

*Art in Early Childhood*

# COLLABORATIVE ART- MAKING EXPERIENCES AS A MEANS TO PROMOTE FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the role and impact of family involvement, through the arts, on schooling within an early childhood urban public school classroom. It also examines how joint art-making experiences involving families, teachers and children contribute to building partnerships and a classroom community. Finally, it investigates what families, children and teachers learn about art and its expressive characteristics through art-making activities and their influence on the lives and schooling of children.

This action-based research study was carried out within a pre-kindergarten class over an academic year. Three family /child art-making experiences were integrated into curriculum and the daily life activities. Caregivers and children worked collaboratively or side-by-side and interactions within the class were studied. Data was collected using a mixed methodology, including questionnaires, interviews, video recording and the researcher's reflective journal.

This paper aims to offer insights into ways and structures of building integrated arts classrooms that involve families. The educational aim is to provide descriptive analysis of teacher/family partnerships and how they might be employed to create sustainable arts programs. Also provided, are strategies for potentially strengthening schools by developing partnerships among schools, families and teachers in an arts-integrated program.

## **THE ARTS AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT**

School improvement strategies often include family involvement. When families are involved, children do better, teachers are helped and it can even strengthen families (Epstein & Associates, 2009; Lareau, 2011; Mapp, 2003). Benefits include "higher reading scores, language growth and development, motivation to achieve, prosocial behavior and

quality of work habits” (Caspe, Lopez, and Wolos, 2006/2007, p. 20). Administrators, teachers, caregivers and students all strive to find ways to involve families in schools (Epstein, 2001). Administrators want caregivers involved in the everyday life of schools, including school governance (Epstein and Associates, 2009), and many teachers want families to support what is being done in the classroom by helping their children in school and at home. In turn, many caregivers across socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities and race desire to be part of their children’s schooling (Mapp, 2003). Similarly, children feel supported when they see their family members at school or when their caregivers are able to follow up at home with what they are learning.

Much of the research on family participation in schools focuses on family involvement in children’s education from behind the scenes. According to Epstein and Associates (2009), some of the most common forms of family involvement in schools are; decision making, supporting children at home to make sure that they are prepared for school, communicating with the school, volunteering at the school or in the classroom, or attending special events and programs. Irrespective, partnerships form when schools, families, teachers, and communities share the responsibility for children’s learning and development. In partnerships families and schools share information and work together to solve problems and celebrate success. Each side makes contributions and is actively engaged in the education of the children (Epstein, 2001).

*In Developmentally Appropriate Practices in early Childhood Programs: Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, Sue Bredekamp and Carol Copple (2009) argue that it is necessary for professionals to establish relationships with family members/guardians in order to involve them in the education of their young children. The guidelines for early childhood programs are; (1) reciprocal relationships between teachers and families built on mutual trust and shared responsibility and goals; (2) frequent communication between teachers and families; (3) families are included in decision making of programs and children’s education; (4) teachers acknowledge family’s choice and goals for children and respond with sensitivity; (5) teachers share knowledge of children’s development, progress and learning with family members; (6) programs involve families in accurate assessments and planning for children; (7) programs link families with a range of services for children and families; (8) teachers, caregivers, programs, social service, health agencies and consultants communicate and share information about children’s well-being and development. In addition, in the NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs (2009), Standards 2 and 4 highlight the importance of building family connections, involving families in multiple aspects of children’s learning and development and understanding the valuable role families play as children’s most important teachers.

In the Reggio Emilia preschools, families play a significant role in all aspects of the school which may include; meeting with teachers individually and in small groups to discuss children, curricula and activities; community meetings about a particular theme or special topic that includes experts; families coming together to work on school improvements; learning by doing, where families and teachers acquire skills; holidays and celebrations; and families taking excursions and trips with a class/school. (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2012). Sergio Spaggiari, the former Director of the Department of Early Childhood Education in the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, describes community based management as schools that encompass, embrace and “promote strong interaction and

communication among educators, children, families and community...The participation of the families is just as essential as is the participation of children and educators (Edwards et al, 2012, pg. 119-120).

Within the context of the present study, it also is important to understand family involvement in the context of the cultural and socio-economic status. Much of the research has suggested that the level of family involvement in schools is linked to social class. Lareau (2011) found that middle-class families played a more active role in their children's school, which can place their children with a marked advantage. Unlike middle-class families, however, working-class and poor families do not feel they are entitled to act on behalf of their children and often do not know how to make their own way through an organization such as school. Across socio-economic and education spectrums, however, families want to be involved in their children's education and are aware that their involvement will have a positive impact on their children's development (Mapp, 2003).

The arts also can make a powerful contribution to improved educational outcomes as a direct way of getting families involved in their children's education. Benefits of arts education include the promotion of problem-solving, critical thinking skills, learning to think creatively (Rupert, 2006; Hetland, Winner, Veenema, and Sheridan, 2013) and learning about other cultures and peoples from around the world. The arts also promote development (Burton, 2004 and Gardner, 1990), allow reflection on experiences and memories, provide aesthetic experiences (Dewey, 1934) and are an outlet for the expression of feelings. Finally, it has been asserted that "the arts are a natural interdisciplinary connector and a viable way to mobilize family and community partnerships with schools" (Epstein and Dauber, 1995, p. 116).

This paper reports the results of a study evaluating a strategy to improve family involvement through art making experiences in an early childhood class in a Title I public elementary school. It tests the hypothesis that, by helping families understand how children learn and think, the arts can be a catalyst for enhancing family involvement in children's schooling and teaching family members about the importance of both art education and how young children learn. To do this, the study examined how joint art-making experiences involving families, teachers, and children might contribute to building a classroom community, enhance families' interactions with their children, increase families' knowledge of their children's learning needs and styles and influence their perceptions of and involvement in schooling.

## **BACKGROUND: THE FAMILY/CHILD ART-MAKING EXPERIENCES**

The study took place in a school located in an eclectic, gentrifying, densely populated urban neighborhood. In the school year during which the study took place, 87.8% of the students at the school were living at or below the Federal poverty level. Roughly 53% of the students were Black or African American, 42% Hispanic or Latino and 4% Asian or White. Despite the demographics of the school the class participating in the study was extremely diverse, with the participants coming from a range of socio-economic and educational levels, ethnic backgrounds, and varying family structures. There were 51 participants; 2 teachers, 18 children, 3 twin siblings in other classes, 17 (of 18) mothers, 8 (of 17) fathers, 2 grandmothers, and an uncle. The class comprised 8 Black African or

African American students, 4 White, 3 Hispanic, 1 Asian, and 1 mixed race student. Fifteen families held a college degree or higher, 2 of the families had completed a two-year community college program, 6 participants had gone to high school, 5 declined to disclose their education level, and 3 of the families were currently taking classes or planning to further their education in the near future.

On the school wide level, family involvement varied between grades and teachers. At the pre-kindergarten level, there was considerable involvement in the daily life of the classroom. This declined precipitously in kindergarten.

The investigator, an art teacher at the school, collaborated with a pre-kindergarten teacher to develop art making experiences that involved families and children. The teachers' approached teaching and learning through a constructivist perspective. They considered the student's developmental needs and milestones, emphasized construction of knowledge by the individual, promoted active experiences in material and learning processes, and facilitated learning through purposeful interaction with one's environment. The art making experiences took place in the fall, winter and spring and corresponded to the classroom and art curricula and reflected the direct interests and needs expressed by the children.

## **METHODOLOGIES**

This action-based research study was an intensive examination of an individual unit - a pre-kindergarten class, in relation to its environment - the school and classroom in which the art-making experiences and other events of this study took place. Action based research studies can enable teacher/researchers to gain insights into how children learn, teaching methods and learning environments (Mills, 2007). In action based research the "problem" and "questions" arise from one's direct experience (Hubbard and Power, 2003). The study sought to understand the relationships, events, and patterns of the individuals in this cohort vis-à-vis the events that were constructed and later analyzed.

Data collection included observations, descriptions of events, interviews and responses to questionnaires. Initial questionnaires provided a better understanding of the families' background, culture, and lives. A questionnaire was distributed to the adult participants after the art-making experience and evaluated what the families and children learned from this experience. In addition, six adult participants and the classroom teacher were interviewed at the end of the study. Finally, the investigator's Reflective Journal and video recordings enabled extraction of relevant information.

For the analysis, all the data were thoroughly reviewed through open coding. The themes were arranged into categories and further refined through axial coding. This qualitative phenomenological approach described the subjective experience of the families and "seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon of a person or a group of people." (Patton, 2002, p.482). This approach to data analysis revealed the varied experience of the participants.

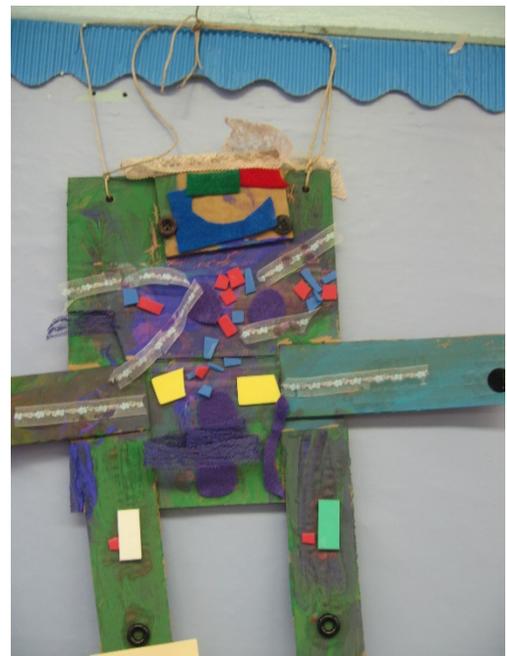
## FAMILY/CHILD ART-MAKING EXPERIENCES

Themes and materials were selected based on the classroom and art curricula. The children had opportunities to become comfortable with the particular mediums before their families came in to work with them. The students, therefore, were comfortable with the particular medium before their families came in to work with them. Before the first project, based on collage, the children created several collages and stick puppets (see Figures 1-2). (The motivating questions were proposed to the students when introducing the lesson).



*< Figure 1. Torn Paper Collage. Motivating Question: How can you change a piece of paper by tearing large, medium and small shapes? How can you overlap cut shapes on the torn shapes?*

*> Figure 2. Large Stick Puppet. Motivating Question: How can you combine different rectangles to create yourself? What colors will you use to paint yourself? What materials will you use to design your features, details and clothes?*



Before the second, painting based experience, children had four opportunities to paint and explore color mixing, mark making and designs (see Figures 3 - 4).



< Figure 3. Student artwork-painting experience. Motivating Question: How will you use the primary colors, black, and white to mix new colors? How will you explore marks, lines, and shapes; will you create a design or perhaps a person or animal?



< Figure 4. Student artwork-painting experience.

Before the final project the children made sculptures of butterflies, becoming familiar with combining recycled objects, papier-mâché and the concept of three-dimensional objects (see Figure 5).

> Figure 5. Student artwork-Butterfly sculpture. Motivating Question: How will you create a three dimensional sculpture of a butterfly? How will you design the butterfly's body and wings? What details will you include on the butterfly?



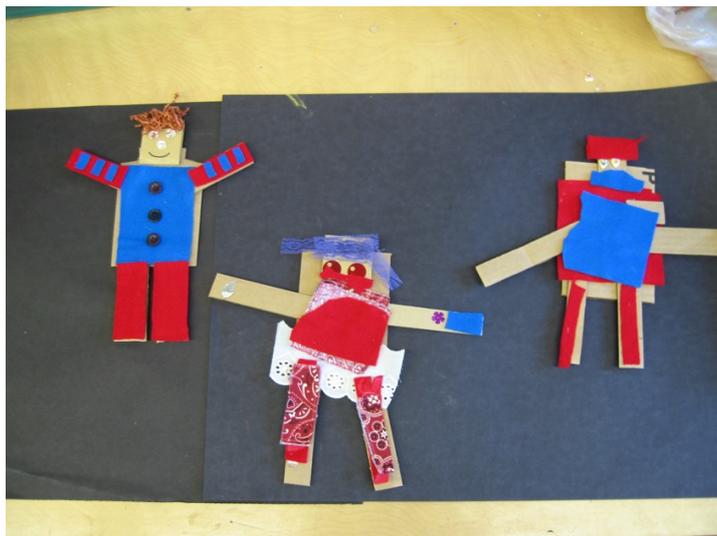
**Phase 1: Family stick puppets.** All eighteen families participated in the first family/child art-making experience. The children were studying “families” in social studies in their classroom. With their families they spent 45 to 90 minutes making representations of immediate family or anyone else they felt to be important (grandparent, pet, etc.), by

combining cardboard shapes and designing clothes and details with fabric, beads and buttons.

Each family-child interaction was unique, as they used cardboard shapes to create the structure of the bodies. Some worked together as a team, discussing what materials and shapes to use and divided the responsibilities. Other families had very little communication with their children and worked silently side-by-side. Yet others experienced difficulty and frustration working with their children. One mother and her son struggled with an inability to compromise, the mother saying, "He won't let me help him. He wants to do it all by himself" (See Figure 6 - 7).



< Figure 6.  
Participants working  
on stick puppets.



< Figure 7. Family stick  
puppets.

Fifteen of the 18 participating families completed the exit questionnaire. Using a Likert scale, 5 (being most favorable), ten families rated the family stick puppet experience as 5 (very favorable), and the remainder as 4 (favorable). Twelve family members claimed to have learned something new about their child's learning style abilities and skills, two did not and one was equivocal. Many were surprised how creative their children were and commented on their children having clear ideas and preferences about how they wanted

their art work to look. Twelve families reported that the knowledge they gained during this experience changed how they interacted with their child. Ten families reported gaining knowledge about problem solving. For instance, one mother said that she needs to be more patient with her son when they are doing learning activities together. Others wanted to help their child be more independent by encouraging and supporting their learning.

**Phase 2: Painting.** After winter recess, the students embarked on a classroom study of the life-cycle of butterflies and explored painting in art. Intentionally, painting was not integrated into the study of butterflies as 4- and 5-year-olds generally are not representing (people, animals, etc.) in their painting and we did not want the children to feel pressured to depict butterflies. We also wanted the families to have a first-hand experience of what their children were learning about the materials, giving them a better understanding of this exploratory phase of artistic development (Burton, 2004). Finally, not knowing the families' prior knowledge of paint, we also wanted to allow them to explore this medium.

Sixteen of 18 families participated in this phase of the study and after an introduction, set out to work. Most family pairs worked on the same piece of paper for at least one painting. But the session was fluid and the majority explored working together and separately. Unlike the more structured puppet-making experience, this was wide open and each family took a unique journey. Some painted about personal events, topics including family events, trips, or experiences with friends (see Figure 8).

> *Figure 8. Family painting.  
"Me sledding with my cousins.  
The plane is flying to the  
Dominican Republic".*



Others painted about topics relating to the school curriculum – butterflies or characters from favorite stories (see Figures 9 - 10).



< Figure 9. Family painting. "This is a butterfly. Here is its abdomen, thorax, legs, and antennas".



< Figure 10. Family painting. A painting of Abi-Yo-Yo (character from a book the children were reading in the classroom). "The ground is shaking and this is the door to someone's house. The ground is shaking because Abi-Yo-Yo is coming."

Lastly, some explored mixing new colors and creating different kinds of lines, marks and textures. For instance, one mother and son started off painting separately. She painted a rainbow and he was mixing new colors. When he realized what his mother was painting, he also wanted to paint a rainbow and got a new piece of paper. He could not do this to his satisfaction, became very frustrated and asked his mother for help. At some point they just started to explore the paint by overlapping dots. At the end of the session, mom said, "This is our Picasso. We have polka dots.... I have always wanted to take the paint and do this. Just to be free. I like this kind of painting" (see Figure 11).



< Figure 11. Family painting.

All 16 families who participated completed the survey. Fourteen families rated this experience as very favorable (5) and two rated it as favorable (4), on a Likert scale, 5 being the most favorable. All of the families reported learning something from this experience. Many described learning something about the paint, such as how to mix new colors. One twins' mother, who painted a family of turtles, wrote, "I bonded on another level with my daughters and learnt how important family really is to them". Some reported that their children learnt that they could make pictures about whatever they wanted, without feeling pressure to paint something in particular.

Twelve families reported learning something new about their child. Some responses were:

*All the work that he creates is directly related to his life experiences.*

*There is darkness to one of my daughters that I had not seen, and the other is full of sunshine, even in her art.*

*She was independent in her own design, she didn't copy my work or colors.*

*This experience confirmed that at this age my daughter is more interested in the process of art than the outcome, which I am pleased about.*

**Phase 3: Construction.** The final family/child art-making experience was inspired by a study of the metamorphoses of butterflies and frogs. The children became very interested in birds when they learned that birds eat butterflies and therefore, the final art making experience was the creation of bird sculptures. Families were asked to research the bird that they would construct before coming in to do so and 17 children had a family member participate in this phase.

The adult participants helped the children construct the birds out of recycled materials (see Figures 12) and in art class the children papier mâché, painted and decorated the birds (see figure 13). Although families were invited to return to work with their child to complete the sculpture, only one did so.



< Figure 12. Bird construction materials.



< Figure 13. Family bird construction.

While most adults and children started off constructing together, 10 of the 17 adults took over the project at some point, desiring to construct a realistic bird. One mother explained:

*Parents were competitive with other parents ... when I saw that another mom was doing a flamingo too, I thought, her flamingo looks so much better than mine. We are going to have to get bigger and better. I think that we tend to take over the art. We should let them guide us and I think as parents we tended to guide them.*

Nonetheless, the children whose family member took over the construction portion still were very proud of their sculptures and they worked on the papier-mâché, painting and the addition of special details and features without their families' assistance. Ultimately, the sculptures became the children's work. This mother described her reaction to her daughter's finished flamingo:

*Her flamingo was so much better than I expected - the feathers and the color when she told me that the whole thing was pink, with pink eyes, I thought it is going to look horrible. But when I looked at it, it was so beautiful and imaginative and very creative (see Figure 14).*



< Figure 14. Family bird construction.

On the opposite end of the spectrum other families fully engaged their children in the process of constructing and served as an aid to them. For instance, they discussed what materials to use for particular body parts. One boy picked out tiny pieces of cardboard for wings and his mother said, “We can give him tiny wings but hawks really have big wings”. He wanted his original selection and in the end the choice was his. In the exit survey his mother described what a “clear vision” her son wanted “from his art ... and his total conviction about where he wanted body parts, anatomy notwithstanding”.

Overall, families responded positively to this experience. Of twelve who completed the exit survey seven responded very favorably and five favorably (5 and 4 on Likert scale). Most reported that they and their children learnt they could make sculptures from recycled objects and that they gained a deeper understanding about the bird they had researched. For example, one mother reported that her daughter learnt about the “anatomy of the bird and the importance of using objects that seem like garbage”. Another recounted, “My daughter learnt about a new type of bird, including details e.g. what it eats, closer look at its color, etc.”

Asked whether this art-making experience inspired the adults to talk to their children in new or different ways, six of the 12 participants responded that it had. Those responding affirmatively said that they discussed particular aspects of the bird and different ways to construct it. For example, one mother wrote that she “was reminded to keep explanations simple and relative to her. It also helped to see how other families/grandparent interacted with the children, for example, ‘do you want to use cardboard or paper for the tail?’ Both approaches were helpful with my daughter”. More specifically, eight parents felt that the knowledge they gained during this experience would change how they would interact with their child in the context of learning and problem solving. One father said, “She had applied skills, so I should respect it and try to extend it. I should also expose her to new things so as to be able to make seeds of new

ideas". Another mother said that "these projects helped me to be less controlling and more open to my child's creative process – this is a work in progress for me".

## DISCUSSION

Two dominant themes emerge. The first relates to the partnerships created in this pre-kindergarten classroom. The second to the enhanced artistic learning and classroom and art curricula that were enabled by the families' participation.

**Partnerships.** Over the course of the year, aided by the family/child art-making experience, partnerships, defined as a collaborative relationship of mutuality, where power is evenly distributed and a shared responsibility exists for children's learning and development (Epstein, 2009, Lareau, 2011 and Winters, 1993), were established, including those with and between individuals and family units and the group as a whole. These "partnerships" could not have developed without trusting and mutually supportive relationships among the teachers, families and children.

The present study demonstrates that family/child art-making experiences can serve as a bridge between families and teachers. Here, the families had a first-hand opportunity to see the learning process, the materials, and what the children were learning. The level of interest and participation was a result, at least in part, of the families having some knowledge and understanding of the types of learning taking place. One mother described her daughter's experience:

*It is hands-on, visual and she is able to understand a concept because she can touch and use her senses, everything gets incorporated... She loves to learn and at home wants to find out new things about whatever she is learning.*

Another mother said:

*Kids learn through their experiences, through what they are exposed to and that is huge. She has taken so much from the whole project.*

Because the level of contact between the families and teachers was both abundant and consistent throughout this study and was not restricted to the typical parent-teacher conferences, they were able to form meaningful relationships that positively impacted the children's educational experience. These findings are consistent with the view of Malaguzzi, founder of the early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia, who stated that teacher – parent partnerships "are the most effective tools for all those concerned – children, teachers, families – to become more united and aware of each other's contributions. They are the most effective tools to use in order to feel good about cooperating and to produce, in harmony, a higher level of results" (Edwards et al., 2012 p. 43).

Over time, family initiated (versus teacher initiated) active participation became common. Many of the families asked to come into the classroom and contribute to, and participate in, the learning experiences and classroom events. For example, a mother volunteered to come and sing songs and teach the children a dance, families came to the classroom to read books or teach lessons, and some came to the art classroom to work with their children outside of the family/child art-making experiences. Winters (1993)

explains “that an active participant ... is able to share in the joy of contributing to positive outcomes. In many ways, this fulfills the basic human need to be recognized and belong” (p. 105).

The other partnership that this study revealed was that between families and children in the context of learning and development. For instance, one mother reported that the experiences increased her awareness of what the class was studying and through her intimate knowledge of the topics and the learning process, she was able to bring them into the home environment for further study. A father explained:

*It has helped her educational experience in that we [her parents] have learned things together, we see things differently, through her eyes and it helps to stress to her that we value learning and we expect her to continue to value it too.*

Not only did the families gain greater knowledge of what the class was studying through the family/child art-making experience, most families gained considerable personal satisfaction from the partnerships. The experiences enabled families to bond in new ways with their children and allowed the families to act as another resource providing support for their children’s learning.

These learning experiences also were important to the children. They were extremely excited when their families came into school to do other projects and be part of the classroom activities. One mother explained: “Watching my son’s excitement when he knows I’m coming in has made me believe it’s important to my child’s own sense of being supported and loved by his parents to have us there.” The mother of one set of twins said, “I think it has to do with the whole idea that I have someone to show this to and someone who is proud of me for doing it, so I am going to do it more because she is proud of me.”

Many families acknowledged the importance of family involvement and how it impacts children’s educational experience. One father explained:

*That parent participation in school demonstrates the value of the school experience and shows our children that they are valued. Learning on a continuum is also so important for the learning process – such as translating information to real life experiences. Families also need to be aware of their child’s experiences at school.*

Many families also understood that their involvement was important to their children’s future success. This is important because children have more positive attitudes about school when their families are involved with them on school matters (Epstein, 2001).

**Learning.** Analysis revealed several themes arising from what each participant group (family, children, and teachers) learned as a consequence of the family/child art-making experiences.

The families saw the benefits and joy their children experienced from the art-making experiences. As Gardner (1990) described:

*The arts involve emotions, in that they induce feelings of mystery or magic, or they have a religious or spiritual dimension. Indeed, in this view, the emotions are seen to function cognitively-to guide the individual to make certain distinctions, to recognize affinities, to build up expectations and tensions that are then resolved. However, human artistry is viewed first and foremost as an activity of the mind an activity that involved the use of and transformation of various symbols and systems of symbols. (p. 9)*

Many of the families' feelings after the art-making experiences conformed to what Gardner described. Families commented on how much their children love to learn, their capacity to make decisions, their preferences concerning the way they wanted their artwork to be, and how they were acquiring skills and knowledge through this art-making experience. The families recognized that through the art-making process individuals are involved in cognition, as those engaged in art making are, thinking, problem solving, and decision making (Hetland et al., 2013).

Not only did the families recognize that the children were acquiring skills, thinking, and making choices in their artwork, many recognized their children's personal response to the material and the expressive qualities of their work. One father realized that his son's decisions were, as Burton (2004) suggests, guided by his response to the materials. Families also recognized the deep connections the children made with their art works and how they elicited conversations that extended beyond the actual art-making experiences. The family stick puppet project was what the families spoke most about as making the deepest connections. For example, it enabled many of the participants to talk about their families. One mother explained that "it helped to open more discussion about our family and the ways families are formed (ours by adoption)." In another example, the mother of one of the twins shared:

*I didn't even realize how much of an impact the divorce had until we started to do the family project. We started talking about all the different dynamics and it is okay because they still have a lot of men in their lives because they have their uncle and their grandfather and my cousins. I figured that they were four years old, so it did not impact them that much because they were not with their dad. It is just amazing the way they see things and the way that they interpret things and I have totally disregarded it... I should have realized that, but it did not even hit me until we did the project. And it was funny because it opened flood gates for us to talk about "me, and I love myself and daddy still loves me because I love him" and it was really, really a learning experience for me.*

This parent's appreciation of her daughters' feelings and experiences arose because of the art work they produced together. As Dewey (1938) points out, "When excitement about subject matter goes deep, it stirs up a store of attitudes and meanings derived from prior experiences. As they are aroused into activity they become conscious thoughts and emotions, emotionalized images" (p. 68). For children, art is, among other things, a safe space in which difficult knowledge can be manipulated.

At the outset of this study, most families stated that art should play an important role in school. This did not change, but in the questionnaire and in interviews, many of them articulated a greater understanding of why they felt this was important and what its

benefits are. Families felt that art was an important part of their child's education because it is "fun..., builds curiosity..., enhances a child's analytical skills through deep thought, consideration and creativity..., and provides methods to express oneself". They recognized that children's art-making endeavors are not simply "decorative products to be taken home at the end of the day ... [their] visual and graphic languages provided a way of exploring and expressing understanding of the world easily available to most preschoolers" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1994, p. 27).

## CONCLUSION

This study evaluated the contribution family/child art making activities can make toward developing a classroom community and enhancing families' active involvement in their children's education. We saw the families become vital members of the classroom community and throughout the study, they built meaningful partnerships with the teachers, other family members and their children. They became fully integrated into the life of the classroom and we (teachers and families), as Edwards et al. (1994) describes, "shared in the care and education of the children" (p. 223). These families also learnt about the school curriculum, the art-making process, and how their children learn, think, and process information, through the parent/child art-making experiences. These intimate collaborative learning environments gave the families opportunities to view the work from the child's perspective as they engaged with their children (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2011).

Families are a vital factor in improving the quality of schools and creating sustainable education programs. Back to school nights and parent teacher conferences alone are insufficient. Rather, teachers and administrators must make direct contact with families, actively recruit them, make them feel welcomed and appreciated, build a sense of trust and community and foster an environment in which families feel that their contributions are important. All too often, teachers complain that they cannot get their families into the classroom, even with an open door policy. This study demonstrates a way to overcome barriers and achieve these goals. The diverse group of families in this study were all willing to get involved. Moreover, once integrated, many of the families continued to contribute to the classroom without further prompting, in part because they felt that their contributions were valued and celebrated.

The present study also addressed another factor in improving schools and learning, the implementation of programs whereby families can be instructed about how their children learn and think. Through the families' actual collaboration with their children during the art-making experience and the conversations they had with their children about learning outside of the classroom, the families learned new ways of supporting their children's learning.

This program also was effective in teaching families about the importance of art education and the manner in which young children learn, because they had the opportunity to experience these learning activities directly. "When education is based upon experiences and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes radically. The teacher loses the position of external "boss" or "dictator" but takes on that of leader of group activities" (Dewey, 1938, p. 59). In the journal *Pediatrics*, Milteer and Ginsburg (2011) reported that when families play with their children they

have different qualities of interaction with the children. For instance, families listen to their children in different ways, they learn about their children's world through their eyes, and they can learn to communicate and offer guidance to their children more effectively. Perhaps, when families are provided with opportunities to experience the value of art education and active forms of learning in the classroom, they also will advocate for their children. Advocate that arts should not continue to be cut and defunded from schools. They will fight against the current trends in education that have squelched play, recess, and other in-school creative and physical activities (e.g., physical education, art, music activities) that allow children to develop creativity, imagination, and cognitive, emotional, and physical strengths (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2011).

Families can be a very powerful force to shape children's education. But many families themselves have to be educated and in some cases empowered (Winters, 1993), so they can advocate for their children and promote holistic educational environments. Teachers and school administrators do not only have to be committed to the education of the actual child; they have to reach out to families so they can learn how to help their children have successful school careers. But families, teachers, and administrations cannot build sustainable lasting programs in isolation. The broad application of strategies, such as family-child art making activities, early in a child's school career has the potential to produce positive effects outside the walls of a single classroom to the wider school community.

Finally, early childhood classrooms that involve family in learning experiences do not require extra funding. All that is required is a commitment by the teachers and the recognition that building classroom communities is a worthwhile experience that can benefit the lives of their students, both in the short and long term. The present study highlights the ability to enhance, through art, parental involvement in the classroom and provides support for further study in this area.

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## **Biography**

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