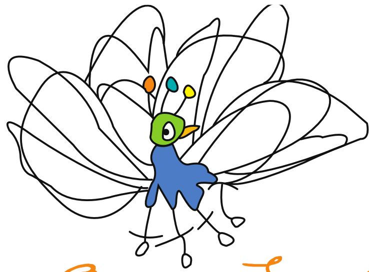

BUT "DID YOU *MAKE* IT?" ART AND OWNERSHIP IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Marta Cabral

ABSTRACT

What does it mean to really *make* something? In schools, art is often about being told what to do: "This is the project, this is what the final product will look like, this is how you will make it." Yet, I know from my own time in the studio and my own struggles and joys with materials and ideas, that making art requires doing "my thing." As a fellow artist and teacher working alongside my students of all ages, my job is to help them figure out what their own "quizzical itch" (Sullivan, 1989) is and how they can go about exploring it. How can artmaking be a way to develop ownership of learning in early childhood education? How can the materials and experiences offered by teachers help students gain agency over their roles as makers and agents of change in the world? What can it mean to "let go" of our taken-for-granted control as teachers to follow our students as they gain ownership of their learning? What does it mean to have creative agency?

Keywords: quizzical itch; creative agency; ownership of learning; making

INTRODUCTION

As an art educator with my own artistic practices, I continuously undertake studio art courses to hone my craft. Taking these courses—in glass working and in other materials— and spending time in the studio forces me to constantly rethink what it means to *make* something and *own* that making—maybe an object, maybe a process or a learning. This question was crucial to me in the decade I spent running the art program at a laboratory early childhood center situated in a large university in New York City. There I also taught graduate-level art education courses and supervised pre-K to 12th grade pre-service art teachers.

These two contexts – supporting students in their artistic explorations and working on my own art – constantly inform each other. Teaching children and adults has made me reconsider the importance of having one's own wonderful ideas (Duckworth, 1987); and the time I spend making my work, negotiating with materials, being happy and frustrated, annoyed and excited, is crucial in helping me understand how important it is for my students to have that experience

themselves - the time, space, and support to feel happy, and frustrated, and annoyed, and excited.

In this article I use self-reflective personal narrative to raise questions and issues regarding children's identity and agency for consideration around art-centered inquiry in early childhood and teaching contexts. I aim to: 1) argue that creative agency often relies on the ownership and decision-making and 2) make a case for teachers to design their curricula around experiences that foster ownership of learning.

The core of what I suggest as *creative agency* in the artmaking of young children is not the "thinking outside the box" often stereotyped as the way to or the hallmark of creativity, when after having found or identified the problem, the maker then expands to thinking about solutions that lie outside whatever is considered to be "the box." On the contrary, the young children described in this article work very much within the limits of their current explorations, their toolboxes (Stokes, 2014) of mastered skills, their ideas, and their current knowledge of processes in materials. They do work, however, constantly expanding on those ideas, questions, and knowledge, and broadening and deepening the realms of their explorations.

Stokes (2014) also moves away from this idea of thinking outside the box to the notion of "thinking inside the tool boxes of [the artist's] expertise" (p.276), redefining problem-finding as constraint-finding and taking artistic freedom as something that can only be "earned by experts who have mastered the basic tools that define their domains" (p.286). In the examples shown in this article, children are not responding to problems that are defined for them by adults focused on helping them extending the skills they are believed to have their toolboxes. On the contrary, I argue that these children are working with what Sullivan (1989) calls quizzical itch or Duckworth (2006), examines as wonderful ideas. Rather than searching for outside of the box solutions to problems posed by others, they are able to recognize and pursue their own quizzical itches, "overcome by the urge to find the new and the unusual" (Sullivan, 1989, p.196). This ownership of decision-making (leading not to adequate solutions to set problems but rather to the investigation of inescapably enthralling questions) is what I argue for when I define creative agency in young children's artmaking.

Fundamental to this creative agency is having opportunities to explore in ways that push us in relationships with materials, allowing us to follow our experimentations instead of the need for a specific final product or solution. I believe such times are when we embrace what is it that makes us think, investigate things that that tickle our curiosity, that poke our intellect and make us want to go further. But is it happening in our schools? Do schools encourage students to follow their curiosities? Are students supported in developing ownership of their learning? What does creative agency mean in school settings?

WHOSE ITCH?

When pre-service teachers and I reflect on the schools in which they have been teachers in training, we sometimes play what we call the "Whose itch?" game. Looking around hallways,

classrooms, and other school spaces, observing the work exhibited on the walls, we discuss questions such as: “Guess who may have decided what these pieces look like?”; “What ideas could the artist who made this have been grappling with?”; “Would you guess that the person who made this work had an idea of what the final product would look like?”; or “Who would you guess came up with the design of this piece?” This is, of course, a game of guesses and assumptions. We do not know any of the answers to these questions, and we do not pretend to know. But considering them helps us observe the art works and think about them. I feel that this exercise helps us question our own (and others’) practices of teaching and learning, pondering them as offerings of decision-making opportunities that have potential to foster ownership and creative agency in our students.

These questions often take place as reflections on collections of child-made pieces that at first glance may look just “colorful,” “welcoming,” or even “cute.” When seen in context, however, they may suggest the production of work that is driven by instructions more than by creative agency, and offer indications as to what is valued by curricula and teachers. So, we look, and we reflect, and we ask ourselves “whose itch is reflected here?” Often, I have seen in US school hallways rows and rows of identical products, made using the same materials, the same processes, the same ideas – presumably reflecting teachers’ ideas. These ideas may be themed guidelines to a process of exploration. For example, the teacher may be eliciting students’ interpretations of a specific aspect of the world such as the ocean, or a specific idea such as friendship or justice, or a specific lived or imaginary experience such as something students like to do with favorite pet, or in a favorite place. However, it is imperative to question whether a genuine personal interpretation is achieved when all the designs on the wall feature the same cotton balls in the same spot of the page where a snowman is outlined, the same greens straight from the container painting identical animals, or the same squares and triangles forming the same stereotypical house (even if most students live in apartment buildings). There is a real difference between children being able to explore a meaningful idea with materials, as opposed to using materials to make something that looks a certain prescribed way.

This questioning of whose ideas are present in art work was reinforced to me by the words of a child I encountered during a research project. In a study about ownership and artmaking, a parent reflected on how their child, who was still new to kindergarten, reacted when her art teacher assigned her a project with specific instructions to portray a specific scene: “But if you’re just telling us what to do, that’s not art,” the 5-year-old stated with surprise (Cabral, 2016). There are, of course, different ways to read this. Although learning specific skills is not inherently a negative way of learning (on the contrary, the guided learning of skills can be important and fruitful!), if a kindergartener is telling us that performing a specific exercise does not feel “like art,” that sentiment and statement surely mean something. As teachers, it is our job to listen. So, what is it that helps young children experience something that feels like art? What can artmaking look like if children are able to own their work and recognize and truly exercise their creative agency?

ARTMAKING IS CONNECTED TO THE OWNERSHIP AND CREATIVE AGENCY OF THE ARTIST

I go back to my own artwork and my own creative processes, and to what I know of the artmaking world. I notice that some artmaking practices often happen in interaction with others. In their work with different media, many artists work with assistants. This assembly may come in different forms. For instance, artists may work in collaboration with others (for example, glassblowers need physical assistance to perform parts of a making process that cannot be achieved by a person alone), consult with specialists for technical details of fabrication, or commissioning the specific elements of the work in a material the artists themselves are not familiar with (for example, when a conceptual artist asks a glass technician to create a specific object for them). In these cases, the people making the actions that lead to the physical object are not necessarily the driving force behind the end product – the creative agency lies elsewhere with the artist (even if, in other occasions, the creative work may indeed happen in collaboration.)

Artmaking is connected to ownership and creative agency. And that ownership, more than the physical making of the work, is linked to the thought processes and decision-making that determine how the shaping of the work happens. The notion that ownership exists with young children became evident in a research project which my colleague Sean Justice and I facilitated. This involved young children's explorations of 3D design and printing (Cabral & Justice, 2013). The study, developed out of a partnership between an early childhood center and a graduate school's digital media lab, was a response to preschoolers' questions about a MakerBot (a 3D printer) and what could be done with it.

During this project, my young students, my research partner, and I worked in an adult-focused laboratory, with furniture and objects not designed for the bodies of small children. Some of the four-year-old students were also not physically able to manipulate an adult-sized computer mouse to move the objects around in the platform on the computer software we were using. Therefore, I handled the mouse for the children as they directed me and indicated how they wanted me to place the digital objects for them within the software's working space. After each design was finished and each child was happy with what they saw on the screen, I asked each young maker at a time to click the button that would send the information to the 3D printer. And slowly a plastic object shaped exactly like the one that had been digitally designed gained physical shape on the printer's shelf, right before our eyes.

When asked to describe their process of creating a 3D printed object, Daniel (one of these children) explained: "I told the computer what to do, the computer told the printer, and the printer made my work" (Cabral & Justice, 2013). The fact that the teacher's hand was in fact making the mouse move around was irrelevant to this child because this creative agency resided with the person who was determining the work –the child. Even though this child had not physically made the artwork, the ownership of its creation was his. He was the artist who made the decisions, guided the actions, and determined process and outcome. In this case, assistive technology can also be seen to be supporting the artist's physical access to the material but not determining action.

ACTIVELY SUPPORTING WONDERFUL IDEAS

As teachers, much of what we do is related to building ownership of the learning process for children (Cabral, 2016). Or, as Sullivan (2006) puts it, as teachers we work on building our own redundancy, making ourselves a helpful but not an obligatory accessory to the learning process. Nonetheless, the teacher is still supporting and assisting children, still providing an environment of curiosity and materials, still being the adult who is responsible for that classroom. As teachers, we do this by noticing, supporting, and allowing children to have and follow their very own ideas. And where possible also having our own ideas to follow, or being contributing members to community ideas that exist in collaboration with children. Each child, however, owns and guides their meaning-making processes.

In classrooms and studios alike, I strongly believe we need to give our children time and space to explore as they develop their curiosities and then define their investigations. We need to let our students decide what is it that they want to devote themselves to. Crucially, the ideas worth pursuing should make sense to the child – why would any child want to devote their full consideration to an invested investigation of something that does not truly interest them? Duckworth (2006) highlights the importance of letting students develop ideas that are meaningful to each of them, engaging children with questions that are worth their time and attention. As artists and educators, we must engage children in quests that are significant to them; quests that empower them to follow their own quizzical itch.

Examples of the importance of personal meaning and investment in learning are plentiful in literature reaching far beyond the fields of art education and early childhood education. A new education (Davidson, 2017) is called upon to help students create knowledge in community and for the community, and to build work around their personal interests - working on what matters truly *matters*. And this is no less the case in the art practices of young children. Yes, teachers can have students learning based on ideas that, for a variety of well-meaning reasons, matter to them as teachers. Examples of this could include: artworks for the end-of-the-year show, holiday-themed objects to take home to families, a card for the principal, or a product that can be "assessed" and in the way "justify" time spent on an art lesson are just some examples. But what if children can learn based on what genuinely matters to them?

If teachers give students teacher-driven problems to find solutions to, then students will likely find suitable answers for the teachers rather than for themselves. However, by spending all their focus in pursuits that are not their own, students might never realize what are the questions and investigations they really want to explore and figure out. If, instead, teachers provide students with time, space, and support to come up with their own wonderful ideas (Duckworth, 2006), and scaffold their expeditions in the pursuit of their own thread of questions and answers, teachers may find that both their students and they themselves learn more deeply and broadly about modes of inquiry they might otherwise never have considered. "The more we help children to have their wonderful ideas and to feel good about having them," Duckworth (2006) argues, "the more likely it is that they will someday happen upon wonderful ideas that no one ever happened upon before" (p. 14).

I suggest that the job of the teacher is not to let students climb pre-determined progressive trails of learning stepping-stones provided for them, but to help students find their own climbing challenges. To let them have their very own wonderful ideas. In doing so, the work of the teacher is two-fold. Firstly, empowering students take ownership of their own processes of meaning-making, and secondly, helping them to establish their identities as people who have authentic questions to ask and puzzle over, knowing their ideas are worth pursuing.

In the art studio, the personal ownership of processes can happen every day, as students discover their own ways of thinking with materials. Teachers who are active listeners often notice the serendipity of what happens through the choices children make. Teachers can comment on the motions they observe and how these motions connect (or not!) with the materials; dwell on what they see physically happening in / on / with the materials; mention the choices that were made, and the things that “just happened.” Teachers who notice provide students with enough time and opportunities to discuss their work if they want to, but leave them to their own explorations if they decline share their thoughts. The kind of material inquiry and learning (Justice, 2017; Justice & Cabral, 2019; Cabral & Justice, 2019) that happens in the studio means that students learn properties and characteristics of materials and how to use them in new and old ways, but also to become increasingly aware of the impact they and their actions have on the world around them.

This is, of course, not exclusive to the specific space of the art studio. The “studio” as a place of study and investigation can happen anywhere, and the early childhood classroom is a prime example of this. In a study where we followed our students’ movements towards what became an exploration of graffiti in the classroom, my colleagues Emmanuelle Fincham and Tran Templeton and I became aware that pursuing new ways of using materials in the classroom illustrated our convictions about the importance of supporting young children to take the lead in their explorations (Cabral et al., 2019). In this semester-long exploration, our toddler students played with (non-toxic, child-friendly) spray-paint as they made marks on paper and cardboard, an extra-large stretched canvas that acted as a “wall” in the classroom and, ultimately, several previously off-limits surfaces in the art studio and the classroom. Although we did not set out to make this exploration happen as a pre-designed “project” or “learning unit,” this investigation of materials, boundaries, and risk-taking took its own course as we responded to our students’ interests and actions in ways that allowed them to push the boundaries of what was previously allowed. As a consequence, this allowed us to push the boundaries of what we thought of as child-led.

As we made sense of that time in which we explored graffiti with our toddler students, I realized that one of the things that changed was an increase of the children’s intentionality. By letting go of control on our part as teachers, by letting the children decide when and how to work with each material in the classroom, we were able to invite them to find their own reasons for and ways of doing stuff. And, by doing so, we felt that the children became more purposeful in their marks and more intentional in their making.

“YES, I MADE THAT”

Through my research I have observed that as children grasp this notion of autonomy in and for themselves, they also come to expect the same intentional ownership in others. Each gesture becomes a conscious choice, and intentionality is at the forefront of actions – even when the choice is to follow a physical motion and not an outcome. This became clear to me in a dialogue I had with a child who came to visit the art studio after he graduated from preschool. We were preparing our annual art exhibition, and Harold, now a first-grader, had come over for an "art date" to make work he wanted to exhibit. This is a reflection on that discussion:

> Armed with [my] freshly made cup of tea, I welcomed [Harold] as I saw him coming down the hallway. As he hopped into the studio with his usual joyful and antsy energy, [Harold] noticed a stack of a few objects that I had placed on my shelf: a heart-shaped candy box that a preschooler had given me for Valentine's day with a small glazed clay plate I made to keep my wet tea bags on – of course topped off with one of the said tea bags. He stopped suddenly as the assemblage caught his eye. "Marta, did you make this?" he asked. "Well I put my tea bag there..." I answered, tentatively. "No, I mean did you *make* it," he insisted. [Harold] has worked with materials long enough to know what that intentionality means. To know that our choices matter in terms of design and composition and that materials are our way through that. In fact, I had decided to keep the candy box there because I liked how the curves of the heart and round shapes of the clay worked together. "Yes, [Harold], I made it," I replied, this time with conviction. "And you are making it too when you look and notice it. It becomes yours too when you notice it so carefully." [Harold] went on to find his materials and work on an elaborate collage of wood on cardboard – a city in which I was lucky enough to be assigned a small egg-shaped house by the water (Cabral, 2016, p.37).

Years before, when he was a baby in the infant room in the same early childhood center, he pointed at the mobile we had made together. He firmly and repeatedly said his name. At the time this pushed me to consider ownership in the context of art making with very young children (Cabral, 2014). And now, as a first-grader, Harold was again holding me accountable for my own choices and processes. As I interpret it, Harold was making sure I knew that I was responsible for what I did, that I had agency in my work, and that I should consider my choices carefully.

What Harold did for me (by asking me if I had *made* that object) is what I try to do for my students of all ages. I try to help them be aware of their creative agency, to be conscious of their choices, and to be intentional in their making. From this experience with Harold I have realized that being aware of one's intentionality pushes the awareness of one's agency. This happens when we are given space to value our ideas and see them recognized by others. Consequently, in order to allow children to frontline their meaning-making processes we teachers need to engage in interactions that truly promote agency. Just as Harold did with me with the language he used with me.

HELPING CHILDREN BUILD THEIR INDEPENDENCE

The importance of helping children build their independence is by no means a new idea in early childhood education. However, in many contexts in the US (and other countries), children's agency in deciding what does happen in their everyday school and classroom experiences is in reality very limited (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). The teacher, often having their own decisions determined by imposed curricula and other pressures and agendas, determines where the class is going and how it will get there. Students are left to silence their ideas and voices, literally and metaphorically, as they go about following the prescribed questions of a pre-determine path to be followed. What may be relevant here is that as teachers we need to help children to help us build *our own autonomy* too. When we let our students take control we need to let go of some of what we teachers often think of as our own role and responsibilities. That comes with a shift in the ways we see our students as independent thinkers and "children's ways of being *as* knowledge" (Yoon & Templeton, 2019, p.57). True collaborations between teachers and students can be "liberating" (Wilson, 2007, p.19), as teachers fully recognize their students as active agents in the process and see themselves as evolving learners (Cabral, 2016; Ellsworth, 2005).

However, letting go is not an easy task. Nonetheless, Templeton reflects on how a child she was working with "barred" her efforts (Yoon & Templeton, 2019, p.76) to make decisions on the child's work. This action led her to shift focus from the aspects of the child's work that she, as an adult researcher, considered interesting, and to truly listen to what the child's foci were. This urge to define what is interesting and what should be valued is something that I also constantly battle with myself while working with children and adults as they explore their ideas with art materials and processes. The afore-mentioned graffiti exploration (see pages 6 and 7) is an example of how my colleagues and I actively endeavored to let go of much of our control of the classroom and the activities that were "allowed" as we purposefully listened to our students' experimentations and, as we did that, redefined our identity as teachers. As we let go of control and offered it for our students to take, we gained a different ownership of our roles in the classroom, shifting our focus from controlling actions and outcomes to owning our identities as learners and investigators, as people in the making (Cabral, 2016; Ellsworth, 2005).

But if educators are to truly understand the importance of letting students explore, struggle, and rejoice with materials and ideas, I believe that they need to experience that feeling for themselves. Owning our choices in our own artwork processes is crucial in helping us understand the need to foster the same agency in our students - in the toddler art studio as much as in the college classroom. In this way, teachers' studio and teaching practices are extremely important as they are deeply intertwined, and because they shape each other. By pursuing our own questions and following our own ideas, we can embrace the uncertainty of letting our students do the same. If art is indeed "an expression of how [we] 'do' autonomy" (Baldacchino, 2012, p.176), the consciousness of that autonomy may be developed through an understanding of materials and one's own role as a maker of art. It does not really matter which materials are applied because we all have different ways of knowing and learning, and different

materials can help us think in different ways. What matters is that we exercise agency and listen to the people and materials we are exploring with.

CONCLUSION

As do many other artists, Henri Matisse (1869-1954) worked in different ways throughout his lifetime. Some of his most famous artworks are cutouts, often large-scale paintings and collages. As he got older and presumably with more difficulty moving, Matisse often worked with assistants to physically help him with larger works. He created paper cut-outs out of papers the assistants had painted and placed the cut-outs - or had them placed - on large surfaces. Matisse, an artist of immense significance and importance, directed his assistants to arrange his cut-outs on the studio wall, in the exact way he told them to do. As I ponder this, I reflect on Daniel's 3D designing and printing process (see page 4), and how he completely disregarded the fact that his hand was not the hand actually moving the computer mouse – just as Matisse's was not the hand physically placing those cutouts where they should be. With Daniel, as with Matisse, my work has shown me that creative agency seems to be the result of taking ownership of decision-making. Creative agency arises from the choices we make, and from the relationships that facilitate, nurture, and encourage us to do so. As art educators, supporting the development of that creative agency in children is a crucial part of our role.

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BIOGRAPHY

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