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Making Meaningful: Intention in Children's Art Making

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Abstract

Children's art work has often been the subject of study by researchers seeking to gain insight into the role of art making in children's learning and development. However, rarely are children's own explanations of their art making used to inform these studies. Children's perceptions of their own art making are important for research and practice in art education, because their artistic experiences and motivations determine how they will engage in and respond to art making activities. This study used ethnographic methods to learn about the art making that took place over the course of one year in an elementary school art room, and to gain insight into the students' experiences and perceptions of art-making activity. Data were analysed using a socio-cultural framework. By asking children why they made art and exploring children's own explanations of their art making, this study reveals some of the important intentions that children bring to their artistic activity, and some of the ways that children make meaning through art making.

Keywords

children's art making, intention, meaning, socio-cultural perspective

Why do children make art? This is a question that is not often encountered in the literature on children's art making and art education. Yet for educators, it is a vital question. Without understanding why children participate in art making, we cannot fully know how they are responding to, engaging in and learning from the art making activities that we set for them. Furthermore, as art educators we are certain that art making is a meaningful activity for children, but we have limited knowledge about why it is meaningful for them. This study takes on the question of why children make art, and seeks to answer it by going straight to the source. Through interviews with children and observations in an elementary school art room, this study provides insight to children's perspectives on why they make art, how they experience art making and in what ways art making is a meaningful activity for them.

Understanding intention in children's art making

In the pursuit of meaning, the journey is crucial. Spontaneity and subconscious are vital to that creative journey, but too often children have been seen as all spontaneous, free expression and completely lacking intention in their art making. Historically, children were thought of as more closely connected to both the natural world and the spiritual world, and more capable of tapping into those realms through creative activities than adults, who are encumbered with culture and mundane reality. This was a prominent view of children in the Victorian era, for example, when artists tried to capture that unencumbered spirit in their own work by mimicking the art of children. Paul Klee was taken with 'the example children offered of an uncorrupted expressive capability' (Franciscono 1998, 98). Wassily Kandinsky also sought the spirit of children's art in his own painting and gave special privilege to the lack of purpose in children's art making: 'There is an unconscious, vast power in the child which manifests itself here and which places the work of children as high (and often much higher) than the work of adults' (in Wörwag 1998, 71).

Although this vision of children as uncorrupted and unintentional conduits of creativity persists to the present day, there is some research in the recent literature on children's art making that addresses intentionality. The intention behind young children's drawings has most often been examined by developmentalists interested in whether and how children's drawings provide insight into early cognitive development (i.e. Bremner 1999; Cox 2005; Kindler 2004; Lowenfeld 1947). This research has explored the aesthetic intentions of young children (Arnheim 1998; Kellogg 1969), and their representational intentions (i.e. Freeman & Adijapha 2008; Golomb, 1999, 2004). The literature is rich with ideas about the development of drawing in early childhood and debate about the psychobiological drives that motivate young artists. However, most of this research examines intention from the adult perspective on child development: that is, it does not consider children's own ideas about, or experiences with, art making, and ascribes no agency to children in developing their own artistic intentions. Furthermore, the subjects of these studies tend to be pre-school aged, and therefore too young to provide thorough verbal accounts of their artistic intentions, leaving researchers to use adult artistic activity as a framework for interpreting the young artists' intentions. The current study focuses on middle childhood, with children starting at age 6, which is where most of the developmental studies leave off. By doing so, the capacity to rely on children's reports about their own art making is increased.

Artistic intention from a socio-cultural perspective

While little research on children's art has broken away from the developmental paradigm, Brent and Marjorie Wilson (Wilson & Wilson 1977; Wilson 2005) are two researchers who have examined children's art making from a different theoretical perspective. The Wilsons used a cultural framework to examine how children pursue their own artistic development by copying cultural models and then creating their own variations on those models. Talking to children

about this activity enabled them to gain insight 'about the complexity of kids' minds, their interests, aspirations, and just how much they learn when they teach themselves through producing their own visual culture' (Wilson 2005, 33). Anning & Ring (2004) similarly argued for a socio-cultural framework for studying children's art making and also noticed that the aesthetic preferences that young children employ in their drawing activity was often rooted in their cultural surroundings. This work suggests the importance of looking at the social and cultural aspects of children's art making in order to understand their motivations and intentions.

Art making always occurs in a cultural context, and so understanding who children are as artists requires looking at how they situate their art making in their cultural setting. Bruner called the cultural activities that people engage in 'acts of meaning', which he defined as 'the meaning-making processes that connect man to culture' (Bruner, 1990). He argued that people make meaning in context, and that meaning is found in what a person is 'doing or trying to do in that context' (Bruner 1990, 118). These intentional activities have also been called 'personal projects' (Little 1993), which are the goal-directed activities that a person engages in as a way to make life meaningful. Personal projects 'impel actions intended to achieve individually defined goals' (Little 1993, 162). This is a useful term for talking about art making because it implies that activity is rooted intimately in the person, while also projected outward, as well as into the person's past and future art making. Through personal projects, an individual makes life meaningful by projecting their uniqueness into the cultural sphere. Seen through the framework provided by Little, a personal artistic project is the intention, endeavour and investment – the reason for picking up the brush to paint, and the reason for staying committed to making something when there is the option to walk away. It could be said, then, that this is one answer to why someone makes art.

The present study

This study examines how children make personal connections to their cultural world through art-

making activity, and in so doing provides insight into the questions of why children make art and how they experience art making. Art making is a personally meaningful activity, and it is important to understand who children are as artists if we want to know them, what they are learning in art making and what meaning they are making for themselves in the process. This analysis uncovers some of the intentions that children engage when they make art. It does not assume that all children will have one of these intentions in their art making. Instead, it is meant to reveal the types of projects that emerged as possibilities, with the understanding that any individual child might embark on an entirely unique project, or may combine multiple intentions into their personal art making project.

Methods

Site

This study takes place at Haven Elementary, a charter school in Bayside, a large, diverse city in California [1]. The neighbourhood suffers from social and physical deterioration, and the school building itself is worn, but the vision driving the school is innovative and progressive. The mission of Haven is to develop youth into educated and involved citizens through community and environmental programmes, and the arts are central to this mission. All students at Haven had art twice per week, and performing arts once per week, and had an additional arts integration class each week. Visual art classes were taught by Ms Murray, a veteran art teacher and arts mentor for a countywide arts integration initiative. Her curriculum was roughly based on the Studio Habits of Mind framework (Hetland *et al.* 2007), and her approach was to provide few art assignments during the year, allowing students time to develop each project over time.

In the year that this study took place, Haven had about 150 students in grades K-5. Some students were from the neighbourhood where the school is located, but most came from other neighbourhoods throughout the city. The school aimed for diversity, but struggled to maintain

that vision. The population of the school was about 65 per cent African American, 15 per cent White, 8 per cent Latino, and 12 per cent multi-ethnic or other ethnicities. About 80 per cent of students received free or reduced-price lunch.

Study design

This analysis is from a study that was designed to describe the world of children's art making and explain the experiences of individual children within that world. This study was designed to foreground the experiences and activity of children as they participate in art making in a learning context. Socio-cultural learning theory suggests that research which aims to generate knowledge about learning should look not only at the context and the learners, but rather should foreground the activity that the learners are participating in (Engestrom 1993; Greeno 2006; Tulviste 1999). To that end, this study was designed to foreground children's art-making activity and their experiences as learners in the art-making process.

This study uses ethnographic methods, including field observations in the art room, interviews with children and analysis of documentation and artefacts from children's art-making activity. By talking to children about their art making, observing their art-making activity in context and examining their art products, I sought to capture the social and cultural patterns in children's art making, while also revealing the unique activity of individual artists.

Selecting participants

I asked each classroom teacher to nominate 3–4 students for small-group interviews. Children were nominated based on their interest in art making and likely interest in talking about art. In the small-group interviews I learned more about their art making and willingness to participate in interviews, and with that information, I selected children for individual interviews, making an effort to have a diverse group, both demographically (gender, ethnicity, age) and in terms of artistic interests. The 14 children who were chosen include four first graders, two second graders, four third graders, one fourth grader and three

fifth graders. They were six girls and eight boys, and ethnically they represented the school's diversity. Some were avid artists who worked intensively on art projects whenever possible, while others were less interested in art and did little more than complete school assignments.

Data collection

Field observations

Field observations were conducted at Haven for one academic year. During that year, I observed on average six art periods per week. Each first to fifth grade class was observed at least once per week for at least a semester. While they made art, I sat at the tables with the children and spoke with them about their work, asking questions such as 'Can you tell me about your picture?' and, 'How did you get that idea?' I took notes about how children used materials in their art making, how they developed and altered their artwork in response to the social and cultural environment of the art room, and how they interacted with and influenced each other as they made art.

Some observations took place in settings outside of the art room, such as in classrooms, after-school clubs and in children's homes. At children's homes I asked them to show me their artwork, to make art while I watched and invited parents to talk about their child's art making along with the child. In their homes, I observed indicators of family influence on art making, such as displayed artwork, evidence of parental engagement in the arts and the space and resources provided for children to make art. I asked both parents and children to talk about the artistic background of the family. In this way, home visits were set up to provide information about how and why children participated in art making outside of school.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted in two phases. First, I conducted semi-structured focus-group interviews with three or four children at a time, usually during lunch. In these focus groups I asked the children broad questions about art and art making, such as 'What is art?' Interview

questions were designed to elicit the children's perspectives on art and art making, to get at their emic understanding of concepts such as 'art' and 'imagination', in order to better understand how they think about the artistic activity that they engage in. These abstract questions were followed by descriptive questions such as 'What kind of art do you like to do?' and 'Where do you make art?' so that they could speak more concretely about their artistic activity. The focus-group format was used to get a discussion going among the children, so that they would be responding not only to me, but also to each other. In doing so, I captured some of the social dynamic of children's art making.

During the focus group interviews I also used photo-elicitation and artefact-based approaches in order to get at their understanding of their own processes in art making, what it meant to them, and what the experience was like for them (Barron *et al.* 2001; Collier 1967). I asked the children to select an artwork that they had completed from their portfolio and describe it: how they made it, how they made certain decisions along the way and why they chose it over the other pieces in their portfolio. With photo-elicitation, I asked the children to look at photos of themselves making art, and asked them to describe what they were doing, what the assignment was and what the other people in the picture were doing.

Children selected for case study were interviewed once or twice at school in addition to the focus-group interview. Four of the children were also interviewed at home. In the interviews, they were asked questions about their art making and abstract topics related to art making, such as 'What does it mean to be creative?' The individual interviews included more in-depth artefact-based questioning. They elaborated further on the origins and development of an art piece they had created and recalled more detail about how they created it. By having them describe something they made while looking at it, I was able to have a window on to their art making that would not have been available if they did not have the object to look at as they talked.

Finally, I asked them to choose one of several different art materials, such as markers, oil pastels

or watercolour paints, and to make a picture using that material. They talked out loud while they made the picture, saying what they were thinking and describing what they were doing as they made decisions about the picture. This think-aloud activity provided access to their process and decision-making.

Data coding

To make sense of the wealth of data that resulted from a year of observations and interviews, I used an emergent coding method, looking for patterns in the data to see what factors were important to children's art making in this art room, keeping in mind the question that I was hoping to answer about why children make art.

In the first phase of coding, a random sample of four interviews and five field notes were read with an eye to identifying ideas that seemed important to the children's art making. From this sampling process, a list of emergent codes was made that reflected the patterns and themes that were identified. One of these codes was *reasons for making art*, which came out of children saying things like 'I didn't have nothing to do,' and explaining that 'we always do what [Ms Murray] tells us to do'. However, some reasons emerged that had a different quality, describing more the intentions that they brought to their art making that caused them to be invested in the project. For example, one boy said about art, 'I like to make it when I'm kind of like mad.' These intentions showed not just why children decided to make art in the moment, but also the purpose that determined how their art-making activity took shape. As a result of this process, *intentions* became a coding category. Within that category, I devised sub-codes based on the types of intentions that the children described: such as storytelling; representing experiences, identity and emotion; and experimentation. In the next section, I discuss the categories of intention that emerged.

Results: intentions in children's art making

The different intentions that the children described took shape as projects that caused them to be invested in their art making and that

gave their art-making activity meaning. As described in the coding section above, intentions were restricted to the artistic motivations that demonstrated what children were 'doing or trying to do' in their art-making. Therefore, reasons such as 'I had nothing to do' and 'the teacher asked us to do it' were not included in this analysis. Intentions, as described in this section, were observed independently of the reasons that children engaged in art making at a given moment. The personal artistic projects that were observed were different for each child, but tended to fall into a few overarching categories: storytelling, representing self and experiences, experimentation, imagination, aesthetics and relational. They are not mutually exclusive; rather, children engage multiple projects while making art.

Storytelling

Jonathan fishes around in the box of paper scraps and pulled out a trapezoidal shape. 'This is my boat. Me and all my friends are in the boat.' He gestures with a sweep of his hand that 'friends' are the boys at his table. 'We're going fishing, it's a fishing boat.' He finds a square piece of paper with blue paint on it, 'This is the window.' As he glues the shapes to the paper he elaborates the story. 'Me and my friends went fishing ... These are the fish. Then we went to this island, and that's the house.' He cuts a circle out of black paper and glues it on to the fish. 'That's an eye! I put an eye on the fish.' He cuts a long, thin strip of paper 'and that's a fishing pole!'

The story that 6-year-old Jonathan told about the fishing boat is not true. He imagined this adventure and created the story as he made the collage. The paper shapes in the collage box offered suggestions that guided the story development; a trapezoid made Jonathan think of a boat, and then the next shape reminded him of a fish. Younger children like Jonathan tended to create a story out of the materials they were using. The collage project was an open-ended assignment with no requirement to do anything other than glue shapes on to a piece of paper, yet a number of children told stories as they created an image. The materials planted the seed of a story in the children's minds, and then

they elaborated the narrative in their imagination. Once a narrative is started, it determines how the project will continue and changes the art-making activity. After Jonathan found the trapezoid shape and determined that it was a boat, he had to complete the picture with elements that made sense to the narrative. Instead of simply finding shapes in the box, his task changed to actually creating the shape that he needed. The storytelling structure organised and extended the art-making activity.

Older children were more likely to keep a narrative in mind, that they then brought to life with art materials when they had them available. For example, 8-year-old Aisha had a story of a girl and a prince in her mind throughout the year, and she used every opportunity with art materials to visually elaborate the narrative. She kept a journal in which she continually added to the story with words and illustrations, and used assignments in art class to add to the story. An assignment to paint a still life of a flower became a scene in the romantic development between the prince and the girl, and the task of painting with analogous colours was an opportunity to create a fiery scene with a dragon that the prince had to kill.

The persistence of narrative in children's art making was evident in different ways. While Aisha maintained and elaborated one story over the course of a year, 10-year-old David developed one character, who was at the centre of a long series of comic stories. His character, *Drag, the Dragon* is a stunt-dragon who gets into different stunt adventures. Drag is depicted in David's comic tales as a stick figure. Many of his drawings are simple, providing the bare minimum of graphic information to convey the story. Where Aisha tended to elaborate her story by adding visual detail to her illustrations and paintings, David first built his stories in his imagination and then drew them. He maintained the stick figure image of Drag in his mind, and with that could imagine the situations that Drag got into:

Guess what his newest stunt will be? Make a jet ski jump off the top of the Statue of Liberty's torch. There'd be a little ramp and they would

have put a wall around the torch because the torch, if you put water on the torch, then it would all flow out. So they put wooden boards around the bottom and on the side to keep the water in ... and they put a ramp aiming right towards the water.... And he never fails a stunt, but guess what? He's not gonna land on the jet ski. He's just gonna let the jet ski fly... so he's gonna hit the water without the jet ski.

David has reached the point with his drawing that he can imagine what the drawing will look like, and can elaborate the story before he draws it. However, it is through visualising the future drawing that he is able to elaborate the story.

Representing self and experiences

Child and adult artists alike often say that art making is a form of self-expression, but what do they mean when they say that? In this study, children frequently talked about self-expression as the purpose for their art making. They talked about making art to portray important experiences they have had, to tell about important people in their lives, to express emotions and to describe things that they find interesting. This section describes these different ways that children use art making as a way to express identity and to process and represent experiences.

Students at Haven often had opportunities to use an art assignment to represent things that interest them. Omar (age 8) was intrigued by skyscrapers, so an assignment to make a cityscape gave him an opportunity to focus on his topic of interest. He said that skyscrapers were his favourite subject to paint: 'I like to make skyscrapers. I wanted to live in one ... [but] I've never been in the New York City skyscraper'. Art making was a way for Omar to explore something that he cannot know from first-hand experience, but that he was intrigued by and wanted to understand. Similarly, 6-year-old Rahsaad expressed and explored his interest in dirt bikes through art making. While drawing a dirt bike during our interview, he started with the parts of a real dirt bike. 'I'm drawing the back wheel These are the handlebars.' But then he started to imagine what was beyond his knowledge of

actual dirt bikes to add things that were his own inventions:

I need the yellow for this part for when it gets too hot. The sun will go all the way back [it will reflect the sun]... so like if you're in the desert, you'll still be cool. The green part, that's the green fire smoke. I'm just making it green 'cause ... I want it to be colourful. I'm drawing my own just pretend dirt bike. A real dirt bike doesn't have this [sun reflector]... or that [green smoke].

As children make art about these things that they like but do not get to experience first hand, they become familiar with them and develop understanding. Omar came to understand the verticality and angles of a skyscraper, and Rahsaad came to understand the parts of a dirt bike and their functions. With that foundation of understanding, they could then expand on their knowledge with their own invented ideas.

In addition to using art making as a way to understand the things they are interested in, children also used art making as a way to represent important experiences and people in their lives. Many of the children at Haven made artwork about people they care about. They made drawings of siblings, friends, parents and grandparents. They included details that describe the specific person, and represented experiences they like to share with the person, such as 'going to carnival with my dad' or 'swinging in grandfather's backyard with my sister'. More than just representing these important people, the children explained art making as a way to share the special qualities of the people they care about. For example, first-grader Jackson represented his mom by drawing a cartoon character that acts crazy, saying that he did so because his mom also acts crazy. They described their efforts as beyond simply representing the physical qualities of people or representing the aesthetic qualities of the human figure. Rather, they expressed the intention to make sense of and explain the meaningful qualities of influential people in their lives.

In addition to representing important people, children used art assignments to repre-

sent significant experiences in their lives. For example, both Frida (age 9) and Obi (age 7) used the assignment 'make a painting of your favourite toy' to make pictures of themselves playing in a tree in the yard at their old house. Rahsaad adapted that assignment to portray himself doing flips on his skateboard, even though it's not his favourite toy: 'My favourite thing to really do is bike ride, but I did a skateboard That was the ramp. There was a bigger ramp, but it was three-dimensional.' The assignment to make a favorite toy gave Rahsaad the opportunity to share an exciting experience with skateboard ramps. For Frida and Obi, it was an opportunity to revisit an important experience from their past.

The children described different reasons for making art about significant experiences. Some wanted to record events to remember them. For example, Dario (age 8) liked to draw the events of his day when he got home from school so that later he could remember what happened. Others talked about wanting to change some aspect of the experience they were portraying. Rahsaad, for example, recalled riding on a friend's ATV (all-terrain vehicle or quad bike) as he was drawing his dirt bike, and changed some aspects of the ATV to make it more like a dirt bike: '[The ATV] is different from this 'cause it has four wheels. This has two wheels A two-wheel bike would beat the ATV.' The ATV was a memorable experience for Rahsaad, but in representing it, he thought of things that would have made it a better experience for him.

A third area of self and identity in which children used art making was to explore and express emotion. Several children at Haven spoke directly about making art to feel better when they were upset. To alleviate his anger, Dario said that he makes self-portraits of himself looking angry, and Omar said that he makes angry portraits to 'cool down'. Lakeisha (age 10) said that she likes art because it is a way to express her emotions:

It's like I just open up and just draw ... it's just there, like it shares all my emotions When I'm drawing, instead of me talking, or something like

that, I'm just using my body in [a] different kind of way So it really is expressing how I'm feeling.

Although she talked about expression coming from open and free drawing styles, she also understood that she could control a drawing to express specific emotions: 'I can make, like when I'm feeling sad, like the little soggy eyes, something like that. Or when I'm happy, the big old smiles.'

They also talked about expressing more complex emotions in art making, though were less able to speak directly about them. For example, Omar described making a drawing about a person who had to sit all alone in the movie theatre because he was socially excluded for looking different:

Someone was there all by their self No, it was like those are the seats and that's the person. And like this the only person there. That's because they look different – difference. And they don't want to be by them.

This drawing of a person being left to sit alone in the movie theatre was made in response to an assignment to 'draw a crowded place'. It's a poignant example of the feelings of exclusion and loneliness that we can feel, even among a crowd. Omar articulated his intention to make a picture about the complex feeling of isolation, even if he was unable to state that directly.

Experimentation

Like adult artists, children engage in art making as a process of experimenting with materials and investigating ideas with media. Some of the children at Haven were very purposeful about their experiments and explorations with art media. They described experimenting with materials to convey a particular idea, transforming an existing artwork into something different, playing with imagery to create something new, and investigating a concept by playing with materials. Sometimes they talked about wanting to come up with novel solutions to problems, present an idea in a different way, or invent a picture that they never made before. The goal of invention was closely related to the purposeful

experimentation that I observed among children at Haven.

Play is considered to be an important activity for child learning and development, enabling children to explore concepts separate from reality and develop symbolisation (Matthews 2004). The experiments that children engaged in with art materials were a significant form of play. They experimented with art making using found objects, materials from nature, household objects and anything that left marks, in addition to traditional materials. Stephanie (age 8), for example, made art with leaves, seeds, marbles and woodchips, and Zaac (age 6) used things he found, like feathers and cardboard boxes, to make art. Even traditional art materials invited exploration. Artists young and old experiment with materials, sometimes altering their use to convey a particular idea and sometimes just to see what emerges. Some of the young artists in this study conducted experiments with traditional art materials, like Lakeisha, who enjoyed playing with colours in order to create new effects in her art. In making a picture of a landscape, she experimented with coloured pencils to portray the scene in a novel way:

I'm probably going to draw different kind of colours of an ocean. And like the sun, but it's going to – I'm going to use different colours I'm gonna try to do this part kind of goldish, and then try to use this one and, like, space it, kinda, a little gold a little space, and then I'm gonna make the other colour ... Everybody thinks that the sun is yellow or orange, and I just want it to be different from other people's suggestions.

Some children deliberately experimented with imagery in order to see what would happen. Jamari (age 10) and Lakeisha conducted imagery experiments by turning their drawings upside down while working on them. Lakeisha said she turned her drawings around to see something different from what it was before, and then altered the drawing to reflect the new image she saw. Both of these children explained that they do this as a way to create something new. In another approach to creating new

imagery, Stephanie liked to draw people but experimented with giving them different features. 'I try to draw them differently so they don't look alike, because I want to draw different drawings, not like the same drawing.'

Making the imagined real

Several of the children said that they like to make art because it was a way to express imagination. Imagination was understood by most of the children to be something akin to creativity. It was about being able to create something in your mind that does not exist in reality. For some children, this was an important activity. As Stephanie put it: 'I think I make art just to explore my imagination and get my imagination somewhere in reality. Well, it's kind of like in my head. It's like different from the real world because you can make up anything you want.' Kaisha (age 8) said: 'I like making art because you can make different imaginations from your head. Sometimes I close my eyes and then I paint what's in my head.' Dario said that he likes art because he can create 'a whole new world' and can transform real things in his imagination and then render them with art media. 'You can make yourself anything you want to make yourself. I could make Tariq turn into a dog, Kaisha turn into a parrot, me turn into a pirate.'

Relational intention

There were several different ways that the children in this study used art making as a way to relate with others. First, many saw it as a way to give a gift to someone else. This happened often in the form of artistic cards for birthdays and holidays. Children also talked about making artwork for people with them specifically in mind. Dario made pictures of dragons for his mom because she likes them. Frida enjoyed making art for others, and made pictures of animals for some of her friends who like animals. Aliyah (age 7) made a purple drawing because 'My auntie, she loves the colour purple.'

Beyond simply interacting with each other as they made art, the children developed relationships through their art making and sought to relate to others through their art making. While

making collages of people, Ronia admired Jada's (both age 6) image of a girl in a prom dress, so Jada helped Ronia make a similar one. In doing so, both girls used art making to take on social roles and develop social relations. Jada relished the role of expert and trendsetter and was eager to be Ronia's mentor, while Ronia wanted to emulate Jada by creating the same artwork that she had. Each of these children used art making as a way to form relationships with others, by trying to establish mutual understanding through similar artworks, taking on social roles among their peers through art making, and by simply using art making as an opportunity to interact with others.

Discussion

Children engage in art making with intention, motivated by the overarching projects that they set for themselves. These projects come out of a desire to make life meaningful through art making. Making meaningful was theorised here as human drive to act on and interact with the social and cultural world that one occupies (Bruner 1990). The intentions described above are some of the more common ways that children in this study made meaning in their lives by using art making as a way to connect their inner lives with their social and cultural surroundings. This represents a shift from the developmentally framed paradigm that has dominated the study of children's art, toward a socio-cultural perspective. This shift has been called for by researchers and educators who are concerned with important issues in children's artistic development and learning (Richards 2007; Rose *et al.* 2006).

Related to the call for a shift in theoretical perspective is the growing concern among researchers with the problem of declining interest in art making among children. Since the discovery of the debated 'U-shaped curve' in children's artistic capability (Davis 1997; Gardner 1982), researchers have been examining this problem to understand whether this phenomenon truly exists and what might cause children's interest in making art to decline (i.e. Flannery & Watson 1991; Pariser 1997; Rose *et al.* 2006).

This study fills the gap in research on children's art making from the socio-cultural perspective and, in doing so, provides a new way of understanding how children think about their own developing artistic activity. This perspective provides needed insight about the motives that drive children to not just make art, but to make art that is meaningful to them, even when completing a teacher-directed assignment. This insight can be of great value to educators hoping to foster their students' intrinsic desire to continue developing as artists.

The study reported here provides a preliminary model of children's artistic intentions. More research is needed to test and refine this model, including conducting research with different populations of children and in different locations. More in-depth case studies should be conducted with individual children to examine how different intentions work together to take shape as a child's unique personal project. Additionally, further research should examine how artistic intention varies in different art-making contexts, such as when art is required and when it is spontaneously engaged by the child.

Conclusion

In this study, children were seen making art in ways that made it a meaningful activity for them and a meaningful way to connect to their culture. They were also found to be making meaning through their art in the sense that they used art materials to investigate, represent and transform important ideas that they encountered in their world. All of these ways of making meaning occurred through intentional artistic activities, which were driven by the personal projects that they set for themselves. While I discovered several common intentions among the children, such as storytelling, representing experiences, experimenting, relating to others and making the imagined real, it should be made clear that these are not the only possible intentions that children might engage in their art making, and that any one child will engage multiple intentions as they develop their personal art projects.

Note

1. The school name and all participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy. This study was conducted with approval from the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board of Stanford University (IRB protocol #328-Malin).

Heather Malin is a research associate for the Stanford Center on Adolescence. She earned a PhD in art education from Stanford University School of Education, where she completed a dissertation on children's art making as a socio-cultural learning process. Her research interests include the role of art making in children's learning and development, the ways that young people learn to be participants in culture and society, and the development of artistic purpose in adolescence. She received her masters and teaching certification in K-12 art from Columbia University Teachers College. Dr Malin has taught art in elementary schools and in community-based programmes, managed artist-in-the-schools programmes, and currently prepares future teachers to provide arts instruction in the elementary classroom. Contact address: 505 Lausen Mall, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 943053-083, USA. Email: hmalin@stanford.edu

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