an idea or expressed a willingness to choose materials; she was merely looking over the reclaimed materials and watching the other students as they began to construct their artworks. Ms. Newman gently explained to Keira that time was “running out” and that she needed to get to work on her project. She suggested that Keira make a gift for her mother, showing Keira a tin container that was pretty and could be easily decorated. As the two collected materials, Ms. Newman picked out letter beads for Keira to use that spelled “LOVE U” and suggested attaching a red bow to the lid of the tin to make the gift “beautiful.”

Though Ms. Newman was successful in helping Keira finish a project in a brief time, Keira’s tin (Figure 5) shows little personal expression, and her experience with the materials differed widely from that of Caden or Greyson. Rather than using the recommended guided-exploration approach, Ms. Newman aimed to help Keira create something that could be labeled “beautiful” and was appropriate as a gift. The interactions between Ms. Newman and Keira, and between them and the reclaimed materials, highlight the challenges of allowing students to develop a unique, personal creation while working with expressive media.

Lessons Learned: A Look toward the Future

This research sought to explore the possibilities of introducing a visual arts experience into the existing framework of an established afterschool program. Our findings indicate that students were engaged, interested, and appropriately challenged throughout all phases of the project. For these afterschool students, work in visual art focused on the processes of exploration, experimentation, and personal expression. The structure of the project, which included time for exploration and planning, appeared to reflect NAEA recommendations. In addition, our work highlights possibilities for strengthening future explorations by dealing with inconsistent student attendance in afterschool settings, expanding training for afterschool staff, and recruiting community artists.

We planned the art project for three consecutive days so students would have opportunities to revisit their questions, explore recurring issues, and build on personal successes as they sought to realize their ideas in a three-dimensional work. Certainly an important benefit of afterschool arts programming lies in the opportunity to work without the time limitations of the weekly art education generally offered in school. However, variable student attendance is a consistent problem for afterschool programs (Apsler, 2009; Beckett et al., 2009; Hartry, Fitzgerald, & Porter, 2008). In our study, only 33 percent of program participants attended the three

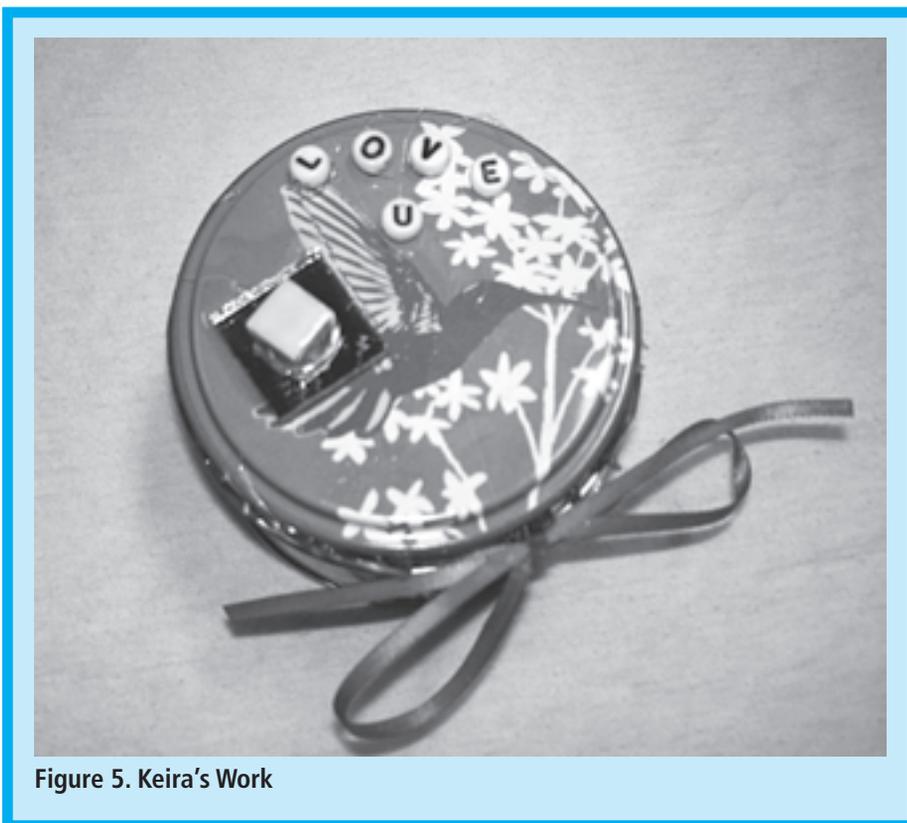


Figure 5. Keira’s Work

consecutive days of the project. Arts project leaders might anticipate inconsistent student attendance as they plan so they can develop arts experiences that allow students to be successful at their own pace.

This study also demonstrates the need for content- and pedagogy-driven professional development to support long-term art explorations in afterschool settings. Bresler (1993) notes that a guided-exploration approach requires significant planning on the teacher's part as well as attentiveness and active engagement on the students' part. Analysis of session transcripts led us to conclude that the brief training session we conducted did not provide program staff with the level of scaffolding they needed to be successful facilitators. Though the training introduced the project as a whole, it did not adequately emphasize the primary importance of allowing the students to drive the process of creation, as the example of Keira and Ms. Newman illustrates. The goal of Keira's experience was defined by Ms. Newman rather than by the student artist. Arts-related professional development for afterschool staff must focus on the NAEA's (2008) recommendations advocating respect for children's abilities to create their own artworks, free from adult direction.

When leading or teaching children engaged in creating art the instructors should encourage self expression, thoughtful solutions to problems, and exploration of new ideas. The instructor should embrace a variety of expressions that are as unique as the children who are creating them. (NAEA, 2008, p. 1)

Though Ms. Newman did not engage with Keira with the intention of directing her work, she did encourage Keira to finish the work rather than to explore the art-making process. Fostering student-driven arts exploration requires afterschool staff to let go of preconceived notions of what student art should look like. Instead, they must learn to embrace the notion that the arts teach children to uncover possibilities they themselves may have yet to imagine.

The held beliefs of non-arts teachers about the importance of product over process are tenacious. Therefore, project planners must attend to afterschool staff members' arts-related beliefs in order to ensure that students will have opportunities to engage in authentic experiences, unencumbered by staff judgments. A substantive professional development session could both expose the afterschool staff to arts pedagogy and strengthen staff knowledge of a particular genre or media. More on-site professional development for afterschool staff might help to reduce the prevalence of "make-and-take" crafts and

encourage the inclusion of arts experiences designed to encourage students to focus on the process of making art.

The brevity of this project limited our opportunity to connect the afterschool students to the larger community of found-object artists. Exploring reproductions of found art provided an entry point for this connection, but in the future we hope to strengthen the community-school connection by bringing in local professional artists for longer-term projects. Local artists can introduce afterschool program staff to the processes and language of their media. They can act as art mentors to students, sharing their technical expertise while encouraging students to "own" their personal work and artistic decisions. The artists would not take the place of trained art educators or program staff but would work collaboratively with them, sharing content knowledge and pedagogical practices with staff while using their professional expertise to provide students with unique, authentic art experiences.

Despite the challenges, school-based afterschool programs have the potential to become important vehicles for informal arts experiences. As the NAEA (2008) suggests, afterschool art activities may help students to express themselves, explore new ideas, engage in meaning making, and develop their ability to make choices and face challenges. Our research demonstrates that even brief arts experiences can be beneficial to students as long as the arts project includes meaningful content, engages students, and supports student exploration and knowledge building. Rich, meaningful afterschool arts programming enables both students and staff to experience the world and themselves in new and profound ways.

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