The Effectiveness of Art Activities

In Developing School Readiness Skills

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Chrystyna Z. Holman

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Abstract

This research study explores the statement: "The effectiveness of art activities in developing school readiness skills." The significance of school readiness is well documented, and is supported by a correlation between school readiness and success in formal school. The importance of art activities is also well documented. This study blends the two issues and explores how art activities can be most effectively used to develop school readiness skills.

By interviewing three educators and two artists the researcher comes to the following conclusions: 1. That art activities can effectively help develop school readiness skills if the activities are open-ended and process-focussed. This was the dominant theme. 2. That adults should provide positive feedback, talk to children about their art, and ask appropriate questions as this affects children's readiness development in a positive way. 3. That children should be offered a variety of materials and tools appropriate to their developmental stage. 4. That social and cognitive readiness skills develop more quickly if they are done in small groups.

Three further points are made. First, that the teacher's role should be that of facilitator and provider. Second, that art activities should be inclusive and involve all children with limited experiences or special needs in successful endeavours. Third, that art activities with some directions are appropriate for children who are developmentally ready and interested, as following instructions is an expectation in formal school.

The artists make two significant contributions. One is that teachers of young children needed to be "special" people who can stand back and let children create. The other is that children must have "freedom" to create from their experiences and their imaginations, and must not be restricted in any way.

Acknowledgements

Twenty years ago I looked into taking my Master's Degree in Education, but with three young children, a full-time job and a husband who was rarely around it did not seem feasible. By chance, I told Vianne Timmons, the Dean of Education, that at one point in my life I had toyed with the idea of obtaining a Master's Degree in Education, and before the conversation was over I was encouraged to become a student once again. I can't say I loved every moment, but I did find the courses stimulating and interesting. For this experience and the opportunity to learn, I would like to thank Dr. Vianne Timmons.

All of the courses I took were taught by incredibly nice and caring people. To all of them I owe a sincere thank-you! But there are two who stand out for me. One is Dr. Fiona O'Donoghue, who challenged and extended my perception of what teaching and being a teacher really means. The other is Dr. Graham Pike, who undertook the tedious task of supervising this thesis. His advice and sense of humour were always appreciated and at times quite entertaining. To him I am extremely grateful.

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Dr. Kathy Gallagher Ross is a friend of many years. She not only followed my progress, but supplied me with some very relevant Canadian studies which made my work more comprehensive and unique. Her advice and encouragement meant a great deal to me.

I owe a million thanks to my good friend Cora Hurlburt who read and reread all my submissions. I want to thank Merle Ems who edited the work and Cindy Wood who checked that it met APA standards. I owe thanks to my personal cheering committee consisting of Heather Orford, Eddie Rice and Kate Mosse. They kept my spirits up, kept me on task, and are still speaking to me. I feel this degree is partially theirs.

Finally, thanks go out to my family, especially Larissa who allowed me to write about her early school experiences and was highly amused by it all. And to my husband who put up with a messy house, an empty fridge, and a humourless and cranky wife. Needless to say he stayed out of the house most of the time, which was rather prudent of him.

Writing a thesis is an interesting experience for most people. I do not know many who could write such a work in isolation. I know I was lucky for the support and encouragement I received throughout my educational odyssey. This is not a great piece of work, but it is a substantial achievement for me and I owe a debt to all who helped me along the way.

Chrystyna

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

My family came to Canada with very few possessions. As refugees, we came with what we had and were grateful to find a safe haven. We went West, that was where our sponsors lived. First we lived in a four-room apartment with three other families. Each family had a room and all shared the kitchen and the bathroom. I was very young and had no idea how difficult or complicated the arrangement was. I was very happy. Eight adults and nine children occupied the space. There was always someone to play with and most of the playing occurred outdoors. We lived that way for a year until my parents moved to a small one-bedroom apartment where we had our very own bathroom -- a luxury that was quite unequaled up to that point in my life.

The other great marvel for me was my uncle, who lived in British Columbia and occasionally came to visit. His visits provided us with wonderful entertainment. He was a great storyteller and we were allowed to stay up late to listen to him. He arrived one morning with two surprises. The first was his own set of false teeth. With these, he could click out rhythms that sent us into gales of laughter. The second one was quite special. Out of his pocket he took a box of crayons, gave it to me and said, "Here. These will keep you busy and out of your mother's way." It was my very first box of crayons and it was a gift that brought me great joy.

I entered Grade One shortly after our arrival in Canada. I couldn't speak or read or understand what was expected of me but I could print very well. It was not enough. I failed Grade One and the rest of my elementary years were simply a struggle.

As an adult I watched my middle child's journey through Kindergarten and elementary school. School was a real effort for Larissa. It was sad to watch this little waif cry so miserably at the Kindergarten door. Larissa liked little about school that year, but she did like the art activities.

I will not recount the details of Larissa's sad entrance into public school, except to point out that her first formal report card as a 5-year-old in Kindergarten was absolutely dismal. Fortunately, the implications of Larissa's pathetic performance were lost on her.

Larissa continued through elementary school not really doing well in art and music, but I know she loved both. We bought her brushes, paints and good art paper. Larissa and I would visit art galleries and art shops. Art was her therapy and she would spend hours drawing, painting and pasting. We encouraged that interest. Larissa's artistic creations were framed and hung in her room and in the kitchen. It gave us all a great deal of pleasure to look at her art efforts.

After dropping out of university and taking two years to rethink her future, she went to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. She loved it and graduated with a degree in Fine Arts. Can she make a living with her art? I really do not know. But I do know that, as long as she has a creative outlet, she will be happy.

As a teacher and a mother who could identify with and understand the implications of poverty and failure in school, I was determined that the children I taught and my own children would be happy. I knew I could provide art activities which would give them pleasure and hone the skills required to help them in Grade One.

As for myself, I trained as a primary specialist and taught Kindergarten in Ottawa's poorest district. My teaching took me to Canada's North where I taught Aboriginal children. In both locations language and poverty were issues. Since then I have worked with many more marginalized children and their families. A number of them were new immigrants to this country and once again language and poverty were issues.

Perhaps because of my own memories as a child, as a teacher of young children and as a mother, I have watched children put their souls into their paintings and other creations.

Giving children opportunities to express themselves freely provides an understanding of what they could be thinking and feeling. As both a teacher and a parent, I believe that art activities are critical to a child's happiness and to their success in school and life. As the mother of a fairly timid and shy child, I watched how Larissa used her love of art activities to cope in the institutional milieu of public schooling. Art activities were her salvation; they inspired her and soothed her through a fairly unhappy early school experience.

As a result, my decision to focus my research study on the role art activities or art experiences play in helping children acquire school readiness skills stems from a genuine interest in the topic and from my years of working with young children and their parents. After all, my experience told me that art activities were easily supplied, could focus children and provide them with positive experiences. It seemed logical to use those positive experiences and explore their relationship to children's preparation for school. Suggestions on how art activities could help children would be of interest to parents, in particular, and to early childhood educators. Considering that, it seemed relevant to explore the statement: "The effectiveness of art activities in developing school readiness skills."

Art activities in Kindergarten are not really a subject. Rather, they are a part of an integrated approach to provide young children with experiences that will shape and prepare them as members of a society and, also, give them the foundation for formal schooling. The Ontario Ministry of Education and Training (1998) in its policy document states:

> In Kindergarten, children's receptivity to new influences and capacity to learn are at their peak. During this period they acquire a variety of important skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will affect their ability to learn, their personal development, their relationship with others, and their future participation in society. (p. 3)

In terms of their school readiness, the Kindergarten program:

> is designed to help children broaden their base of information, form concepts, acquire foundation skills and positive attitudes to learning, and begin to develop their abilities and talents in a wide range of areas. It is also designed to prepare children for the new curriculum for Grades 1 to 8. (p. 4)

Looking at a holistic and integrated approach to early learning is sensible, inclusive and an encouraging way to prepare young children for Grade One (The Canadian School Boards Association, 1999). For preschoolers, offering a variety of subjects separately at a given time, with specific skills to learn, would be ineffective because: children come with a variety of attention spans, needs and backgrounds; their ability to participate in group activities is a skill that develops with time and maturity; learning in isolated blocks is not natural for children. In short, they learn by living through different experiences and perspectives.

> Kindergarten programs should emphasize the interconnected learning that occurs when children are exposed to real-life situations and activities in the classroom, home, school and neighbourhood. For example a trip to the grocery store can develop literacy, numeracy, and social skills, and can provide an opportunity to acquire nutritional information. (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p. 6)

Both the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training (1998) and the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (2000) state the importance of, and the need for, children's learning to occur through "integrated activities" (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998, p. 6). This learning occurs best when children play.

> Play can be joyful, serious, solitary, social, relaxed, intent. It may be exuberantly physical or purely imaginative. It is at the heart of our ability to learn, to cope and to become whatever it is we are to be. (Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2000, p. 41)

What is relevant here is that play provides an effective approach to learning if it takes place in a holistic and integrated way. A broader interpretation of play in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board's (2000) manual is described as:

- the child's actual learning process...the foundation for all later learning
- the way a child learns what no one can teach him/her
- the manner in which young children investigate their world and build a repertoire and understanding of what exists in their everyday environment
- the business of children, their way of learning. Play and work are synonymous to the child.
- (an) activity which is pleasurable and enjoyable even when the outward stages of joy are not observable.
- (an) active involvement (which) satisfies the child's need to interact with his environment.
- a natural activity of children and thus permits development and acts as a vehicle for all learning.
- motivated by intrinsic needs and is a spontaneous voluntary activity, chosen freely by the player.
- an important and joyful part of our lives. It should never be forgotten or neglected. (p. 38)

Basically, the philosophy of the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training (1998) and the Ottawa-Carleton School Board (2000) underlines that all preschool activities should provide an opportunity for children to learn about the world in their own unique way and in their own time. The definition and description of play in these two manuals encompass what the literature considers art activities. Lowenfeld's (1965) construct of art activities as the "most natural forms of expression" resonates with how play is defined. He describes art activities as providing children with the opportunity to "freely and independently enjoy discovering and exploring the world around" them (p. 3). He parallels art to play when he says, "To promote free art expression, then, is the same as providing the child with a free and happy childhood" (p. 25). Lowenfeld's phrase "a free and happy childhood" intends to illustrate that in order for children to represent the world around them, they have to first learn about it by freely experiencing and exploring it in their own way. According to the Ottawa-Carleton School Board (2000) one can describe play as "the manner in which children investigate their world ... (p. 38).

Art activities, as a way of representing, are only one aspect of a school readiness program. As a preschool teacher and as a parent, I look at children's art as a reflection of their

inner persona and as a marker of their progress (Dighe, Calomiris, & VanZuphen, 1998). Children's art discloses how they perceive and understand the world around them. Lowenfeld (1965) feels that children's art enables an adult to know what experiences children need in order to develop their readiness skills. Both Lowenfeld and Seefeldt, (1995) make the point that art does not happen without experiences. Children need to see, touch, talk about things in order to understand and then to represent them. The ability to represent the world around them is a critical step in preparing children for reading and writing. Art activities for me symbolize a relatively simple and easy approach to ensure what children need to achieve success in school and in life. Art activities help develop a happier, more contented and more sensitive personality (Goff & Torrence, 1991 & Lowenfeld, 1965).

As primary specialists, we were taught that happy and contented children were more inclined to acquire school readiness skills, which provide the basis of successful transition into Grade One. The significance of school readiness is not just a belief peculiar to primary specialists. Its importance is well documented in a number of studies, including two Canadian studies by McCain and Mustard (1999) and Doherty (1997).

To conclude the importance of school readiness skills cannot be ignored. As the literature will attest, there are studies that correlate school readiness with success in school and success later on in life (Doherty, 1997). Art activities help children acquire those skills in a holistic, naturally paced sequence, and in a satisfying, therapeutic manner (Lowenfeld, 1965). Again, my children's own experiences and my work with young children support this.

My literature review looks first at the importance of acquiring school readiness skills. Then it focusses on the importance of art activities and how they best develop those skills. For clarification purposes, an example of school readiness skills are included on the following pages.

There are qualifying statements for each of the five skills. The school readiness skills proposed by Doherty's (1997) are taken from nationally adopted standards (Kagan, 1992, p. 50) and are considered a basic guideline for children entering Grade One. Different school boards do extend and list other specific skills but they include and utilize the ones listed below. Doherty also utilizes Kagan's (1992) definition of school readiness: "School readiness refers to a child's ability to meet the task demands of school, such as sitting quietly, and to assimilate the curriculum content at the time of entry into the formal school system" (Doherty, p. 1).

The School Readiness Skills

The experiences (skills) that bring about school readiness depend on the following five components:

- physical well-being and appropriate motor development.
- emotional health and a positive approach to new life experiences.
- age-appropriate social knowledge and competence.
- age-appropriate language skills.
- age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive skills (Doherty, p.14).

Physical well being and appropriate motor development

Assuming normal birth weight and the absence of any major disability or sensory impairment, children's physical well-being and motor development unfolds as it should as long as the child:

- has adequate nutrition;
- is protected against accidents, neglect, abuse, and violence;
- is protected against preventable diseases through immunization; and
- is given plenty of opportunities to exercise large muscles by running, jumping and climbing, and to develop fine motor skills by manipulating a variety of objects. (Doherty, 1997, p. 26)

Given these preconditions, appropriate motor skills in the first component are that the child:

- can hold a pencil
- can cut
- can turn pages of a book without tearing
- can button clothes

- can write alphabet letters

Emotional health and a positive approach to new life experiences

Psychologists have developed well-validated procedures to determine if an infant's or toddler's attachment to a caregiver is secure or insecure. Follow-up studies comparing groups of 4- and 5-year-olds whose infant/toddler-caregiver attachment was secure with groups whose attachment was insecure, have found that those who had a secure attachment:

- are more positive in their general outlook;
- have higher levels of self esteem;
- are more independent; are more empathetic with other children and have greater social competence;
- show higher levels of curiosity, are more purposeful and focused in their actions, and are better able to persist with tasks; and
- are less rigid in their approach to problem solving. (Doherty, 1997, p. 28)

Given these preconditions, the skills for emotional health are that the child:

- can control anger/frustration in an appropriate way with minimum adult assistance most of the time
- has a sense of curiosity
- has the ability to stop and think before deciding how to act
- is willing to "give and take" in play situations
- is able to take turns, share toys and possessions.

Age-appropriate social knowledge and competence

Children with secure attachments can be expected to perceive themselves as worthy of love and to approach others, including peers, with positive expectations. This type of approach tends to elicit positive reactions from others and forms the basis for the development of social competence. . . the secure attachment children have been found to:

- be more empathetic and responsive with their peers; and
- have greater social competence with other children, for example, to be more skilled in initiating and responding to contact with peers. (Doherty, 1997, p. 29)

Given these preconditions, the skills for age-appropriate social knowledge and competence are that the child:

- is ready for social group living, desires experiences beyond family group

- shares responsibility for planning classroom events and activities
- can communicate feelings and wants in a socially acceptable way
- knows how to enter a peer group without disrupting it.

Age-appropriate language skills

Language development requires:

- gaining control over the speech apparatus -- mouth, lips, tongue, vocal cords -- in order to produce specific sounds intentionally;
- being exposed to language; and
- being actively encouraged to use language. (Doherty, 1997, p. 32)

Given these preconditions, the age-appropriate language skills are that the child:

- understands adults and other children
- identifies favourite books and enjoys retelling the story
- can communicate experiences, ideas, stories and feelings
- identifies colours, numbers and letters
- may begin to read.

Age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive skills

The rate of development and the formation of cognitive skills required for school readiness depends on:

- anatomical maturation of the structure of the central nervous system; and
- the child's previous physical and social experiences. (Doherty, 1997, p. 34)

Given these preconditions, the general and cognitive knowledge skills are that the child:

- can sit and listen to a teacher quietly
- can sort by colour and shape simultaneously
- identifies and reproduces patterns
- knows a story has a beginning, middle and ending
- makes simple comparisons
- uses words that represent concepts shared by adults more frequently.

(The skills listed under each heading are taken from Doherty, 1997; The Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1998; and Ottawa-Carleton District School Board 2000)

Potential Significance of the Study

Sometimes sound educational reasoning is not enough to create and sustain beneficial school programs, and preschool programs fall into this category. This is particularly true in Prince Edward Island. It is the only province in Canada that does not provide a fully-funded public Kindergarten education. The programs here vary in delivery, duration (from three to ten months), and philosophy. After interviewing six Island elementary-school principals, I found none could claim that all children coming into formal schooling had attended a preschool or Kindergarten program, mainly because, as one principal explained, the lack of public transportation. Children come into Grade One with a great range in their readiness and abilities to cope with formal schooling. Even in provinces where Kindergartens are established and mandatory for all 5-year-olds, parents are looking for support and advice on how to help their children's successful transition into formal schooling. This is a major issue in McCain and Mustard's (1999) study. They state that parents need more support and education on how to help their children. The study also states that children benefit and do better when their parents are involved in their children's early childhood education.

The challenge here on Prince Edward Island is to help parents provide activities that help children achieve school readiness skills. Art activities have a role to play in helping children prepare for formal school. For example, to help children achieve "appropriate motor development" (Doherty, 1997, p. 14) parents could supply simple household materials such as styrofoam bits, buttons, pop bottle tops for glueing which strengthen and promote eye-hand coordination. Also, discussing, questioning and commenting on a child's creations helps build and extend a vocabulary and develops prereading skills (Oken-Wright, 1998, p. 77). It is reassuring for parents who are especially interested in developing their children's readiness skills, to know

that appropriate art activities are something they can provide, at very minimal cost. Realizing that supplies for art activities are easily acquired, may also encourage parents at home to provide children with more opportunities for expressing themselves in different ways. Also, as the literature documents, creative, non-directed activities for young children are the basis for developing readiness skills for formal schooling (Lowenfeld, 1965; Seefeld, 1995). McCain and Mustard's (1999) report strongly recommends that parents should be better informed in order to provide not only opportunities for children to develop readiness skills but also to provide age-appropriate supplies and to maintain them in an accessible place.

For teachers of preschool children here on the Island, the research findings should help justify and encourage the use of appropriate art activities, especially those art activities that are child-directed. Art activities give children the stamina to deal with more demanding tasks such as sitting still, a readiness expectation that is very important and key to success in formal schooling (Doherty, 1997). This study will emphasize to preschool teachers that art activities are a useful way to encourage learning and understanding. How teachers prepare the day, arrange the environment to encourage, motivate and inspire young children in any activity, including art activities, makes a great deal of difference.

This thesis also helps to fill an apparent gap in the literature. Much has been written on the developmental art milestones, art as therapy, art as instrumental in honing gross and fine motor skills, and art as a way of conceptualizing (Lowenfeld, 1965 ; Seefeldt, 1995). More has been written about the latter in terms of learning and school readiness, and one can find references to art activities as an aid to conceptual thinking (Oken-Wright, 1998; Edwards & Nabors, 1993; Engel, 1996). However, little can be found relating all of those art activities as a whole to school readiness. Of 4,000 searches in ERIC and psycINFO, only six established a relationship between

art activities and being ready for formal schooling. The relevant information was found in journals, papers and studies; searching for the connections between art and school readiness should be of use to concerned adults who work or have children.

This thesis contains five chapters. Chapter Two surveys relevant literature, including aspects of the individual and social significance of school readiness skills. As well, I review relevant thinking on changes in theory of brain development, creativity, the approach to the use of art activities, links between art and writing, and the stages in art development. Chapter Three explains the methodology I used and the analysis process. Chapter Four provides an account of how three educators and two artists responded to the interview questions. Chapter Five develops the links between my research and corresponding principles that emerged from the literature review.

I realize that my convictions come from my own childhood and life experiences, from the emotional involvement in my children's progress through their school years, and from my training. In my first year of teaching I had a wonderful mentor who introduced me to Lowenfeld's work. I was and continue to be greatly impressed and influenced by him. Like Lowenfeld, I believe that the creative process is a powerful force that can enrich and promote growth in every aspect of a child's development, and in acquiring the skills which are necessary to achieve success in school and life. I also feel that this creative process is fragile and cannot be pushed or encouraged in ways that are unnatural for children. But it is a process which can give a child joy and encouragement and a feeling of self-worth and self-esteem as long as the adults in the child's life understand and appreciate the significance of that process.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The Importance of Acquiring School Readiness Skills

In most parts of Canada, Kindergarten is an essential preparatory step for the successful transition of young children into grade school. It is a huge step for children to go from a fairly free, activity-based preschool program focussing on socialization of preschoolers in groups, to develop the skills needed for Grade One. Ontario and British Columbia no longer consider Kindergarten sufficient for ensuring success in learning. Ontario is now recommending a greater commitment to developing programs targeted at preschool children and their parents.

Why this initiative? Recent studies indicate that preschool children have incredible brain activity and learning capacity. McCain and Mustard (1999) advocate that resources be made available to support and educate parents in order to enhance the development of very young children. They stress the importance of stimulation and nurturing of young children as key to a child's optimal development, including success in school and later in life.

> The evidence is clear that good early childhood development programs that involve parents or other primary care givers of young children can influence how they relate to and care for children in the home and can vastly improve outcomes for children's behaviour, learning and health in later life. The earlier in a child's life these programs begin, the better. These programs can benefit children from all socioeconomic groups in society. (p. 52)

Other studies such as the *Perry Preschool Project*, (Renaud, Good, Nadeau, Ritchie & Way-Clark, 1996; Canadian School Board Association, 1998), have found that a high-quality preschool program significantly reduced the risks of criminal behaviour, of teenage pregnancies, and a dependence on the welfare system. "A $1 expenditure in preschool programming was

estimated to save $7 in later costs related to special education, social service, justice and remediation" (Renaud et al., p. 10).

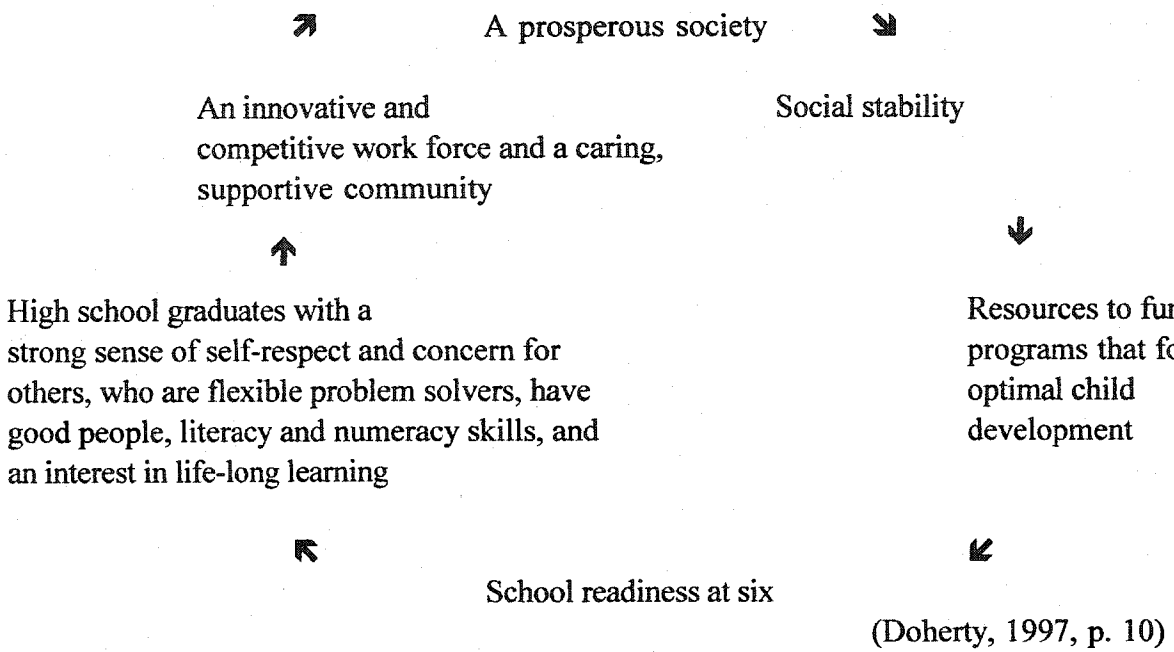
Doherty (1997), another Canadian researcher, emphasizes the importance of a successful transition to school. Her report makes the point that successful transition is a determinant of later academic success, and positive social and emotional development. Children who enjoy school and do well in Grade One are well equipped to learn. Doherty writes that these children are socially ready to work in a group, solve problems and absorb the learning experiences around them.

The importance of school readiness is illustrated in the following charts. Figure 1 shows the relationship between a prosperous society and successful learning. Figure 2 illustrates the direct relationship between poor reading skills and employment possibilities. A prosperous society is a good thing for all concerned, not just in terms of financial rewards, but also in developing a sense of purpose, self-esteem and membership in a healthy community (Sergiovanni, 1991).

Low literacy and poor reading skills limit people's ability to provide for themselves and their families. Certainly, governments are recognizing the economic benefits of an educated population. In Prince Edward Island a number of agencies, such as Workplace PEI, Adult Education, and the PEI Literacy Alliance, have been established to increase the educational level of residents. The studies cited so far all stress that quality preschool programs can make a difference at the preventive as opposed to the remedial stage.

> Investing in young children saves remediation costs in the health, social service and judicial systems in later years. More importantly, it provides a skilled, competent and capable work force that will sustain Canada's productivity despite an aging population. (Renaud, et al., 1996, p. 11)

Figure 1. The inter-relationship between economic and social goals



(Doherty, 1997, p. 10)

Figure 2. The possible effects of inadequate language skills at school entry

Possible outcome for the child		Possible Outcome for Society
Difficulty learning to read		Difficulty understanding and communicating effectively with the teacher, leading to an increased likelihood of classroom behaviour that is considered disruptive by the teacher and peers
Frustration, perception of self as unable to do academic tasks, probability of being turned off school and attempting to learn	→	Grade repetition, and/or repeated failure in various subjects
Poor academic achievement, perhaps to the extent of being functionally illiterate	→	Leaving school without diploma and without adequate reading and mathematical skills
Difficulty obtaining and retaining employment, low standard of living	→	Fewer skilled workers, undermining of society's economic base and fewer resources to meet increased income maintenance demands (Doherty, 1997, p. 60)

The arguments presented so far have illustrated the correlation between school readiness and high-school graduation, employability, number of arrests, physical and mental wellness, and the use of fewer social services.

Among early childhood educators, the most-talked about and quoted report is by McCain and Mustard (1999), also known as *The Mustard Report*. The report makes many recommendations, but for the purposes of this study the following suggestions, which are repeated throughout the report, are key:

- Parents must play a vital part in any early intervention or development program for young children.
- Community-based preschool programs should be made available for all young children.
- There should be supportive programs and resources for parents of young children.
- Families at risk should be supported through universally available programs, and not dealt with in exclusive and special programs.
- Investing in early childhood programs will ensure a more productive and economically viable society in the future.

McCain and Mustard (1999) continually emphasize the importance of community-based programs both for young children and their parents. Parents need to be more knowledgeable about what are reasonable expectations for young children. Quality Kindergarten programs should be a link between the early-years (pre-preschool) programs and the school system.

> Ideally, early child development programs and the school system should be part of a continuum for children that extends from the early years through to adulthood. The brain develops in a seamless manner and what happens in the first years sets the base for later learning in the formal education system. (McCain & Mustard, 1999 p. 18)

In 1998 the Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA) prepared a discussion paper on preschool education. In its paper the word "preschooler" refers to 4- and 5-year-olds. The paper was presented at a conference to the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada

(CMEC). The paper is important because the recommendations were made to the Ministers of Education by the people responsible for implementing and developing educational programs.

Furthermore, Ministers of Education are ultimately responsible for providing the funding for any new program initiatives. The CSBA (1998) emphasizes the significance and benefits of preschool programs to the Ministers. Included in the executive summary are the following points:

> Preschool education lays the foundation for individuals to develop fully and to contribute to their communities in ways that foster economic growth, social stability, and prosperity.
>
> Preschool education covers the learning that takes place in children from birth to age 6 and covers learning both within and outside of organized settings. Families, communities, and the formal school system all have a role to play in preschool education.
>
> Age-appropriate development ensures that children enter formal school programs ready to benefit from the school learning environment. The learning that takes place from birth to age 6 covers motor development, emotional development, social knowledge, confidence and competence, language skills, general knowledge, and cognitive skills.
>
> Ministers of Education should play a key role in moving provincial governments forward in ensuring that preschool learning enables all children to take advantage of school programs. This requires that ministers go beyond their specific jurisdiction in order to influence the factors that enable children to be school ready. Bridges must be built between ministries to make preschool education work. (p. 1)

The CSBA (1998) discussion paper is an important step in recognizing that preschool education makes a difference in the development of school readiness skills, because appropriate enriching activities impact on a child's ability to learn. The skills children bring into Grade One depend largely on their preschool experiences.

Although much is written about what constitutes quality preschool programs (Kagan, 1992; CSBA 1998; Chapman, 1996) one cannot assume that all preschool or Kindergarten

programs are beneficial. Doherty (1997) suggests that Kindergartens and preschools which try to prepare children for formal schooling by providing more "academic" instruction, such as drills and rote learning, are not helpful but have negative effects on children. Academic instruction is responsible for producing:

- higher rates of stress behaviours among children in "academic" programs than among peers in more developmentally appropriate kindergarten settings and lower levels of self-esteem and belief in one's ability to succeed;

- poorer language skills, both in terms of understanding language and in communication ability, among children in "academic" programs; and

- short-term gains in school readiness, such as recognizing numbers and letters, among children in "academic" Kindergarten. However, this is offset by poorer academic functioning in the later elementary school years and higher rates of leaving school before graduation than among children who received less structured academic programs as four- and five-year-olds. (Doherty, 1997, p. 87)

Furthermore, Doherty (1997) feels this research is really critical as there is some concern -- but no hard evidence -- that American "academic" approaches to Kindergarten may gain popularity here in Canada. Therefore, it is prudent to keep an eye on American educational trends towards a propensity for drills and rote learning in Kindergarten, as it could influence our educational practices. "This is a very important policy and practice issue because of the well-documented adverse effects of drills and rote learning in Kindergarten" (p. 88).

One can conclude that the quality of the experiences is important and has an impact in how a child progresses through school and life. School is such a large part of a child's life that it is important for every child to have the opportunity for success and happiness. According to Sergiovanni (1991), everyone has to take some responsibility for ensuring that the future generation becomes a community of caring, productive and accepting people.

Doherty (1997) supports the contention of the CSBA (1998) that good preschool

programs can have a long-term, positive economic impact. She points out that an unskilled work force earns less, resulting in a loss of tax revenue which leads to a decrease in services, a larger population depending on social welfare, and a society that cannot compete in a global economy. Ensuring that preschool children acquire readiness skills so that they experience success in school and later on in life appears to be a pivotal point.

Similarly the CSBA (1998) report states that, "Enabling people to develop their skills fully and to avoid the negative effects of not doing so is a worthwhile goal in itself. It also makes sense economically" (p. 1). According to the CSBA, the full development of one's abilities can act as a real buffer against a life of poverty. "Preschool education is now widely seen as a strategy that schools use to combat the effects of poverty" (p. 5).

Looking at New Knowledge

Kagan (1992) and Doherty (1997) indicate that readiness to learn in formal school depends to a large extent on quality preschool programs, providing that children's other basic needs are met. Doherty (1997) lists birth weight, good nutrition, nurturing, stimulation, and quality preschool programs as the foundation for emotional and physical health, behaviour and learning. To understand the significance of these early years, McCain and Mustard (1999) look at how a child's brain develops and matures. Now, there is a "re- thinking" of the brain's development. It was once thought:

(a) How a brain develops depends on the genes you were born with.
(b) The experiences you have before age three have a limited impact on later development.
(c) A **secure relationship** with a primary care giver creates a favourable context for early development and learning.
(d) Brain development is **linear**: the brain's capacity to learn and change grows steadily as an infant progresses towards adulthood.
(e) A toddler's brain is much **less active** than the brain of a college student. (McCain & Mustard, 1999, p. 28)

Recent research suggests:

(a) How a brain develops hinges on a complex **interplay** between the **genes** you are born with and the **experiences** you have.

(b) Early experiences have a **decisive impact** on the architecture of the brain, and on the nature and extent of adult capacities.

(c) Early **interactions** don't just create the context, they **directly affect** the way the brain is "**wired**".

(d) Brain development is **non-linear**: there are prime times for acquiring different kinds of knowledge and skills.

(e) By the time children reach age three, their brains are **twice as active** as those of adults. Activity levels drop during adolescence. (McCain and Mustard, 1999, p. 28)

Other key points:

- Early brain development is interactive, rapid and dramatic.
- During critical periods, particular parts of the brain need positive stimulation to develop properly.
- The quality of early sensory stimulation influences the brain's ability to think and regulate bodily functions.
- Negative experiences in the early years have long-lasting effects that can be difficult to overcome later.
- Good nutrition and nurturing support optimal early brain and physical development and alter learning and behaviour.
- There are initiatives that can improve early child development. (McCain & Mustard, 1999, p. 25)

This new information about the brain directs attention to the "critical periods."

> There are a number of specific times when a child is at a particular developmental level and is biologically primed to develop more advanced neural structures and/or skills provided that the appropriate stimulation is available. These times are known as 'critical periods'. They represent a window of opportunity and set the stage for later development. (Doherty, 1997, p. 45)

The phrase "use it or lose it" implies the importance of stimulating the brain. Both Doherty (1997) and McCain and Mustard (1999) describe the significance of "critical periods". Assuming all is normal, the brain's wiring is formed and strengthened by sensory stimulation and nurturing by other humans.

For example, in order to develop binocular vision, both eyes must be properly stimulated before the age of two or this vision will not develop properly. Doherty (1997) documents that the development of emotional health and a positive approach to new experiences -- a readiness skill -- is formed and strengthened by "secure attachment to the caregiver" (p. 50) early in life. Secure attachment is the basis for developing "self-confidence, independence, flexible problem solving, and persistence in five-year-olds" (p. 50).

Similarly, "There is an important process of pruning away neurons, synapses and even entire neural pathways that are not being stimulated" (McCain & Mustard, 1999, p. 27). As far as school readiness is concerned, that stimulation must occur at critical periods.

Doherty (1997) does give examples of intervention programs for children who have not been stimulated during critical periods. The intervention programs can help, but children "that miss out on crucial experiences during a critical period will never probably be what they could have been" (p. 60). McCain and Mustard (1999) explain why it is difficult to reverse the process.

> When some kind of (sensory) stimulus activates a neural pathway, all the synapses that form that pathway receive and store a chemical signal. Repeated activation increases the strength of that signal. When the signal reaches a threshold level (which differs for different parts of the brain) something extraordinary happens to that synapse. It becomes exempt from elimination -- and retains its protected status into adulthood. (p. 27)

In terms of school readiness certain memory functions are required. One of the readiness skills for Grade One is that children have the ability "to understand the differences and similarities between groups of objects and the ability to recite back specific pieces of information" (Doherty, 1997, p.17). At age four, most children will retain one concept at a time. They can count objects and they can tell which set of objects is "a little or a lot". What they can't do is compare the sets using two categories such as size and colour (Doherty, 1990, p. 36).

> They act as if two sets of knowledge are stored in two separate files, as in a computer, and there is no way to "merge" them. Between the ages of four and six, most children become capable of correctly answering questions such as "which is bigger, four or five?" The ability to integrate counting and an estimate of global quantity simultaneously is necessary for children to understand grade one level instruction in adding and subtraction. (Doherty, p. 36).

Considering that children who have acquired readiness skills strengthen their opportunity for success in formal school, in their ability to learn, and later on for success in life then the relevant quest for this study is to look at the effectiveness of art activities in relationship to and promotion of school readiness skills. In the next few pages, the literature on how art activities can develop school readiness skills is reviewed.

A Rationale for Creative Art Activities

The Importance of Creativity

All cultures tell their history and story through their creative expression. For children it is much the same; their art is unique and, for most, a very personal portrayal of their own experiences. Lowenfeld (1965) feels those childhood experiences can shape a destiny.

> It is our childhood experiences which determine whether we live in fear, frustrated, shy, and inhibited, full of feelings of inferiority, or whether we live basically free, uninhibited, and well adjusted for the rest of our lives (p 171).

Lowenfeld's (1965) writing is as relevant today as the day it was published. He sees the creative process as a healing, nurturing and stimulating experience. He sees art as an integral part of a child's ability to develop independence, imagination, initiative, confidence and satisfaction, and healthy self-esteem, as well as activities that provide a child with great pleasure. Lowenfeld goes on to say that art and the creative process provide emotional wellness, and encourage an appreciation for beauty and a sensitivity to the experiences that enrich one's life. As children

develop a respect for their own work, they learn to value other individual efforts.

Cherry (1972) and Kellogg and O'Dell (1972) agree with Lowenfeld that the urge to create is innate and universal in young children. Kellogg and O'Dell state that children progress through their artistic developmental milestones in much the same way, regardless of cultural or ethnic background.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1999) defines "creative" as "relating to or involving the use of imagination or original ideas in order to create something" (p. 334). Edwards and Nabors (1993) define creativity in more lyrical terms: "Creativity is a feeling free to be flexible and original, to express one's own ideas in one's own way" (p. 79). Paul Torrence (1970) whom Edwards and Nabors (1993) regarded as "a pioneer in the study of the creative process" defines creativity as "the ability to produce something novel, something with a different stamp on it" (p. 79). For him creativity has four characteristics: fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration.

In a different research study, Goff and Torrence (1991) also substantiate Lowenfeld's (1965) opinion that creativity fosters emotional health and mental well-being by providing children with the opportunity to make choices in the classroom. They agree that creative activities and expression bring individual satisfaction, and motivate people to socialize and communicate. Creativity produces what is commonly known as a zest for life and positive mental health.

Some may question the importance of children having creative outlets in the school system, perhaps because of busy curricula or pressure to perform well on tests, but Lowenfeld (1965) feels very strongly that creative outlets for children are imperative. Tolley (1993), who studied creativity and science, agrees with Lowenfeld that creative activities give children the opportunity to look at the world from a different perspective and help them understand that

world. They help develop social competence, language and general knowledge and cognitive skills.

One can conclude from the literature that art activities engage children and help develop the above skills. However, only art activities which allow children to represent things in their own way, from their own imagination can be accepted as creative activities and thus helpful in developing readiness skills (Edwards & Nabors,1993). These skills require concentration, cooperation, the ability to understand and follow instructions, and to work in a individually or in a group. How does one justify this position? The following examples in the literature support and reinforce the argument that creative art activities meet the needs of a wide range of students:

- Creativity in Mathematics, a precise and undisputed science, helps students to develop abstract reasoning and problem solving (Khurana & Baral, 1997).
- For the gifted child creativity in the curriculum provides much needed challenges and encourages interactions among a number of distinct cognitive components (Mumford, 1998).
- Creativity in the classroom allows for the inclusion of physically and mentally challenged children by allowing a more open and flexible environment (Huntinger, 1998).
- For the "at risk" and "economically disadvantaged" children a creative environment keeps motivation high, and ensures that creative self-expression brings success in activities of interest (Runco, 1993).
- The market place is driving the demand for people with qualities that are not easy to measure but that prove their competence by their ability to produce innovative work. The working world is looking for people that have creative ability, are agreeable, flexible and excel at problem solving (Tolley, 1993; Alencar & Bruno-Faria, 1997).

In Kindergarten when children start illustrating the world around them, they need time and practice to recreate the things they see. A few years ago, a 4-year-old visitor at my kitchen table was busy trying to paint the tree outside. Her painting was typical for her age, consisting of a circle for the top of the tree and two sticks for the trunk. Her mother was not pleased with her

effort and inquired as to why the tree didn't have any branches in the drawing. The child looked at her tree and she looked at the tree outside. In an attempt to please her mother, she drew branches which radiated out from the circumference of the circle. She knew instantly that her tree was not right and she justified her effort by saying, "I made a sun tree."

Pushing children to produce art that more accurately represents the things around them is depriving children of the time they need to interpret things. You can teach children to produce art beyond their maturity level, but it will not reflect their experiences or their cognitive development (Kagan, 1992). This was a well-meaning mom, but like so many, she had little understanding about the creative process that children need to experience in order to enhance their development.

McCain and Muster (1999) strongly recommend that parents be involved and participate in workshops that would help them understand their children's developmental needs and expectations. In this story, requesting "branches" wasn't an appropriate or reasonable approach. I'm certain Lowenfeld (1965) would agree.

Definitions

Before I look at the rationale for art activities, this may be a good place to insert two definitions for terms used in the thesis. They were supplied by one of the participants interviewed for the purpose of this study.

Open-ended activities:

These activities provide children with opportunities for self-expression and self-discovery. Materials and tools are used by the children in ways that are interesting, challenging and stimulating for them. Open-ended activities do not provide children with a model to copy, but rather allow children to work at their developmental level. Children use the materials and tools to represent things they have experienced or things from their imagination.

Process-focussed activities:

The raison d'etre for these activities is that they are focussed in the *how* and *what* children are doing and not in the end product. The end product is irrelevant and often there isn't one. Children should experience pleasure in the *doing* and not be concerned in the *producing* of something.

The Approach

The Manner used in Encouraging and Engaging Children in Art Activities

> "Producing Art -- being able to think about something not present and then to find a way to express it -- is a major accomplishment for young children" (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 40).

Art cannot be produced in a vacuum. Children need experiences to motivate them and to express themselves creatively. Art is a cognitive activity requiring "that children think of an experience, idea, or feeling and then find symbols to express it" (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 39). Seefeldt, quoting Harris (1963), calls art "a language -- a form of cognitive expression" (p. 39). It is a cognitive skill, a readiness skill, the fifth of "the five essential and integrated -- cognition and general knowledge" (Kagan, 1992, p. 50) because it develops children's reasoning and organizational skills. Their thoughts expressed through art involve decisions on how to arrange the work, what colours to use, or what symbols to use to represent those thoughts or feelings. "In the process, children are forced to develop perceptual sensitivity to their world perceiving likenesses, differences, shapes, sizes, textures, and colours" (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 40).

Currently, the major influence on the art programs in North America are the Reggio Emilia

schools in Italy. These schools view art as a cognitive skill, a language that gives children a " way to communicate ideas, feelings, and emotions" (p. 39). Because art is considered as a language, Seefeldt has listed the following points as cognitive skills. Not all are relevant for Kindergarten children, but the goals can guide teachers as they work to motivate and teach children.

According to Seefeldt, (1995) the cognitive skills applied to art include the ability to:

- effectively communicate ideas, attitudes and feelings through the visual art form;
- innovatively express ideas with visual art forms;
- interpret the meaning of works of art; and
- use art media, tools, techniques, and processes skillfully (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 40).

Motivation is key for children. In order to be motivated, children need to experience things to "talk" (artistic expression) about. Meaningful experiences provide the basis for children to "act upon it, do something with it" (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 40).

> What can a child draw if she has little to think about, few ideas, dreams, feelings, or experiences to express? To produce art, children need many interesting experiences in classroom and community, and encouragement to think, talk, and create art in response to their experiences. (p. 40)

Many writers suggest that all preschoolers' art should be "process-oriented". Teacher directed activities that are "product-oriented" are not helpful, and can be hurtful and damaging because "it demonstrates disrespect for children - - their ideas, abilities and creativity" (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 42). Edwards and Nabors (1993) also emphasize the importance of the process and not the product in children's art. "There is no right and wrong in the artistic expression for the young child because art comes from within the child, not from without. Creativity cannot be imposed from the outside by a well-meaning teacher or assistant" (p. 80).

When the focus is on the process, then the environment is one that values a child's originality and creativity (Edwards & Nabors, 1993; Seefeldt, 1995; Dighe, Calomiris, & Van

Zutphen, 1998). Security in expressing experiences comes when children feel assured that there will be no negative comments. The environment should "offer children sufficient experiential motivation so that they will have something to express and psychological safety so that they will feel free to do so" (Seefeldt, p. 44).

Preschool children with experiences in messy exploration and who have not been required to produce art measuring up to adult standards, but have had their work valued and appreciated, make the most of the "opportunities creative work offers -- to explore, invent, express, and think -- in sum, to give form and meaning to their experience" (Engel, 1996, p. 74). Materials and tools are important. They need to allow children the freedom to experiment, to explore without the constraints of producing a specific product. However, teachers often feel compelled to change the inventory more frequently than necessary. "Constantly introducing or changing art materials may actually stand in the way of a child's mastering the material enough to express his own feelings" (Dighe et al., 1998, p. 6). Seefeldt (1995) adds: "After all, adult artists use the same medium for many years, but often change how they use the materials and what they want to communicate" (p. 42).

Yet the materials should be of a certain quality. There is little joy in painting on small pieces of paper, where it's hard for children to fit in all their experiences. Poor-quality paper that rips easily creates great disappointment for a child who has spent a long time on a masterpiece. Schiller (1995) makes the point that: "Children should be offered a variety of well-displayed, good quality materials every day; time to work until finished; and the pleasure of seeing their work attractively presented" (p. 35).

The materials offered should be well stocked and open-ended, so that the children can decide how and what to use. "Broad brushes, thick crayons, water-colours and finger-paint are

advocated by some art educators, designated by others" as are, "feature painting with marbles, straws, spray bottles, bubbles, even brushes attached to a helmet" (Dighe et al., 1998, p. 5) were just a few of the things listed with which to explore and experiment.

Displaying children's art indicates an appreciation and a respect for their work. The Reggio schools look like museums where children's art is professionally exhibited with display signs explaining the children's efforts. This is quite wonderful for the children, the parents and the public, but simple display boards are also effective. The important thing is that each child's art be valued and appreciated (Seefeldt, 1995).

There are things to remember about displays, but the main point is that the displays are there for the children, and so placed at their eye level, in order for them to appreciate, discuss, touch and admire the art (Cherry, 1972).

Lowenfeld (1965) feels very differently about displaying art. He feels that selecting a particular painting for display purposes can actually be harmful because it states a preference. However, he allows for the displaying of all artwork done by the children as this will not suggest a preference. He also feels that parents and teachers should remember that children are far more interested in the "process" and the "experience" they get from it, than in their final art effort. Indicating a preference could show poor professional judgment, but perhaps the dilemma could be solved by allowing children to decide which piece of art work should be displayed.

The teacher's role in all this is one of facilitation, setting the environment, encouraging the children in all their efforts, and engaging them in conversations. There are some techniques that need to be demonstrated by the teacher, such as how to hold a paintbrush, or how to use scissors. This help should be given in a matter-of-fact way so that children are not frustrated, but can manipulate the media to enable them to express themselves creatively (Dighe, Colomiris,

& Van Zutphen, 1998). According to Schiller (1995) there are three major themes in a "high quality" program: "Children need many opportunities to create art. Children need many opportunities to look at and talk about art. Children need to become aware of art in their everyday lives" (p. 34).

Talking is really important at all levels, but meaningful conversations about children's art require skill, sincerity and truthfulness. Encouraging Kindergarten children to talk about their art requires questions which solicit meaningful answers, such as "What's happening here?" (Oken-Wright, 1998, p. 78) or "How did you get the idea for this picture?" (Engel, 1996, p. 77).

As a teacher, you want to engage the child in a discussion. You want the child to draw a "story" and tell it. The drawing uses a lot of skills, such as portraying a concept (moms in the office), something from a child's imagination (moms as angels), or recording past experiences (my mom and me on a picnic). However, the drawing doesn't always need to be a "story"; its purpose is often for exploration and experimenting with a medium (Oken-Wright, 1998).

As mentioned previously, talking about art and recording the stories prepares children in an informal way to read and write. Oken-Wright (1998) has developed a chart (see Figure 3) that shows how the teacher's role changes as the children's writing evolves.

There is much more to be said for the value of art and the "art process" in the classroom. The activities provide a basis for almost any learning experience that Kindergarten children need in order to acquire the readiness skills expected for Grade One. It is important and worth repeating to remember what was stated at the beginning of this section, that art does not and cannot happen in a vacuum.

Parents and teachers often feel that learning to read and write is really at the heart of learning. Children try hard to please, and in their effort to satisfy the adult they may resort to

Figure 3 As Children's Writing Emerges:

The Teacher's Role

The Teacher	The Child
Takes dictation of entire story.	Tells the story/talks about his/her picture. May begin to break thoughts into words.
Helps the child distill the story and takes dictation.	Traces the letters the teacher has written.
	Copies the letters from the teacher's printing.
Helps the child distill the story and dictates the letters to him/her.	Copies the letters from the alphabet strip.
	Writes the letters from memory.
Dictates the letters and solicits the the child's help to hear the sounds.	Begins to hear beginning, then ending, then medial sounds in words, with support.
Encourages the child's independence in writing; offers support only as needed.	Independently writes text that is readable by experienced others. (p. 79)

drawings that bring praise, "formula pictures, which are unsatisfying for them and lacking in fertile ground for cognitive growth" (Oken-Wright, 1998, p. 76). Oken-Wright cautions teachers that some children may be "representing, but not in the way the teacher recognizes immediately" (p. 76). Observation and talking through the process can enlighten the teacher as to the child's purpose. It is very important that it is the child's "intent that must drive us and not our own teacher agenda" (p. 77). Oken-Wright believes that:

> If we observe children drawing, and if we listen and think about what we 've heard when children talk about their drawing we have the information we

> need to construct a sense of why the child draws, what she *can do* and what she *could do*, and how her drawing might support learning about many things, including literacy. (p.78)

Finally, one should emphasize the importance for children of an aesthetically pleasing environment. Children appreciate beauty and should be surrounded by things that are natural, orderly, and in good taste. Schiller (1995) encourages teachers to "support aesthetic development in young children" (p. 34). She feels that a classroom environment "can encourage or discourage an appreciation of art" (p. 54). Pleasing environments should include fine-art prints and books, talking to adult artists and, of course, talking "about their art and the art of others" (p. 34).

In summary, the approach to art activities is based on the following points:

- art cannot be produced in a vacuum
- art is considered "a language, a form of cognitive expression" (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 39)
- children need meaningful experiences to provide the motivation and the basis for art to happen
- art must be process-oriented
- children need an opportunity to "explore, invent, express and think" (Engel, 1996, p.74)
- children need a good quality and variety of materials
- a place to display children's work
- the teacher's/adult's role is to facilitate, to encourage children in their efforts, to engage children in talking about their art, to demonstrate techniques when appropriate and to understand and be able to help children use their art as stepping stones to reading and writing readiness
- art that is product-oriented does not validate children's work, their ability to think and to create

The Art Developmental Stages

In the literature, the developmental stages that children progress through are recorded in much the same way, but some of the terminology varies (Mattil & Marzan, 1981). These early developmental stages in art have the same characteristics all over the world (Kellogg & O'Dell,

1967; Hillman, 1988). Both these experts indicate that cultural backgrounds and gender have no impact on the developmental stages until much later, but children will include traditions and certain cultural values that are of importance to them.

There are three basic developmental stages. The scribbling/manipulative stage, the generalizations/pre-schematic, pre-symbolic stage, and the characterization/simple picture stage. The three stages described in the few pages are based on several authors who have written in detail about children's developmental stages in art (Lowenfeld, 1965; Cherry, 1972; Kellogg & O'Dell, 1967; Mattil & Marzan, 1981). More recent writers refer to Lowenfeld in particular as someone whose work in the field is well respected (Dighe et al., 1998).

Art activities provide adults with an understanding of how children develop physically and emotionally (Schiller, 1995). Edwards and Nabors (1993) quote a preschooler, talking about art. "The child, Noel, thoughtfully and analytically says, 'Art lets you see inside of somebody' " (p. 80).

Scribbling/Manipulative Stages (2-4 years of age)

> Scribbles are the building blocks of children's art. From the moment the child discovers what it looks like and feels like to put these lines down on paper, he has found something he will never lose, he has found art. This wonderful thing happens to every child when he is about two.
> (Kellogg & O'Dell, 1967, p. 19)

At a fairly young age, two or younger, children realize that they can hold a crayon and make marks with it. At first there is little control over the marks, but soon children realize that they can control the motion of their hand and that in turn controls the mark on the paper. This accomplishment creates great satisfaction and children will repeat the exercise many times. The repeated action gives the children the opportunity to gain confidence, experiment and refine

eye-hand coordination (Lowenfeld, 1965; Mattil & Marzan, 1981). The scribbling efforts of young children are not often appreciated or understood by adults. Scribbles are as significant to art as crawling is to walking, as babbling is to talking, and as the hit or miss approach of self-feeding is to using a spoon or fork later on.

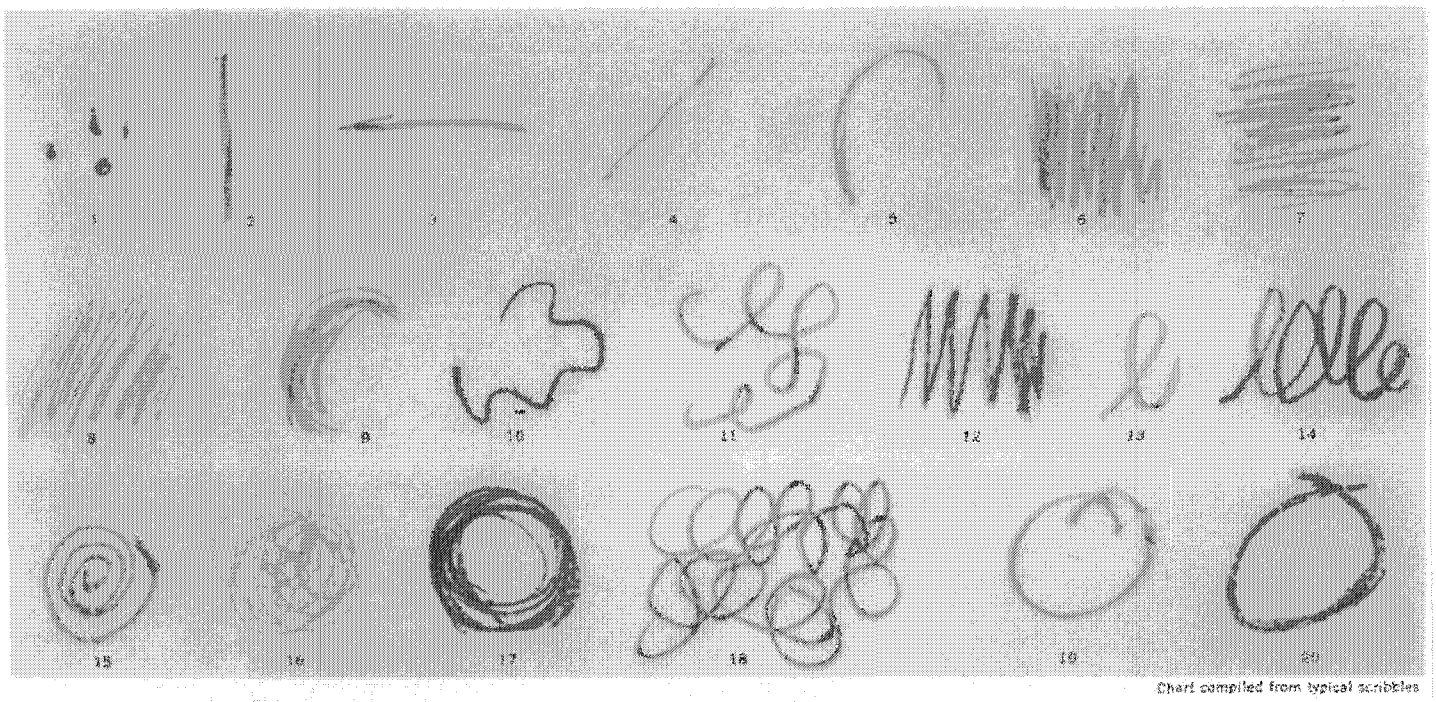
There are 20 basic scribbles and 17 patterns that are recognized in children's scribbling (Kellogg & O'Dell, 1967). Figure 4 illustrates these scribbles and their progressive sequence from strokes to circles. Scribbling begins by whole-arm movements, but as more and more control is acquired other parts of the arm get involved. Usually vertical lines (unless the paper is on the floor) are produced before horizontal ones. As control is gained over the movements of the elbow the child is able to produce slightly curved lines. The ability to control wrist movement provides a whole new dimension to children's art. Now, the scribbles can be rounded and "circles, ovals and spirals" appear on the paper (Cherry, 1972).

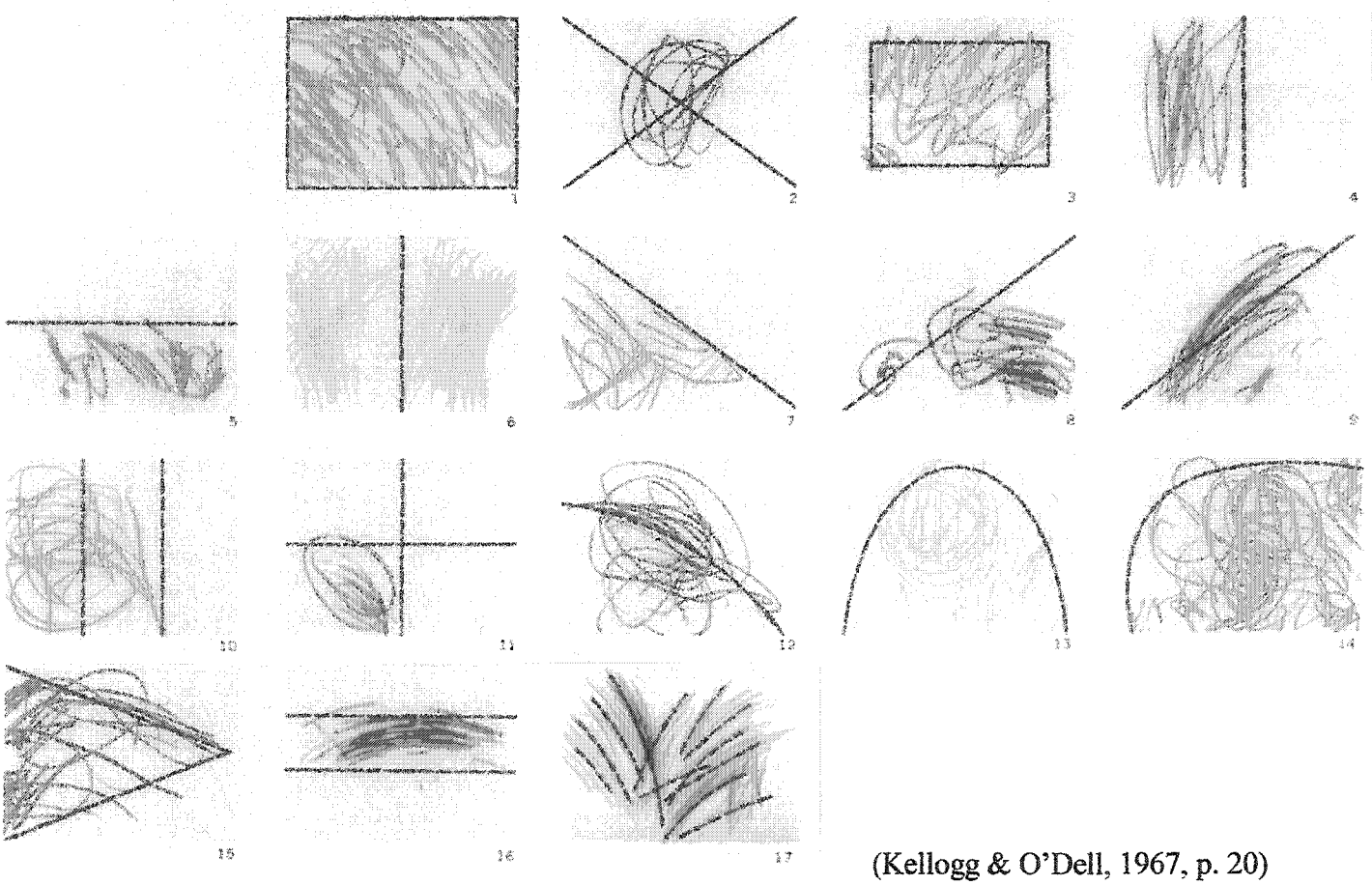
A thick crayon provides a good way to begin an artistic adventure for a young child. It requires less effort to hold and produce marks and it doesn't break easily. In the beginning, children have a tendency to press quite hard as they focus on their work. Thick crayons allow the child to "control, guide and direct the motion" of the crayon (Lowenfeld, 1965).

Paints can be introduced early into a child's life, but for satisfactory results children need thick paint that spreads well, and fairly thick paintbrushes. Tempera paint works well at this stage, and one or two colours are usually enough as young children are not yet concerned with what colours they are using (Cherry, 1972). This is the stage at which children need to explore and experiment -- "mess about" -- with different materials to see what they can do with the medium. They need lots of opportunities to use open-ended materials such as crayons, paints, clay, markers, glue, and objects for collage making, especially natural things that can be harvested

Figure 4

Twenty basic scribbles and dots





(Kellogg & O'Dell, 1967, p. 20)

on walks (Schiller, 1995; Dighe et al., 1998).

Finger painting is another form of scribbling and a wonderfully satisfying medium for young children; they will finger paint with great pleasure, concentration and enthusiasm. It is an excellent medium for children who have few opportunities to scribble and for children who need more eye-hand coordination practice (Mattil & Marzan, 1981).

> The child's ability to scribble develops in direct relation to his ability to control his movements and of his awareness of the relationship between himself and the space around him. His marks become progressively more complex as his muscle control develops. The sequence of psychomotor development is approximately the same for each child. (Cherry, 1972, p. 6)

Generalizations/Pre-Schematic, Pre-Symbolic Stages

> "This is the stage in which children are searching for a style (schema) or means to represent their ideas" (Mattil & Marzan, 1981).

Cherry (1972) writes that, during the scribbling stage, a child realizes that the lines created randomly on the paper have formed a shape. Then comes the business of putting shapes on paper to create a design. Children may use one or two shapes to produce designs. This stage is very pleasing and satisfying to children, and the design discovery accelerates the next stage of development. Simple symbols begin to appear. Circles are very popular to reproduce people (head, eyes, mouth), the sun (circle with rays), or a person (head and appendages).

> As the young scribbler continues to practice, he becomes aware of the circles he is able to make. He learns to perceive them as distinct shapes. From birth, the human eye responds favorably to oval or circular shapes. . . . From ancient times, it has been used as a symbol of the Self, the psyche. The child's ego and his awareness as an individual begin to surface just about the same time he is developing his ability to draw circular patterns. (Cherry, 1972, p. 7)

> As mentioned before, hurrying children along to produce art that more accurately

represents the things around them is depriving children of the time they need to interpret and explore. You can teach children to produce art beyond their maturity level, but it will not reflect their experiences or their cognitive development. "Children draw what they know, many teachers see no purpose in trying to teach children to use more advanced forms of representation" (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 44).

Characterization Stage/Simple Pictures

At this stage children begin to draw what is important to them: their mom, dad, house, car, pet, and so on . . . things from their own life or from stories, or even from their own imagination. There is a tendency for lots and lots of detail. Eyelashes, hair, jewellery of all kinds, buttons and hats appear on people. This tends to personalize the drawing. For example, certain jewellery (big necklaces or bracelets) make "my Mom". Buildings and animals have human characteristics; they can be happy or sad (Mattil & Marzan, 1981; Cherry, 1972).

In this stage children try to produce more realistic representations. They become quite chatty about their work, but at the same time more critical of their efforts. The teacher's conversation about their artwork should be enthusiastic, sincere and encouraging (Lowenfeld, 1965; Dighe et al., 1998).

Towards the end of the Kindergarten year children should be making pictures that tell a story. They also have far more ability to control and manipulate crayons or a paintbrush, and they should have more experiences to reproduce in a drawing. At this stage they are beginning to realize that what they can see they can draw, and what can be drawn can be written down.

Children's art is just one way to tell whether or not the child is ready for the next stage, and that is reproducing letters. Oken-Wright (1998) describes writing as a far more abstract and sophisticated skill for children. Some children who seem ready, but are hesitant, to reproduce or

trace letters just need time. These children may be more timid about trying something new or they need more time to experiment with what they know.

> We do not want to push a child to represent before he has satisfied his drive to explore a medium. Nor will we want to deny a child media through which he is already comfortable representing. (p. 76)

Or again, as Oken-Wright (1998) points out, more meaningful life experiences are needed before children are ready to read and write. Her story of Jessica illustrates that limited experiences deny children a richer, fuller life.

> The next day and the next, and for several weeks of school, Jessie drew the exact same girl; the girl never developed an identity and always seemed to float on the page without connection -- and apparently without a story. (p.76)

Providing experiences, watching children represent those experiences in their art activities, and then talking to children about their art is always helpful and important (Engel, 1996; Oken-Wright, 1998). It gives the teacher an opportunity to look at a child's readiness to read and write. Jessica is not ready, but children who are will dictate stories about their art. As teachers write down the stories, children observe word formation and letters, and some even pick out certain sounds. Those who are interested in printing their words, letters or stories can be encouraged to do so. Children who are still observing will learn from watching their stories printed and discussing them with the teacher (Oken-Wright).

Schiller (1995) takes talking a step further. She feels that talking to children about artists and their art will provide children with "opportunities to discuss art and its impact on their lives" (p. 38). Furthermore, getting children to discuss art is important because:

> Classrooms need to reflect how we ourselves value art and how it has meaning in our lives. The children can then select what is important to them and thereby begin to build their own personal store of imagery, which can lead to enhanced learning in all areas. (p. 38)

Schiller recounts a story. She had been discussing with her preschoolers the art of Matisse, Michelangelo and da Vinci. The children were quite intrigued by the old cracks illustrated in the paintings, and they "were all fascinated to hear that Michelangelo painted a ceiling" (p. 37). Earlier in the day they had talked about Ninja Turtles. One little boy "was drawing very seriously. I listened to his conversation with himself as he drew" (p. 37). This little artist was busy making an "old" painting with an "old boy, he is very old, he is lying down and his legs are here and so are his feet" (p. 37). Schiller reflects on what this preschooler absorbed from the discussion. He understood that art, at different times, looked different and "old" art had cracks and "that artists Michelangelo and Leonardo were much older than Ninja Turtles" (p. 38).

Before I end this chapter I would like to comment on how art can foster a sensitivity and an appreciation for the various ethnic groups who live in Canada. Children take a great interest in certain celebrations such as Christmas, Hallowe'en and birthdays. These occasions are often represented in their art. Not everyone celebrates the same special days. Our multicultural society gives the teacher an opportunity to discuss with the children, the similarities among ethnic groups, their differences, the holidays that matter to various cultural groups. These discussions and art representations teach children, how we, as a diverse people, can live in one community with understanding and respect (Kellogg & Marzan, 1967; Hillman, 1988).

Summary of Chapter Two

In summary, then, the literature reviewed here confirms the following:

Development

- Children's art progresses through certain developmental stages. These developmental stages are universal regardless of gender or ethnic origin.

- There is a natural progression from drawing to writing.

Significance

- The quality of preschool experiences is important.
- There is new knowledge affirming the "critical" periods in children's development.
- Art activities are an inclusive activity for all children.
- Children need many experiences to produce art.
- Art is an indicator of how children perceive the world around them.
- Children need a secure environment in order to experiment with their art.
- Children need a secure environment in order to represent their experiences.
- Children's originality and creative works ought to be valued.

Teacher's Role

- Teachers can facilitate and encourage children so that art activities happen.
- Teachers need to provide the right environment and a variety of materials and tools.
- Teachers need to provide materials of good quality, and suitable for a wide range of developmental stages.
- Teachers should look for ways to motivate and engage children in art activities.
- Teachers should ensure that the art materials and tools provide challenges.
- All children, regardless of culture, progress through the same developmental stages.
- Talking to children about their art helps them to better perceive the world around them and to better represent it.

Readiness

- School readiness is a precursor to doing well in school and staying longer in school.
- School readiness has a correlation with success in life.
- Art is one way to help children develop school readiness skills.
- Art allows for learning to occur in every subject.

Overall Emphasis

- In children's art the **process** is of critical importance and not just the **product.**

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This study examined how art activities can promote school readiness skills. It explored the statement: "The effectiveness of art activities in developing school readiness skills."

The study statement was presented to three early childhood educators for discussion because of their expertise and years of experience. They are known for their work with young children and were recommended by their respective administrators.

The qualitative approach was appropriate because the study relied on the experiences and interpretations of the participants. Measurements were not taken; what mattered were the values placed by the participants on the art processes and activities for young children and how those experiences made a difference in their ability to succeed in school. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) suggest that:

> The word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on processes and the meanings that are not rigorously examined, or measured (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes. Inquiry is purported to be within a value-free framework. (p. 8)

My search for and recruitment of the participants was specific. For three of them, their reality, their understanding of art activities and school readiness, was indeed "socially constructed" and therefore significant for this study. Their experiences had shaped their approach to and belief in children. However, I would go further and say that those experiences fueled a passion for an aesthetic quality in life, and for a desire to create that quality in life for children.

Their experiences or "socially constructed realities" fall within the definition of qualitative research. As such, they cannot be measured but can be observed, provided the researcher establishes a climate of sharing, trust and respect. I feel this is why the participants reached beyond their notes and brought forth stories which did reflect their "socially constructed reality".

I was grateful to be able to establish a good relationship because it made a difference to the sessions with the participants. I feel my interviews had that "in-depth" quality which researchers covet, but which I doubt would have been there if a good relationship had not been established. I used the interview method to obtain the data. Marshall and Rossman (1999) point out that "An interview is a useful way to get large amounts of data quickly" (p. 108). This was an effective way for me to obtain the information, especially as in this study the views and opinions of the participants were of utmost importance. It was their expert opinions, beliefs and interpretations with respect to art and school readiness that were sought, collected and coded.

Three of the participants provided me with "elite interviews" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 113) because of their expertise in the field of early childhood education. Marshall and Rossman would categorize the participants as "elite" because they are "considered to be influential, prominent, and/or well-informed people in an organization or community; they are selected for interviews on the basis of their expertise in areas relevant to the research" (p. 113). However, for the purposes of this study I shall refer to them as "educators".

Also, two artists were interviewed in order to get a fuller picture of what art means for society and what place it should have in children's lives. I was curious to see if the opinions of the artists would be supported by the literature, or if they, the artists, saw art and its significance in children's lives in a different way.

Both school readiness and art mean different things to different people. Kagan (1992)

does point out that school readiness can be flexible in its interpretation. However, Doherty (1997) makes use of Kagan's comprehensive and her general description, which is: "School readiness refers specifically to the child's ability to meet the task demands of school, such as sitting quietly and listening to the teacher, and to assimilate the curriculum content" (p. 13).

The Participants

The educators who participated in the study understood that their input and opinions mattered and were of critical importance to this study. "The purpose of the study is to uncover and describe the participants' perspectives on events -- that is, that the subjective view is what matters (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 110).

The educator participants' subjective views and their expertise in this field of study provided a thicker, richer, more specific and more personal interpretation of the subject than that found in documents or texts (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

I interviewed two artists who earn their livelihood from their artistic abilities. They are interested in, or in some way connected to, children's art. Their outlook on this subject provided interesting points of view, views that were worth documenting. They commented on the social and inclusive nature of art activities. Their opinions on what kind of art children should do, what materials should be used, how to encourage children to participate in art, and whether or not it is an important activity, were quite revealing.

I chose to include the artists in this study to determine whether their perspectives would differ from the three experts. If so, I would have to rethink why such a dichotomy exists. It seemed important that the artists and the three educators be somewhat in agreement philosophically to ensure an enriched and appropriate approach to art activities.

Some personal anecdotes are told in the thesis because this subject has affected me both

professionally and personally. The art produced by children in my classroom gave me powerful and at times wonderful insights into their lives. I have mentioned that my experience includes having taught in an inner-city school in Ottawa, in a neighbourhood composed mostly of struggling immigrants, and in Canada's North with aboriginal children. My experience as a teacher of impoverished children had a profound impact on me.

Poverty and poor language skills were a major problem. Many of the children in the Ottawa school and none in Canada's Arctic spoke English at home. There were at least 15 different languages spoken in the inner-city school, and two languages used among the native children. Art activities provided the children with a common interest, an activity they could share regardless of language, and a way to connect with each other and their teacher. These activities could console, include, soothe and excite children.

In addition, as a mother, I know that my middle child would not have survived her early years in formal school without art to free her and to allow her to create her own world. It was a vital activity for her, and she applied it to all subjects, whenever and however she could.

Three early childhood educators and the two artists agreed to partake in this study without any hesitation. They were not compensated. The educators provided three sites for data collection from three different program delivery systems. A publicly-funded Kindergarten (Ottawa), a multi-service child care agency (Ottawa), and an early childhood teaching institution (Charlottetown) were the sites used by the educator participants.

These were the sites where one, if not both, of the two interviews were conducted for the three educators. The other choice was in their home. All interviews were recorded on audio-tape.

The artist participants were chosen because they are well established and recognized as professionals in their field. One of the artists has illustrated a number of children's books.

The other has travelled the world as a design artist, and has a large family and a number of grandchildren. He has always been interested and enthusiastic about the way children represent. The two artists were asked to suggest the most convenient site for their interviews. They chose to be interviewed in their homes, which provided a quieter and less disruptive space.

One could question what understanding or knowledge artists have of school readiness. I would argue that their combination of professional experience and personal interest in children's art suggested they could shed some light on the developmental process in art. Their views and beliefs mattered and it seemed relevant to compare them to those held by the early childhood experts. Consequently, their opinions were recorded for a more rounded and complete view on art and its significance in children's lives.

All five participants were known to me from contacts in my experience as a teacher. The educator's "sites" were designed to reflect the different places that deliver services to children.

Method of Recruiting

In Ottawa I interviewed a consultant who works at a multi-service child care agency called Andrew Fleck Child Care Services. The staff at the agency works closely with teachers, doctors and other specialists. Currently, the agency is involved in developing an Early Years Centre in Argentina. Permission was granted by the executive director to interview one of their consultants. The consultant was chosen by the supervisor of the child care consultants.

I also interviewed an educator in the early childhood field here on the Prince Edward Island (PEI). She was asked to participate because of her experience in the field and her present position as an educator of early childhood teachers. The selection for a participant here on the Island was limited, so a request to the trainer of early childhood teachers seemed appropriate for the study. I considered this participant to be important so that a PEI perspective was reflected.

The third early childhood educator was an Ontario Kindergarten teacher. She has her Early Childhood Education diploma from Ryerson and her teaching degree from the University of Ottawa. She is creative and artistic in her personal life, and uses art for developing language, motor skills, confidence and self-esteem in her classroom. She has been a teacher for 15 years. The Kindergarten teacher was suggested by both the child care agency and a consultant from the Ottawa-Carleton School Board.

There are many artists on Prince Edward Island but the two who were chosen were asked first and expressed an interest in the study.

The variety of sites was necessary as preschool programs are delivered in various different ways. I wanted participants who represented those services. I felt the three educators did just that. A trainer of teachers, a consultant on child development issues, and a public school Kindergarten teacher gave as comprehensive an outlook as time allowed of the early childhood education field, in relation to the research question.

The Interviews

There were two two-hour interviews for each educator and one two-hour interview for each artist. Although specific questions were asked, the interviews were designed to encourage open-ended answers and they drew upon the participants' expertise and experience. The participants had the opportunity to express "perspectives of their world and how they make sense of important events" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, p. 40). The questions were mailed out in advance. This gave the participants an opportunity to prepare for the interview, so that the interview was focussed, on topic and time-efficient.

There were a few occasions during the interviews when the participants asked for clarification of a question. Most of these related to specific activities. For example, one was,

"Do you want me to give you a more detailed description of the activity?"; another was "Do you want me to list all the prerequisites that need to happen before this skill is acquired?"

The request letter (see Appendix A) included the consent form (see Appendix B), which each participant was required to sign, and the interview questions. I collected the consent forms.

The Questions

The interview questions were based on Doherty's (1997) five readiness components. There were five questions which focussed on the five readiness components. Each of the five questions addressed one of the school readiness components as listed by Doherty (1997).

- physical well-being and appropriate motor development.
- emotional health and a positive approach to new life experiences.
- age-appropriate social knowledge and competence.
- age-appropriate language skills.
- age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive skills (Doherty, p.14).

The educators were asked what art activities should be provided and how those art activities could help. The two additional questions were used as general opening questions to set the context, initiate the discussion tone and set the participants at ease.

It was conceivable that some of the questions could produce simple "yes" or "no" answers. Certainly, the last question could be answered in that way. Question 8 was there to allow the educators to touch on anything in the field of early childhood that was of importance to them or anything else they may wish to add to any of the previous questions. The other questions did relate to the educators own field of expertise and I hoped that they would express and share their views. If, indeed, questions were answered in a simplistic way then some probing questions were asked, such as, "It would be helpful to know how you did that?" or "I am not sure I understand what you are saying. Could you please describe it another way."

In addition to the questions, the participants were also provided with a summary of the readiness skills to help establish the scope and depth of the answers. It gave the participants "the freedom to use their knowledge and imagination" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 114). These questions and school readiness skills helped the participants realize how much could be said within a certain time frame and what were the most relevant points which needed to be made. These were the questions for the educators:

1. How would you explain the role of art activities and experiences in a preschool program?

2. Do you feel art and school readiness should be integrated within the preschool curriculum?

3. a. What art activities help a child develop appropriate motor skills?
   b. Explain how art activities help a child develop appropriate motor skills.

4. a. What art activities nurture emotional health in a child and a positive approach to new life experiences?
   b. Explain how these art activities nurture emotional health in a child and a positive approach to new life experiences.

5. a. What art activities foster age-appropriate social knowledge and competence?
   b. Explain how art activities foster age-appropriate social knowledge and competence.

6. a. What art activities encourage age-appropriate language skills?
   b. Explain how these art activities encourage age-appropriate language skills.

7. a. What art activities stimulate age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive skills?
   b. Explain how art activities stimulate age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive skills.

8. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't talked about in these sessions?

I prepared two questions for the artists. I looked at the artist participants as giving a more global interpretation of art. I hoped that the artists' outlook on the meaning of art in children's lives would provide a background to the study. I also felt it would not be fair to pose the same questions to the artists whose training and interests are not the same as the educators.

These were the questions for the artists:

1. Can you define art for a person who works with young children?
2. What meaning should "art" have in a child's life?

The Researcher's Role

"In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 79).

Within the framework of this study, my presence as a researcher required me to be professional and personable. It was important to establish an atmosphere in which the participants felt comfortable and were willing to share their knowledge. I was asking them to give up a significant amount of time and I needed to be aware of that and grateful to them for it.

The line of questioning was direct and specific for each readiness skill. The open-ended questions could have led to a debate, but to try to influence the participants would have interfered with their train of thought. Furthermore, I would have risked annoying them. They were being interviewed because of their expertise and prestige; they would not be easily manipulated. It was more productive to involve the participants in a lively interview process which challenged them to reflect on their own experiences and comment on what was important. "Elites often contribute insight and meaning to the interview process because they are intelligent and quick-thinking people, at home in the realm of ideas, policies, and generalizations" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 114).

As far as my own biases are concerned, I can only say that I tried to keep my opinions to myself. Can I claim that my views did not colour some of the discussion? I guess not. However, Denzin and Lincoln (1998) argue that a qualitative study cannot be completely free of one's biases. They say:"Qualitative design incorporates room for description of the role of researcher as well as description of the researcher's own biases and ideological preference" (p. 41).

Also, I knew time was an issue. The interviewees were busy people and personal time is valuable to them. Their work time is also taxing and spare time is not readily available. I was very grateful for their cooperation and their willingness to give up part of their work day. Furthermore, these were demanding interviews with a reasonable but tight time frame for collecting the data. It was important for both me as researcher, and for the participants, to keep focussed and not waste time or wander off. However, because of their education, experience, professionalism and their strong convictions, these educator participants were not likely to be easily influenced by my biases or point of view.

Data Analysis Techniques:

All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and coded. The detached transcribed notes did not provide important relevant interpretations. The participants' tone and body language would be used to emphasize a significant point. This was lost in a clinical transcription. I listened carefully for disconfirming points of view, but those were not very obvious and few in number. I found myself going back to the tapes and listening to them over and over to get the stresses, the subtleties and the nuances of the data.

Those subtleties were critical in the coding of the data. The research questions and the data are not controversial or difficult to understand, but they are of a philosophical nature and could indicate different interpretations and approaches when working with young children.

In an effort to clearly understand the views expressed by the participants, I summarized the respondents' comments for them. After each question, I asked the participants if this was exactly what they meant. I also double-checked the correctness of my note-taking by reading back what I had jotted down. There were no disagreements. The debriefing checks ensured the accuracy of the participants' statements. Furthermore, there were two debriefing sessions held

with the educators, one at the end of each interview and one the following day after I rewrote my interview notes. I called the educators and checked again that my notes were reliable. Only one debriefing session was reserved for the artist participants, and it was enough.

The written records of the interviews were photocopied on a regular basis for safekeeping. The double records ensured data availability and security at all times. All the information, notes, tapes and copies were put away safely.

Then began the work of coding all the data collected and recording it on my computer. Each question was coded separately. All the similarities and differences were registered. The themes emerged quickly, but were broad in nature. The participants' answers to the questions reflected their different backgrounds and their personal interests in the field. Once the themes were established, a general comparison was made between the collected data and the literature.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Findings

Introduction

Most of the opinions expressed by the educators in this chapter were in agreement with the literature. What surprised me was how much the artists' approach to children's art seemed in harmony with the literature and with the three educators. The artists differed only in the degree of their very passionate expression of, and commitment to, giving children completely free artistic licence. Because the artists were asked different questions from the educators, their answers are found in a section at the end of the chapter.

The Three Educators' Positions

1. How would you explain the role of art activities in a preschool program?

The three educators believed that art activities should be an integral part of any preschool program. They felt that art activities can be used by staff members, teachers and parents in a variety of different ways. Art activities develop different skills, stimulate children, focus them, and provide opportunities for social development, social skills and social activities. Furthermore, art activities should occur all the time, every day, in math, in language, in science and in all areas, but primarily these activities should give children a chance to express themselves.

All three educators held the opinion that appropriate social skills were most critical for children entering formal school and that art activities were most beneficial in developing those social skills for preschoolers. Such social skills as the ability to function in a group or work independently help children do well in Grade One.

The educators agreed that working alone or in a group on an art project gives children a sense of pride and self-worth. It also creates a sense of belonging to a community and provides the basis of social etiquette. Furthermore, in terms of specific skills, art activities require a precision that helps develop eye-hand coordination, and perceptual and fine motor skills, all of which are necessary to function well in school. Sensory art experiences are particularly useful in strengthening and developing fine motor skills which are, for example, required in holding a pencil. Because art activities help children to focus, they develop in children the ability to sit still. This is not an easy skill to acquire but one that is expected of children in Grade One.

Art activities are used to assess the development of children, as one participant pointed out with the following observation:

> If one looks at the assessment tools that we use on children, a lot of the indicators are actually related to art activities. So there is a diagnostic element to art activities. For example, some indicators are: whether or not children can cross the mid-line, can hold a pencil drawing circles and squares, can draw people, can draw or represent simple objects, and so on; these are some of the developmental levels that teachers look for and that are important in terms of school readiness.

2. Do you feel art and school readiness should be integrated within the preschool curriculum?

All three participants agreed that art activities should be integrated into the preschool curriculum. One of the three educators said, "I actually feel that art and school readiness cannot not be integrated within the school curriculum. The art activities are a large part of the curriculum. I think they are absolutely essential."

Integrating art into the school curriculum was assumed, but all three stressed that art activities should be open-ended and process-focussed. One example is balloon painting, a technique in which the balloon is used as a paint brush. Regardless of the developmental stage, all children, including those with poor motor skills, will experience success. She said:

This activity is successful for every child as the results are always aesthetically pleasing. This success nurtures in children a feeling of self-worth because the feedback is always one of pleasure. The balloon art is all displayed on the wall indiscriminately, consequently each child feels pride in their work and has a sense of self-worth.

3 a. What art activities help a child develop appropriate motor skills?
b. Explain how art activities help a child develop appropriate motor skills.

The three educators gave a quick overview of motor development in young children. Art activities take a child from the very beginning of using very large to finer, more precise, movements. The gross motor skills are developed by providing large paper, large brushes and large crayons, suitable for a young child to manipulate. Art activities in Kindergarten focus mainly on the development of fine motor skills although there is an element of gross motor involvement in certain art activities. Both should be provided at this level.

The educators felt that most children are easily motivated and respond enthusiastically to art activities, especially if the teacher is interested and provides open-ended activities. Open-ended activities tend to make children feel uninhibited because they know they will experience success. There is no right or wrong way of doing things. This is encouraging for children.

There are children who are timid at trying new art activities or art activities of any kind. One contributor suggested that it might help to have them work with a child who is always keen. Cooperative art activities also encourage timid children to participate. All three educators stressed that all children involved in art activities need lots of positive feedback. They need it even more often if they are reluctant to try new things and to experiment.

The three educators felt that one of the most useful and most productive art activities in terms of motor development is collaging. It provides children with a wide variety of materials and

can require the use of some implements. To make a collage, children can pick materials such as buttons, straw pieces, dried beans, ribbons, styrofoam squiggles, scraps of tissue paper, and whatever else has been set out for use. She said:

> Collaging requires that children pick up small materials of their own choosing and put them in a specific place. This activity gives children practice in developing the fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination required in formal school. The ability to tear paper, glue, or cut are all part of developing the motor skills that help in holding a pencil.
>
> If children can't cut they should be provided with things that they can cut with their fingers, such as cutting play dough or tearing paper. Cutting with fingers is also a precursor to being able to button or hold a pencil.

Holding a pencil and forming letters is a sophisticated skill for young children. Not all three participants felt that this should be a goal. However, they did agree that holding a pencil will come when the ability, the interest to write is there for the child.

All three contributors indicated that printing is such a necessary skill in formal school that it is important to develop the motor skills required for this task. They suggested that children need lots of tactile experiences before they venture into printing: experiences such as using paint brushes of various sizes and shapes, gluing anything, using markers, crayons, coloured pencils, pegs with which to hang clothes on a line, dough and clay to pinch, and paper to tear or roll.

Also teachers should provide some useful preprinting activities that teach letter and shape formation. These preprinting activities can be encouraged by providing soft, pliable materials whose successful manipulation needs to come first before actually trying to print with a pencil. One educator said: "I would look for curves and lines and once I saw those being formed -- then I might introduce the letters but not before." The two other educators did not agree with her. They thought children should be able to represent objects that are important to them in more complex

ways before they are ready to print.

All three participants talked about the need for children from impoverished environments with little experience in handling basic tools such as brushes, markers, and pencils, having time in Kindergarten to experiment and learn to use these tools. Controlling basic tools, such as holding a pencil or using scissors correctly, is required in formal school. However, as one participant said in an encouraging way, "Children show a natural curiosity even if they might find the tools a little frightening."

The participants felt children get discouraged if they have a model to copy and are not capable of reproducing it. However, as one of them said, "If children want to make caterpillars out of egg cartons, it is useful to help them figure out where the antennae might go, or suggest how they could use a hole puncher to help fasten pipe cleaners for the caterpillar's many legs." Discussing caterpillars with the children can be very informative. Talking about the caterpillar's body parts and location of antennae, eyes and legs, or number of legs helps those children who have not looked at a caterpillar often enough to represent one.

The three participants agreed that there are times when art activities have to be directed by the teacher, simply because some children may not be able to move towards the next level, or a new or different activity without a little encouragement. Usually a successful way to get all children to participate in an art activity is to do classroom art projects. All three used class murals as an example. A mural representing all the children in the class includes everyone. One contributor suggested that a class portrait could be done by tracing each child in the class on a large, long piece of paper. Then it would be up to the individual child to decide how to decorate and represent him/herself. This activity puts the responsibility on each child to contribute something. All class members would have the understanding that their submission is wanted,

valued and expected.

The three educators touched upon the importance of parental involvement. Parents who feel that children should be developing their math skills or printing skills in Kindergarten in a traditional way, need to understand the developmental stages and skills through which children have to progress. These parents like to see regular paper homework as this is something they understand and it is is difficult for them to see the value of play-based learning without concrete examples.

The three educators' perception was that parents have to be educated about the learning process, and about the value of play-based learning. The Kindergarten teacher made the point that she did not distinguish between play and art activities. "Art and play go hand in hand, it's all experiential, open-ended and not teacher-directed."

Art displays of the children's work can help here. The participants said that when parents look at the displays it is easier to explain, and they begin to realize how art activities help to improve first large, then small, muscle control and eye-hand coordination. Even informal conversations with the teacher give parents an understanding and an appreciation of the preliminary work required for children to achieve the motor skills that provide the foundation for things like holding a pencil, cutting, printing and reading.

Also, the educators suggested that, for children who are doing well at the representational stage, finer and more complex work can be encouraged by providing tools which help create more elaborate efforts. Likewise, for children who are ready to write, it is beneficial to offer materials that further develop that skill, such as precut shapes that are size-related and can be put together to make houses, animals, or people; things which require some concept of proportion. As one participant said, "There is an element of control here but the activity is still open-ended and

specific skills are being developed."

For more developmentally mature preschoolers, two of the participants suggested tracing or using templates for tracing. Focussing on a specific outline and tracing around or within it requires a child to have a certain precision. It is a useful task for developing fine motor dexterity for making small, complex things like letters. Although tracing an outline is to some extent reproducing a model, two of the participants felt that there is a point in the Kindergarten program when many children are really wanting to learn and are physically able to practise forming letters. Tracing becomes an appropriate, enjoyable exercise that develops a specific fine motor skill.

To conclude, it was difficult for the participants to separate the art activities for specific skills. They emphasized that all art activities help children to develop a range of motor and other skills, as long as children are given a variety of materials, and the opportunity to experiment and manipulate them. Also children do better if their parents are aware of how children learn and encourage them appropriately. The educators felt, that once children were engaged in art activities, a general approach to developing motor skills is required.

4 a. What art activities nurture a child's emotional health and a positive approach to new life experiences?

b. Explain how these art activities nurture a child's emotional health and develop a positive approach to new life experiences.

All three participants agreed that open-ended art activities go a long way to giving children a sense of competency, success and self-worth, because open-ended art activities provide children with an opportunity to create something that is of their own making, something unique, by choosing elements of an activity and putting them together in a way that is experimental.

One of the participants who had worked with abused children explained the importance

of open-ended activities. She stated that these activities give children a sense that they have started with nothing and have created something from the materials provided for them. She felt this is a most important emotional developmental stage. Open-ended activities interest children, and encourage them by their intrinsic nature to focus and to create. Because open-ended activities have the potential to interest and focus a child, they can settle an unsettled child. In short, she said, "Open-ended art activities can nurture a child's emotional health."

All three participants voiced the opinion that open-ended art activities such as painting, cutting, drawing and sculpting intuitively imply to children that adults accept their work, their explorations and experimentation. Again, positive feedback is important and comes easily to the observer because the art activities have no prescribed end product for children to reproduce. The acceptance is important because, as children feel more and more accepted, they become more open to expressing themselves through art. They discover that they can communicate meaning and that they can receive positive attention from it. That this skill takes time however, was echoed by all three.

They also put the emphasis on process. Only after successful exploration can children create artwork from their imagination. It is what really matters here. Furthermore, open-ended art activities are soothing for children who are angry or unsettled. The following points were made by the three participants:

1. When children are sad or angry, they can be encouraged to express these feelings through their painting, drawing, or sculpting. A child who is angry can take that anger out by pinching clay or squeezing play dough or just painting their anger. Art activities can provide a positive and acceptable way for children to express themselves.

2. Art activities provide a teacher or an adult with the opportunity to talk to children about their upsetting feelings. Asking questions about unhappy or negative feelings can help children come to an understanding about their indignation.

3. For children who are stressed, appropriate art activities provide a way for them to de-stress, calm down, and focus on something they enjoy and are successful at doing. It is really important for children to work on something that is interesting, fun and not stressful.

4. Art activities given to children for the purpose of settling or soothing must be model-free. Children need the freedom to do whatever they wish with the material.

Freedom is the key in terms of developing emotional stability, as long as it isn't inappropriate, such as throwing things on the floor or at other children. Otherwise, there should be very few restrictions.

One participant said that children who need settling down like to use clay, dough or plasticene to make simple things like balls or snakes, activities that don't require a lot of skill and have a soothing, calming effect on children. Two other examples were: blowing paint through a straw, folding the paper and opening it up to a completely new discovery; or simply sponge printing. One of the educators described the results, "The end results for these activities are always aesthetically pleasing, always a success and always a surprise. Children love doing them."

These free artistic expressions make wonderful displays and provide lots of comments and discussions about the work from other children, the staff and visiting parents in the school. All three participants agreed that positive comments make children feel good about themselves. One educator made the point that, if the product doesn't have to look a certain way, then the children have nothing to fear. She said:

> The more children are encouraged to express themselves through art, the more they will see themselves as capable and trusted. As they gain confidence in themselves, they feel capable of using or trying to use new tools such as scissors, staplers, or sculpting tools.

It is worthwhile to return to the use of displaying children's art as catalysts for discussion. One participant was greatly influenced by the Reggio Emilio schools in Italy where

children's art has almost a religious significance. The children's work is displayed in an elaborate way so that they and everyone who enters the school know that the work is valued and admired. The displays are kept for viewing for a long period of time, allowing the children to feel real pride in their accomplishment.

Although treating children's artistic efforts with such ceremony may be excessive and unnecessary, two of the participants did say that it's important to display children's work well. These art displays are useful in providing a starting point for discussion. All three indicated that talking to children about their art builds the foundation of self-worth, confidence and risk-taking.

All three talked about physical arrangements that need to be considered. Materials need to be stored where children can access them freely. New materials should be put out only when the children display a readiness to experiment with something novel. The variety displayed should meet and challenge the needs and levels of all the children. If children are young, or young in maturity, then start with larger paper and brushes, and simple cutters. For more developed children who progress faster or more efficiently, more elaborate materials need to be provided. One of the contributors said, "So there is an element of understanding a child and the development through which a child progresses." And also, so children acquire a sense of independence and competency.

The participants also said that it was important to talk to children while they were engaged in their art. They felt this was an appropriate role for a teacher or a parent. Questioning children and talking to them as they explore materials or a medium is reassuring and beneficial. Some suggested questions were: "How did you make that? What did you use here?" For all the participants, a child's willingness to explore indicated emotional well-being.

Some art activities were deemed not beneficial to children's emotional well-being. All

three of the participants agreed that colouring books are not appropriate or suitable for children. Colouring books set standards that imply that children's creations are not what they should be. Adults use them because colouring books tend to keep children quiet. The books can be used occasionally as visual aids, much like pictures in a magazine, but colouring books in general were regarded poorly. One participant made the following comment:

> Colouring books have limited use -- very limited use. They don't teach children a whole lot about anything, maybe staying between the lines. I don't have a whole lot of use for them at all. They don't fit into an early childhood definition of art.

Another activity that the three contributors deemed detrimental was that of asking children to reproduce a model. If children are asked to reproduce models, it teaches them that someone else's ideas are better and they only learn what they can or cannot do.

> There is no other creative learning that goes on. It doesn't allow children to figure out for themselves how to do something. It has a negative impact on children who can't do what they have been asked to do. So this kind of art activity leaves children feeling incompetent and inadequate and those feelings often have to be overcome at a later date.

However, all three participants mentioned that there are special occasions when a teacher can use a model, especially if it's important for the children to participate in a group activity. For example, it would be suitable for the teacher to model making an ornament for a Christmas tree or a Mother's Day present. These ideas are for very specific occasions or unusual circumstances. It was pointed out by one educator that the examples cited would not be acceptable in preschools, in which there are children of various faiths or children who have lost their mothers.

The requirement to follow direction is a school readiness skill. Using open-ended art activities with some direction is appropriate for children who are emotionally ready, physically able and have the ability to understand the restrictions. Two of the participants felt that, handled

appropriately, these partially directed activities are a good way for children to learn to focus and follow what is being said. For example, after completing a drawing, children could be asked to make a border around their artwork by sewing around the picture with a bright coloured string. Some children can do this fairly sophisticated activity without any assistance but most will need the teacher to punch holes around their picture. In this case the direction came from adding a more complex dimension specifically to develop a particular skill.

In another example, the Kindergarten teacher showed me the books her class was busy creating after reading *There Was An Old Lady Who Swallowed A Fly*. She made books in the shape of the old woman's apron in the story, and the children were expected to recreate or create their own version of the song. There were some unusual things swallowed by the old lady in that class. For this educator this was an open-ended art activity, however, it was directed in that there were expectations to be met.

One of the participants felt that today's children have too many expectations placed on them. Once they enter grade school, they will have physical restrictions to face. All three participants made reference to the limitations placed on children in a formal school system as not very realistic. One participant said that when physical limitations and a lack of creative freedom are imposed on children, then they tend to "act out," and their behaviour becomes quite unacceptable. She went on to say that for children with emotional difficulties it was critical not to impose too many restrictions.

Children who are emotionally immature may need guidance in terms of sharing equipment; they may need help with some of the implements -- for example, how to use a glue paddle without drizzling glue all over. Mostly they need help with little things that just make life easier as they learn to make decisions and to manipulate the different implements.

She went on to mention that for ESL (English as a Second Language) children who have a limited vocabulary, art activities provide a way to express themselves and to connect with others in the class. Art gives the teacher an insight into how much the child knows and understands.

Again the three participants stressed that children who are emotionally prepared will advance. One way to develop the confidence needed to progress is to talk to children as they work, especially when a teacher extends the learning by commenting on the number of colours, the number of shapes, where the idea came from and so on, in an interested way.

Helping children progress to the next step doesn't always involve interaction with the teacher. Often the equipment can help -- for example, helping a child see the relationships between sizes by supplying different-sized circles or squares so that some fit inside others. One participant offered this suggestion:

> If the child doesn't see the relationship automatically, then the teacher can sit beside the child and manipulate the clay or dough, but take care not to actually present something for the child to copy. She might roll her clay into balls of different sizes and play around with them by arranging one on top of the other or in a different way perhaps with the hint of making a person or an animal. Nothing has to be said to the child about the activity, and the child may or may not copy but there is no sense of failure because the teacher makes a point of never completing anything, just manipulating the material. This is reassuring and comforting to the child, and if the child is interested they'll pick up on it.

One participant said that children will naturally go through the developmental stages and the required skills will evolve. For teachers or parents who feel children should be past the "balls and snakes" at the Kindergarten level, they need to be assured that children will tire of making "balls and snakes" if they are emotionally and physically ready to do more complex work.

In summary, it is the open-ended, process-focussed art activities which nurture in children self-worth and self-esteem. They also help children deal with anger, stress and unhappy

feelings. A variety of materials which are well displayed and easily accessible encourage children to participate in art activities. Positive and appropriate comments from adults are also important and help to encourage children to try new things, take risks and process to the next level.

5 a. What art activities foster age-appropriate social knowledge and competence?

b. Explain how art activities foster age-appropriate social knowledge and competence.

For all three educators, this was the skill that mattered most. They felt social skills were critically important in order for children to have success in school. One of the participants began by giving a very short overview of how social knowledge and competence develop in young children. Since all three participants made reference to this, perhaps it's worthwhile to use the explanation as an introduction to this question.

The participants explained that social knowledge begins very early. For toddlers, it begins as a totally self-absorbed experience. They explore the world around them by using their senses. As for art activities, toddlers need simple things such as large sheets of paper and fat brushes, and lots of space in which they can move around. Variety is not of great importance but abundance of materials is, as toddlers do not know how to share their space or materials. Toddlers can harm themselves or each other and must be watched closely.

As children get older, they can be challenged by a greater variety of materials. 3-year- olds are capable of some self-initiation. They are capable of choosing art materials from supply cupboards. They also require far less supervision than toddlers. They are usually interested in trying new materials and experimenting with new implements. Children over three can share work spaces; they are beginning to learn behaviour that responds to the needs of a group.

At four and five, most children can work independently, make choices around the art materials, develop their creations and do so in a spirit of cooperation. They can share some of the

materials with someone else, provide assistance to a friend, feel empathy, and have some understanding of how someone else may feel if what they want is gone. 4- and 5-year-olds enjoy group projects which provide a good base for the development of social skills and competence. One of the other participants gave the following example:

> In long-term or ongoing projects, children spend a great deal of time planning, discussing, testing things out or exploring ideas -- all of the things that contribute to the development of social knowledge, of how to work together, to problem solve, or even to use someone else's idea before your own.

Helping children acquire social skills by using art activities means that those art activities have to attract, appeal and be of interest to children. Children also need to have the ability to choose for themselves what and how they will use these materials. This ability to choose gives them a sense of control and that in turn builds their confidence. It also reassures them that they will be successful at whatever they have chosen to do. All three educators said that in order for children to function well in a group and have good social interactions, they need to feel successful. So what is put out and how it is displayed makes a great difference to children.

Good social skills require that children can work in a group, sit at a table with other children, be sensitive to the needs of others, share things and take turns. These were the social expectations which are required in Grade One. As one of the participants said:

> For example, children are expected not to keep all the markers that someone else might want to use. Or another example might be that children do not make a lot of loud noises while sitting at the table, because that's disruptive to others.

The three participants pointed out that not all children have an appropriate sense of confidence and social skills. The above expectations are not clearly understood by all children. Sometimes, by using art activities, a teacher or parent can help children become aware of these expectations. By attracting children to an art activity, it will hold their attention and focus them.

A teacher or parent can use this opportunity to work on any other elements of unruly behavior. One participant said:

> By using art activities you can do it in a really positive way, because the children are hooked into the activity, and the teacher can work on children learning to be respectful, not taking things or space from other children, not telling other children that their work is not very good, etc. The art activity, if it attracts the disruptive child, can be used to redirect him/her back to what the child is interested in, and this is a great lever for teachers if they use it correctly.

All three contributors used the example of driving small cars through paint. Cars seem to have a great attraction for young children. Using cars with different wheel sizes produces different patterns and makes it more interesting. This art activity was continually referred to by the participants because it is a simple activity requiring very little skill. One participant said that the children are attracted by the cars, by the colours, by the patterns, and by the fact that this activity cannot fail. Furthermore, a teacher can always find something positive to say about this art activity. Comments can be made about the patterns, the colours or the different track marks.

Talking to children makes them feel that the teacher or adult in their life feels they are worth spending time with, and this feeling is validating and morale-boosting for an unfocussed and unruly child. As one participant explained, a child can interpret this interaction in the following way:

> She wanted to sit with me. She wanted to spend time with me. She wanted to talk to me. She said nice things about my work. So, maybe I'm okay.

All three participants discussed the importance of providing art activities that are stress-free for children. One such art activity, referred to before by all three participants, is that of tracing the body's outline. This activity helps children understand who they are and how big they are. After they paint and decorate their outline and it is hung up on the wall with all the

other images, they can see that they are part of a group. One participant put it this way:

> This simple activity heightens a child's sense of identity, sense of power, sense of confidence, and it allows the child to go forward and do something again perhaps even a little bit more complicated.

One of the contributors talked about the social interactions that occur spontaneously when children are engaged in art activities. There is often a lot of chatter at the painting easels. Some children choose this activity because it is a solitary one. As they work away, they tend to make eye contact with the person opposite them or near them. Quite likely, one will peek around the edge to see what the other is painting. Then the child who wanted to be alone is confronted by someone who is interested in their work or just in them, and so little personal exchanges evolve where they talk and listen to each other. The participant summarized her observation by saying, "These are important steps in beginning to acquire social knowledge and competence."

Good social interactions give children a feeling of competence and success. All three contributors indicated that in order for children to function in a group they need to feel successful. Social competence requires friendly and positive interactions, such as constructing things or creating things together in a collaborative way.

Collaborative art activities require that children plan, discuss and agree on what is going to happen. They have to share materials, demonstrate some self-control, be responsible, and clean up after themselves. Collaborative art activities develop a cooperative and team spirit.

> In group projects -- the planning, the discussion, the research, the organizing, the sharing, the responsibilities, the execution of the project and the cleaning up -- all of those require certain social skills and everyone feels good at the end of such a project.

For children who aren't ready for group activities, the three participants had the following suggestions. One suggested an art activity such as painting, that can provide a solitary and safe

activity. Painting at the easel was preferred because it allowed children to hide behind, or stand by, an easel, where they can observe without interference from other children. This participant felt it was critical for children to have this opportunity. She expressed her conviction this way:

> What is relevant here is that children have a place to go where they feel safe, can watch and see what is happening in the room. And while they are observing, they can assess where they might be able to go and more importantly where they might be successful.

A new child will sometimes spend days or weeks at the easel before they are ready to move into a group of children. There should be no time limit to these passages for children but, "as a teacher I might be concerned if a child doesn't move from a position after two weeks, but it does depend upon how great is the sense of inadequacy for the child."

Another participant talked about children who are easily frustrated and find group work difficult. These children should be encouraged to work in very small groups or by themselves. They need to know that such feelings are valid but that there are ways to express them, and they need to learn how to express their feelings in more acceptable ways.

Children who get cast off by other children was a concern for one educator. She felt a teacher needs to help these children find ways to handle this rejection and with help, they can learn to adjust to this situation by thinking along these lines: "Maybe I can do this, or find another group to work with, or be by myself for a little bit." She believed that role plays and puppetry can help and she also indicated that most art activities are very helpful, particularly sensory art activities -- "painting, box construction, playdough" -- that soothe and comfort. Also, adults can be helpful and therapeutic by giving attention to children experiencing difficulties.

All three participants agreed that children who aren't well socialized can be helped in acquiring good social skills by watching other children or by watching the teacher's behaviour,

"Johnny, please pass the red colour to Mary. Thank you, Johnny, that's a big help." So they learn to share materials, take turns, learn to say appropriate things and appreciate each other's efforts. Art activities provide many opportunities for good role modelling by the teacher or other children.

However, all three said that genuine and sincere interest has to be expressed by the adults when talking to children about their art. Specific talk is useful, not just meaningless praise, such as,"Good job, good job, good job!" without any individual comments. Teachers can discuss colours and shapes, or ask questions with real enthusiasm. A question such as, "How did you do that?" encourages, validates, and makes children feel that their artwork and the social interaction involved in discussing it was successful. Appropriate socialization for formal school is absolutely critical. This was expressed by all three, but one participant summarized it this way:

> If children can't listen to each other, can't make friends, can't relate to each other, can't share responsibility, can't exercise a level of independence, then those children will have a very hard time all the way through school.

> Children who struggle because of their poor social skills usually do not do well in school. Children need to relate to one another, they need to concentrate on tasks, and art activities will help develop those skills because usually they are interested in the art activities . . .

To conclude the three educators focussed on art activities in preschool/Kindergarten programs. Again the participants indicated that art activities which are open-ended and process-focussed provide children with a sense of pleasure, competence and success. Such art activities help socialize children in a positive way. They ensure children have positive experiences and positive interactions. Positive interactions imply that children have the ability to plan, discuss and share responsibilities. Acquiring these social skills were considered most important for success in formal school by the three educators.

6 a. What art activities encourage age-appropriate language skills?
b. Explain how these art activities encourage age-appropriate language skills.

All three participants felt that this question could not be answered without considering all that has been discussed previously: in age-appropriate language, everything comes into play. The children's experiences, their motor abilities, emotional stability, sense of self-esteem and self-worth, all contributes to their ability to acquire language and express it.

The three participants, perhaps because of the nature of their work, focused on language and its relation to school readiness. They felt that how children see the world, and what they think about it, are often easier for them to represent on paper than to express in words. Drawing is very important to young children, and they need all kinds of opportunities and all kinds of media to work out their representations of the world around them and of the world within them. All three of the contributors made the point that children's representations are rarely accurate reflections of the physical world, but accuracy should not be considered important.

What is important, according to the three contributors, are the children's discussions about their drawings, creating a relationship between words and pictures, words and symbols, symbols and storytelling. When children are ready, they tell stories about their drawings.

The teacher or parent can then write the stories down so that children begin to understand that "experiences tell stories, and that their experiences (doing, thinking, feeling) can be part of the story making." This participant went on to say that these talks between child and teacher, or even among children themselves, help the children acquire a broader vocabulary and help them understand how to use it.

Although the participants agreed that children represent their experiences, not all three held the conviction to the same degree. One felt that much can be done for children:

> If there was a climate that encouraged the use of the imagination and the luxury of free exploration, then children can discover many things on their own.

The other two participants did not disagree, however, they stressed that children needed experiences in order to tell stories, which can be written down using the child's own words. Children watch this activity and the teacher can then read back the story. Children begin to realize that language is used for communicating, that it can be kept, that it can be written down, in a way that can be read back. The two contributors also indicated that children who were read to or were told stories had better storytelling abilities. One participant said:

> So they have a sense of storytelling, so that they have that concept of relating either from hearing stories, or from the imagination, or from past experiences.

It's not instinctive for children to represent things that they have not experienced in a tangible way. If certain experiences are not possible, two of the participants suggested that picture books can help. As children look at the pictures, they like to tell stories about the pretty pictures, the colours, the shapes, and the pleasing way things are put together on the page.

All three educators said that the adult's attention to good language was vital. Whether they help extend children's vocabulary by using good language, or coax it out by reassuring and praising them in their artistic efforts, art activities are a good venue for that kind of exchange.

Children need to hear remarks that tell them their work is interesting and attractive to another person. It is easy to compliment children by showing an interest in their art, commenting on things like colour and use of space, or by asking them what is happening in the picture. All three participants felt that positive feedback was one key element in the development of children's language.

Furthermore, the three educators said that the teacher needs to talk to the children about

the process and encourage them to verbalize about their work. The teacher's role is to question, discuss, help children make observations, and display the artwork. Displaying the children's artwork, talking about and inviting others to comment, make children feel their work and they themselves are important.

Co-operative art projects are an excellent way to enhance, develop and build vocabulary. This was agreed to by all three participants. In cooperative art projects language is used by children to share and exchange ideas, to question, to gain information, to cooperate, and to work and talk together.

Group art projects not only help children develop language, they help educators understand the learning process. As one participant said, group projects help

> (Children) to really encourage an understanding of each other and create an understanding for the future of how children think and learn. It gives us an insight into children's language development.

The contributor, who is a Kindergarten teacher, said her class enjoyed and got very involved in group projects that took a longer period of time. One such project dealt with dinosaurs. During the project the children decided to create a forest and other land formations suitable for dinosaur life. Here language was coaxed out as the children discussed how to build their project, what to use, whether or not to use props, who would do what, and so on.

Another participant said she encouraged "mind-mapping". This refers to the process of listing all the things children know about the subject. Getting the children to mind-map what they already know, or think they know, really encourages language development in the group.

The three participants also agreed that group art projects and well-targeted questioning are very helpful in developing language. In the dinosaur project the teacher introduced making footprints using plastic dinosaurs. This activity became a catalyst for a review of what the

children knew about dinosaurs, and more specifically for expanding their vocabulary.

> I ask lots of questions to help develop and expand their vocabulary.
> I can ask children, "Can you remember, did this one eat other dinosaurs?
> How could he do that? Was he the biggest?"

Moreover, one of the participants pointed out that printing, a readiness skill that requires a certain proficiency in motor and language development, is fostered when children's printed stories are attached to their drawings. It is particularly true when there is an interest in letters.

In this participant's Kindergarten class, certain holidays spur children on to work with letters and words. "Children love to dip sponge letters in paint to make designs or actual words, or they can do rubbings using wooden letters." By the end of February, she claims all the children in the class could recognize each other's names and the words *To*, *From* and *I love you*! Help is given to those children who cannot print the words or the message, but most children in the class can recognize the words associated with this celebration by the end of the theme.

Books are a definite way to develop and enrich language. All three participants made reference to books as a necessity for young children. Besides language development, the illustrations from books or magazines teach and encourage children to learn not only about each other, but to appreciate different cultures. Stories help children appreciate the similarities and the differences of people, and the need for retaining basic human rights for all. The two participants who live and work in a multicultural neighborhood feel these are important issues.

Using the stories in books is an easy way to develop an awareness and respect for the people who live here and in other parts of the world. As one participant said, these stories often lead to finding out more, and recording or representing the information through an art activity. The participant expressed the need for children to develop an interest in the multicultural nature of Canada by beginning to learn and understand our own Aboriginal culture. She said:

> Books expose children to different cultures, different art forms. I plan to introduce the children to our own native culture and art. I thought the children would enjoy researching totem poles. I want them to appreciate other cultures.
>
> I want children to respond to their own work, to their classmates and to the artwork of other cultures.

All three participants talked about things that deter language development. The consultant who had spent many years working with abused children felt that language was a huge issue for some children. For example, the language used by the Grade One teacher is often not understood by the children. A subtle message is given to these children that they don't belong, because they don't understand and because they really don't know what the teacher is saying to them. This "not understanding" is not often obvious because it's not the individual words the children don't understand, it is the teacher's intended meaning. For example, the common phrase often used by teachers and misunderstood by children is, "Sit still!" Children with limited language may have no idea what the teacher means. The teacher usually repeats the phrase in a stronger tone "Sit still! Would you please sit still!!!" The tone tells the children that the teacher is angry, and children usually blame themselves and tend to interpret the exchange as "There's something wrong with me but I don't know what it is, and I don't know how to fix it." The participant pointed out that, for children who have poor language skills or lack basic concepts, these simple requests can have very negative consequences.

She felt this problem could be addressed in Kindergarten by telling children that their work will be better and may get completed if they sit down when they do it. They need to understand that to "Sit still" does not mean wandering around the room, getting up to play with cars or other things, and only occasionally coming back to the art project. If children are exposed to this kind of direction on a regular basis, then they would understand the "sit still business".

Two participants talked about beautifully dressed children who were unwilling to use messy art materials. The children were nervous that they may dirty their clothes and upset their parents. As this is a serious issue with some children, she suggested having a discussion with the parents, to help them understand the importance of artwork in language development. Washable smocks can help. Often such a discussion is beneficial for both the children and the parents.

A point made by all three was that language development and social competency are acquired concomitantly by peer influence. Peer motivation is instrumental in developing language and concepts. The teacher often acts as a facilitator, but group acceptance is a strong force.

The Kindergarten teacher illustrated this by explaining how children who do not speak English (ESL children) learn from social interactions. ESL children often acquire in just three months the language they need to fully participate in group activities. They learn their English from listening and talking to other children.

To conclude, the three educators felt art activities promoted and encouraged language development because of the social nature of these activities. As children talk and discuss their artwork among themselves or individually with an adult -- all this verbal interaction extends and builds their vocabulary. For children who know the words but cannot understand their meaning, good modelling can help. This is usually done by the adult although often children can help too.

7 a. What art activities stimulate age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive skills?
b. Explain how art activities stimulate age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive skills.

Again, the three interviewees indicated that everything discussed to this point had a bearing on the development of cognitive skills. So each one of them approached this question differently. Here are their ideas.

The first participant said that towards the end of the year the art created in the

Kindergarten room should reflect the broadest, widest base of general knowledge possible. This includes bringing things in from outside -- things for painting, gluing or making collages, such as pine cones, twigs, leaves and sand (a wonderful medium for developing prewriting skills), and introducing the children to as many things as possible. One can take children to parks or along nature trails where they can find things for themselves, and understand from where this "good stuff" originates. This activity of harvesting things from the environment expands children's language and basic knowledge. This is how she explained the value of these field trips.

> Go to the farm, touch the animals, touch their noses, look at their tails and bring this knowledge back to the classroom to share with and discuss with others. Then when the teacher puts out a basket of cloths, fur bits, or leather the children will pick the pieces that best represent the animal that they wish to make. So they are relating and constantly adding to their store of knowledge. New words can be added such as "bristly, smooth or rough" so language gets expanded.
>
> The teacher has to prepare the things so that the children can make their artwork successfully but she should not care about the end product. So the selection of materials can be connected to the animals they saw.

Field trips and the art activities that come out of these excursions can act as a springboard to help children acquire specific cognitive skills. The teacher's questions relating to the trips, the first-hand "farm" experience, and the art activities that follow can help develop children's abstract thinking -- a skill that the contributor indicated was required in formal school.

The second participant was particularly interested in children who are not comfortable in larger groups. For the quiet or withdrawn child, whose language may not come easily, art activities provide a refuge, a thing they can do and talk about. They need the teacher's time for "one-on-one chats" that tell these children they too have something to contribute.

She also pointed out that in formal school children are required to differentiate between two ideas at the same time. She illustrated this cognitive expectation in the following way:

> This skill requires that shape and colour be recognized at the same time. Children usually tackle one concept at a time, but by the time they are ready for Grade One they need to be able to differentiate both at the same time. Art activities provide lots of opportunities to manipulate and work with two concepts like shape and colour at the same time. Art activities are also collaborative and supportive in the doing of the group art project. Questions that lead to serious discussions include: "How do we start? What's in the middle? How do we end? What do we know about this?"

In terms of other school readiness skills, this contributor again referred to the concept of "mind-mapping" as a good exercise for encouraging language symbols for words and ideas. She indicated that recognizing symbols is a prereading skill, and that art is the common ground between the two. She said, "Art activities provide a common ground for school readiness skills to evolve holistically." The term "mind-mapping" was used only by this participant.

The third participant integrates art into "every aspect of the curriculum." She finds that children are more captivated by a math project if it is integrated with an art activity. Children learn faster and retain new information better if art activities are part of the learning. Again, she suggests using questions to ensure that children really understand the concepts, e.g. "What a lot of circles you have in your picture. How many did you fit into the red thing over here? Let's count them." or "Look at all the things you made with your shapes. Can you name the shapes?" She also talked about the teacher supplying shapes in different textures and sizes so that there is another dimension to the learning:

> When planning these activities, I expect the children to be able to name the colours, count the objects and name the shapes, and make other things with the shapes to show an understanding of the relationship of one shape to another. So questions help make sure the child does have a clear understanding of the concept -- questions such as,"Oh, what a wonderful picture. . . Did you use any triangles?"

The third contributor had mentioned before that most of the children really like to have a

text printed with their pictures. This demonstrates for children that words can be represented by symbols. Folders store their drawings and the stories (words) for their pictures. The participant feels that children, even if they aren't ready to use symbols, want to talk about their art, especially if the teacher is interested in the work. "Language will pour out" if the teacher says things such as, "Oh what an interesting picture? Can you tell me what's happening here?"

This participant has concrete suggestions on developing readiness skills for formal school. In her class the children work a lot with the alphabet. They decorate the letters or lace them, using plastic needles and yarn, or sometimes the children decorate words. All of these activities develop prereading skills.

In science, the class looked at the life cycle of the butterfly or at the age of dinosaurs. These themes help children develop science and math concepts and help them acquire a broader vocabulary. They also let children express what they have learned and indicate the readiness skills they have mastered.

To summarize the following points were emphasized by the educators. In order for children to develop their general knowledge and cognitive skills, they need life experiences. Only then can they talk about those experiences and represent them in their artwork. Adults can extend these experiences and promote the development of general knowledge and cognitive skills, by asking appropriate questions, and by putting text to the children's artwork. As children watch the text being created, they develop an understanding that a text can represent their drawing or the spoken word. This develops word and letter recognition and for children who are interested an opportunity to trace or reproduce them through a variety of art activities.

8. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't talked about in these sessions?

This question gave the three educators an opportunity to touch on any aspect of

preschool learning that was not discussed before or that they felt needed more input.

First Participant

Art activities give children a wonderful opportunity to explore the world through their senses. It helps them to look at things from different perspectives. Tactile experiences are very important in developing readiness skills, and art activities such as collage making, finger painting, "playdoughing," or using different types of paints (thin, thick, or oil pastels) are just a few ways in which children can make sense of the world around them.

Art comes into everything. Activities such as baking and then decorating the baked goods are a science that involves ingredients and produces magical changes. "These are exciting things for young children, and they need time and many such experiences to grasp how things work."

Art activities provide training in a kind of social and cognitive order. There are chores around art: sharing materials, putting things back where they belong, leaving things tidy for the next person, and so on. In terms of cognitive development, children learn sequencing and decision making; their art creations should evolve progressively in more complex and challenging steps.

Adults need to understand the steps children go through in their artistic development. For a 2-year-old, drawing a line is a major accomplishment. 3-year-olds start producing shapes (circles) that have a meaning. 4-year-olds begin to be more creative and enjoy working with a variety of textures. They also begin representing their feelings in art. 5-year-olds are ready for art in the world, and can discuss art around them, visit galleries or look at architecture.

A good preschool teacher (parent) can "so easily ignite a child's curiosity," give them a broader perspective, develop readiness skills, give children self-confidence, and provide the basis for developing a competent, happy person.

Second Participant

She began by listing what she would expect to see in a Kindergarten class at the end of the year: an ongoing, open-ended collage table; a group project that the children would be working on; a place for manipulative materials -- playdough, clay; blocks with accessories to build towns or farms. So, again, open-ended, lots of shapes that fit together -- two of one size that fit into one another. These are just some things she would like to see.

At the end of the Kindergarten year it is appropriate to have some activities with an element of instruction. This is because such tasks prepare children for listening to the teacher and following instructions - for example, making a turkey for a table centre-piece. The children are told that they will make a turkey; that the big, brown part is the body; and that they can pick out the colours for the feathers, cut them out and paste them in the appropriate place. This kind of simple direction is not inappropriate at this stage. The participant did point out that this task would be easier if the children could see a real turkey. But as this is not always possible, a picture will do so that the children understand why they are asked to put feathers on a turkey.

Language difficulties in Grade One are very real for some children and often educators are not picking up on the problem. Children memorize and can fool teachers into thinking that they understand more than they really do. This is a significant concern for the participant. She said:

> They come to school and desperately want to please the teacher, and so they often say things they have no understanding of, but they are saying it because another child said it and it worked. They memorize the alphabet, numbers, words, sentences and have no concept of what these things are for and why we need to know this.

Art and talking to children helps a teacher to understand the things that are misunderstood or not known by the children. As a teacher sits and chats to children in Kindergarten about their artwork, a potential problem can be spotted and dealt with before children enter Grade One.

Third Participant

Most of the art activities in her classroom are open-ended, but on certain occasions she makes suggestions -- for example, how to use some tools: "What else could you add?" She does not like to produce models for children to copy, but if a model is presented it is usually the work of another child. She felt when children are asked to reproduce a model they often feel they don't measure up.

> I think children's work is original and interesting. Picasso said that to be able to tap into your childhood and to do that as an adult and bring it out in your art work is a wonderful thing. Children are natural artists -- they have curiosity and originality which needs to be valued and encouraged.

She enjoys encouraging originality, which she does by providing open-ended art activities: "Children love totally open-ended art activities. The results are always a surprise." These art activities make wonderful displays and the children get a lot of comments about the "eye-catching" artwork.

There are four permanent centres in the room. A language centre which may have an art activity attached; a math centre which may also may be an art activity; a science discovery centre that changes according to themes; and an art centre with activities that provide a safe haven.

> No matter where they come from, well-cared-for, abused, as new immigrants or a bit scared -- no matter where, they can always go to an art activity and feel good about themselves. Sometimes they need a little encouragement but it's the one thing that gives them freedom to do what they want to do.

The home centre in this class is renovated on a regular basis. It can be a home, a school, a book store, or a post office. When it is a toy shop, the children price the items, make "for sale" signs, discuss the hours of operation, make the money, and they even like to make purses for their money. All of these art activities are very popular and provide real learning opportunities.

Picture books are very important for this participant. Her family owns an amazing

collection of first edition picture books and story-books. She uses books extensively in the classroom, "And often it's the pictures that capture the child first and then the words."

Jan Brett's book *The Mitten,* in which each picture has a frame within which is a clue about what is going to happen next, is a favourite book in her class. This book is a wonderful prereading resource, because in order to read children have to be able to interpret picture clues. Children love and comment on the appealing pictures. The book gives children a sense of aesthetically pleasing things, and an awareness of beauty.

Books, for this participant, bring the world into the classroom. She uses them to discuss customs and cultures around the world. She wanted to emphasize that books are invaluable when teaching children about the people and the cultures living around them. This topic is significant to this and one other participant, and both of them look at art activities as a way to catch children's attention and interest, and use that focus to build "an awareness of other cultures and an appreciation for those cultures".

The three participants felt that art displays are a way for children to record what they learned and could accomplish, and what was interesting to them. For example, class murals produce an overview of the learning occurring in the classroom. The murals provide, as do other children's art displays, a point of reference for discussions. Displays provide parents with a visual that is easier for the teacher to explain and help parents understand their children's development. For children they also present something to look at and to talk about with other children, their teacher, or their parents.

One of the participants voiced a concern that was touched upon by all three. She felt today's parents are struggling financially and their worries are picked up by their children. "Living up to certain standards" is very hard on children. They tend to lose interest and their:

(C)reativity shuts down. The children's self-esteem suffers. They are reluctant to take risks because they don't want the criticism. Children tend to try and please the adults in their lives. These children tend to lose their creative spirit, and are not excited by the variety of materials. These children have an attitude of, "Don't give me all this choice; just tell me what to do."

The Artist Participants' Position

It seemed useful to discuss art and its meaning in children's lives with two people who make their living as professional artists. It seemed relevant to include their perceptions as artists about how artistic expression should be encouraged in young children. If the artists held completely opposing views to the "educators", then one would have to question how such a dichotomy could exist.

I had no preconceived ideas about what insights the artists would have into school readiness skills. I thought they would have opinions regarding the effect of art activities on the physical and emotional development of children. However, I also expected the artists to have some understanding of how cognitive skills evolve, simply because one only has to walk through a gallery to know that "Art" demands a knowledge and an interpretation of history, literature and culture. And so I set off to find out how two experienced artists looked at art activities and their place in a school's curriculum. I was not disappointed!

The two questions and answers were as follows:

1. Can you define art for a person who works with young children?

Both artists began with who should teach or work with young children. They felt that too often adults make assumptions about "art" and what constitutes art. Both artists agreed that a good teacher needs to "withdraw" and allow the children to create. The word "withdraw" is not

implied literally; it simply means to allow children to express themselves freely, to project their feelings and their personality onto their work, and to reflect through their art on the things that matter to them. For children, indicated one of the artists, there should be an understanding that: "Art should work in the same way as drama works for actors. You have complete freedom to be someone else with absolutely no consequences."

Both artists believe that the teacher does not need to be an artist; however, the teacher should have great enthusiasm and a belief in children's creative abilities. They both agreed that children do not have preconceived ideas about what art is, and so, they do not suffer from the same kind of constraints as adults. One of the artists put it this way:

> Children are not restricted in their fun, such as colouring, painting, pasting, the use of paper and so on when they create their representations. Whether the teacher can see it the way the children see it is not a problem. What they should recognize is that children see it in a way that is not restricted by an adult's eye. The teacher does not need to understand how the children are seeing it, other than to recognize that they are seeing it in a much more liberated way, and not to impose order or standards on children of such a young age.

He went on to say that standards, order and an adult's perception of beauty affect children "negatively, badly". It's bound to be dangerously restrictive" (though indicating that the word "dangerously" may be a bit strong). The artist explained that imposing standards on young children takes away their ability to be their own person. He went on to say that, by the time children reach their teenage years when they are naturally, instinctively looking to conform:

> They will have nothing leading up to that point, to hang on to, so that when they get through that teenage period and they start recognizing something more than the traditional view of art, they will have nothing, no vocabulary on which to fall back. For too many children this is already happening and that is a distressing thing.

Both artists see children as accepting, exciting, creative and fearless when given freedom

to explore their imagination. In teaching form and having children focus on recreating models, the adult wasn't allowing children "the pleasure of art, but imposing the tools of the trade". He said:

> To deny children the pleasure of their own creations is to deprive them of a world that is going to be too quickly taken away from them as they grow older. Art should simply happen in the classroom.

Both artists believe that the teacher should be a provider of materials, that the end product should be "almost irrelevant," and that the process is of critical importance. Both expressed their disapproval in asking children to reproduce models because those requests defeat the purpose for having art. Yet they agreed that helping children use certain tools or demonstrating certain techniques is useful and, at times, necessary. What must be understood is that, for young children, the ability to express themselves is most important.

The two artists expressed the importance for teachers to provide children with enriching experiences. Visits to the art gallery are "terrific!" as are walks around the town to look at and admire architecture, that helping children understand that our buildings are an expression of the world we live in. An outing for children "awakens and excites their visual comprehension". The teacher's or parent's most important traits are the ability to arouse curiosity, and to excite and delight the children in taking pleasure in the world around them.

One of the artists referred to the eye as an instrument that gives us a visual language. If it is allowed to develop without being constrained by formulas about what art is, then every time the eye sees an interesting "juxtaposition of colour and shape," it will be excited in the same way as we are excited when we hear music. This artist said that it was a shame that art is not accepted in the same way as music. Very few ask the meaning of music; people simply enjoy it. He said, "Too often we want art to represent something. And we are quite reluctant to look at a

work of art in an objective way." he went on to say:

> Art is not something that represents something accurately, and the training of people to do that is contrary to what art is. What art should be for children is the encouragement to see things around them in terms of their relationship to other things. That colour, shape, form and design are existent at all times. What art should be doing is helping them develop a vocabulary, a visual vocabulary.

2. What meaning should "art" have in a child's life?

Both artists were adamant that children need freedom in order to create, that teachers, parents and the public at large do not understand how critical it is for children to have the opportunity to express themselves in their own way. This freedom of self-expression has a tremendous effect on their self-worth, confidence and self-esteem and that this need for self-expression is universal. One of the artists said:

> Art exists at any level, and in every culture the need for self-expression is about as innate as the need to breathe, and is true of all of us regardless of age. If you cannot find a way to examine your own ideas, deal with your fears and desires through some means of self-expression, then of course it is going to be reflected in some rather nasty way. What it does is lead to a more contented whole human being, so all of those other things like getting along with people, controlling anger . . !

Both artists agreed that all expressions of art, regardless of the medium, are a way of coming to terms with oneself. For children not interested in art, then one needs to "promote a spirit of joy, provide appropriate and various materials, not impose order and neatness, and in time the children will find a way to express themselves". One of the artists recalled being faced with a different problem, one of trying to get upper middle-class Grade One children to work with clay and having absolutely no success, because the idea of getting dirty was so foreign that it was "beyond their comprehension". For this artist it is disturbing to see art in school as a separate subject, that it is not a given that the use of visual expression is applicable all day.

> Art isn't a depiction of something in front of the child to reproduce. It should be the expanding of the ability to see the world around them that comes from processes and not end products. Art should be integrated into the whole school day at every level and in every way, that the awakening of the eye should happen at the same time as you're appealing to the ear, or in the joy of physical exercise, but we have little courage to do so. So, we segregate and assign 30 minutes to listen to music and 30 minutes to run around in a gym.

In concluding this chapter, one can trace the similarities expressed between the educators and the artists. Although both parties hold strong viewpoints, the artists were surprising in their zealous and energetic manner. Both groups were committed to an open-ended, process-focussed approach to art activities. Both groups believe that children must have freedom of expression in their art activities. Both, believe that giving children this freedom is crucial and at the core of nurturing and fostering a better, more sensitive and aesthetically conscious person and society. The "aesthetically conscious" bit is more the voice belonging to the artists, although the educators certainly implied it.

Furthermore, both groups said that imposing restrictions on children, such as presenting them with models to reproduce, denies them the right to self-expression. What both groups advocated was that adults ensure that children have lots of experiences which enrich their lives and helps them understand the world around them. In order to create artwork, children must have experiences from which they can draw upon and represent their feelings and their thoughts. These were the opinions and viewpoints expressed by both groups.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Recommendations

Despite their very different backgrounds and experiences, preschool educators and established artists produced remarkable consistencies in their responses to questions about how best to promote readiness through art activities with children. In addition, support for these responses is borne out in the literature on the general standards and teaching strategies for school readiness. As a result, conclusions derived from a combination of my research and the relevant literature are grounded in both practice and theory. This suggests teachers and parents can use this information when considering how to help young children achieve school readiness skills. Art activities are not difficult or expensive to provide but there are some recommendations outlined in this chapter and presented as principles for parents and teachers to follow.

The research study looks at: "The effectiveness of art activities in developing school readiness skills." A number of themes emerged from the interviews given by the participants in the study. These themes provide the principles on how to approach and use art activities. The answers to the first question were all similar. There was a general consensus that integrating art activities into the preschool/Kindergarten program was important. All five participants underscored the need for art activities to be open-ended and process-focussed, and that the activities should not be directed to acquiring an end product.

However, the artists took their perspectives a step further, by saying that art activities should not only be open-ended and process-focussed but should be integrated into every aspect of school life, and not offered as a separate subject. However, they preferred to describe quality art activities as "free" and to emphasize the importance of and necessity for "self-expression".

The literature is consistent with all five participants' views. The CSBA (1998) discussion paper pointed out that preschool/Kindergarten was an important part of a child's education. Good programs should be available for all children, as they make a difference to the children's success in formal school. Both Lowenfeld (1965) and Cherry (1972) write of how art activities for young children affect and influence their learning. Here is what Cherry has to say:

> Art education is a meaningful force in this total learning program. By sensitive planning, the child is motivated to pursue art activities and enjoy experiences that lead to general overall development. He (She) is given plenty of time to move from one step of growth to another at his own pace and in accordance with his own abilities and interests, thus helping him develop strong feelings of self-esteem and self-confidence. As he (she) grows to recognize his own individuality, he becomes better equipped to withstand the emotional pressures of overtly structured situations that he will encounter throughout life. (p. 5)

Seefeldt (1995) looks at the more current educational system of the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy. Children's art is considered a "highly symbolic activity" (p. 39), a language, therefore a cognitive skill, one that can require children to take an idea, create something that is not present; to "then find a way to express it is a major accomplishment for young children" (p. 40). Reggio schools give children the opportunity through the art process to "develop perceptual sensitivity to their world, perceiving likenesses, differences, shapes, sizes, textures, and colors" (p. 40). Dighe, Calomiris and Van Zutphen (1998) are also impressed with the Reggio schools, and write:

> Reggio educators speak of projects that utilize children's symbolic languages, which include drawing, painting, constructing, clay modeling and creative dramatics. These are embedded in the total curriculum; they are the children's way of making sense of the world through representation. (p. 4)

Integrating art activities within all subjects is supported by the literature. Khurana and Baral (1997) suggest that art activities help students develop problem-solving skills in mathematics. Huntinger (1998) and Runco (1993) indicate that a creative environment is more

inclusive and accepting of children who may have special needs. Schiller (1995), a preschool teacher who used art activities to organize her curriculum, said that when children can choose the activities of interest to them they "begin to build their own personal store of imagery, which can lead to enhanced learning in all areas" (p. 38).

This last quote brings me back to Larissa. Art activities were successful and happy experiences for her. They provided her with a confidence to try new things and take risks in other areas. She feels her art activities were a catalyst that spurred her on to try new ways to express herself. She enjoyed setting up challenges for herself. None of those challenges were complex, but for a child they were of great interest. Most were simple things, like figuring out how to make boxes with snug fitting lids. She spent hours perfecting that particular curiosity. Eventually, she ventured into other modes of expression such as drama and poetry.

Larissa's story is important here because it illustrates what the artists and the educators stressed, that everyone has an innate urge to express their feeling, their thoughts, their flights of imagination and their experiences. That the ability to do so provides children with a feeling of self-worth, self-esteem, builds confidence and allows children to go forward and face new challenges, and whatever they might become later on in life. This was certainly true of Larissa.

The recommendations in this thesis provide teachers and parents with some simple, basic suggestions on how to promote emotional stability, and social and cognitive development in their children. Regardless of whether or not children have access to preschools or Kindergarten, parents still need to be informed so that they can provide or make good choices for their children. Being well informed gives parents an opportunity to augment and provide art activities which can be instrumental in helping children do well in school.

This brings me to the main themes expressed by the participants in response to the

remaining five questions. The main themes are presented as principles. A summary of the participants' beliefs will precede the supporting literature. Because open-ended and process-focussed activities play such a prominent role in the findings it seems expedient to review the terms again by providing the definitions supplied by one of the educators.

Open-ended activities:

These activities provide children with opportunities for self-expression and self-discovery. Materials and tools are used by the children in ways that are interesting, challenging and stimulating for them. Open-ended activities do not provide children with a model to copy, but rather allow children to work at their developmental level. Children use the materials and tools to represent things they have experienced or things from their imagination.

Process-focussed activities:

The raison d'etre for these activities is that they are focussed on the *how* and *what* children are doing and not on the end product. The end product is irrelevant and often there isn't one. Children should experience pleasure in the *doing* and not be concerned in the *producing* of something.

First Principle:
Children need to have art activities that are open-ended and process-focussed.
The participants believed that open-ended and process-focussed activities:

- provide children with successful experiences
- build self-esteem, self-worth and confidence
- develop motor proficiency
- develop social and cooperative skills
- promote cognitive development
- provide a diagnostic element
- involve and focus children with special needs
- encourage risk taking
- promote readiness to learn

Art as an open-ended/process-focussed activity was a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews. The participants stressed that open-ended art activities provide children with successful experiences because there is no right or wrong way of doing things. Children can have successful experiences that they find pleasurable, that develop their self-esteem, and give them a sense of competency and self-worth. Lowenfeld (1965) looks at the value of art activities that "heal, nurture and stimulate" (p. 19) while Golf and Torrence (1991) say that, if children can choose their activities, then "creative activities and expressions bring individual satisfaction" and motivate them "to communicate and socialize" (p. 20). Social skills according to Doherty (1997) are a good indicator of school readiness.

One of the participants used balloon art as an example of an open-ended art activity which every child (regardless of their developmental stage or their needs) can do and enjoy. The participant, who worked with abused children, also promoted open-ended art activities as a way to encourage and involve children in something they enjoyed and, at the same time, to help them develop all the five skills needed for formal school.

Certainly, Lowenfeld (1965) and Cherry (1972) believe that open-ended activities can be a catalyst for encouraging children with poor readiness skills to work on art activities which interest them, and at the same time develop a proficiency in fine motor skills that is required at the formal school level. Open-ended activities allow children to progress at their own rate without being pushed to a level for which they are not ready. This gives teachers and parents the opportunity to understand at what stage of development the child is presently situated. They can then help the child, because this diagnostic element provides insight into the right materials and activities needed for the child's progress. Some activities listed that help diagnose the degree of motor control children have were: painting, clay and playdough, creating patterns

by a variety of ways, or simply sponge printing. As these activities establish no expectations, the end results are always successful.

One of the participants explained that open-ended, process-focussed activities are significant because they give children the sense that they have started with nothing and have created something. She emphasized this was important for children's emotional development. It gives children a sense of pride in their work and strengthens their feelings of self-worth. She says open-ended activities have the potential to interest and focus a child; that they can settle an unsettled child. She realized these activities help children develop the ability to sit still, a skill which they require if they are to succeed in formal school. This position is firmly supported both by Doherty (1997) and Kagan (1992).

Both Kagan (1992) and Oken-Wright (1998) caution against moving children too quickly to the next level. Kagan talks about giving children the time to observe and represent their world more accurately and Oken-Wright relates this to preprinting and prereading skills.

> We do not want to push a child to represent before he has satisfied his drive to explore a medium. Nor will we want to deny a child media through which he is already comfortable representing. (p.76)

However, Kagan (1992) flags this by saying that, "Each child needs to develop at his (her) own pace, but challenging experiences stimulate that pace and activate the learning" (p. 52). Open-ended art activities are well suited to this purpose if, as Cherry (1972) states, there are well-informed and caring adults.

Schiller (1995) and Edwards and Nabors (1993) both agree with Cherry (1972), cited earlier, that art provides an understanding of a child's physical and emotional development. Lowenfeld (1965) states that art activities not only indicate the stages of physical development but have an emotional impact on children's development. "It is our childhood experiences which

determine whether we live in fear, frustrated, shy, and inhibited, full of feelings of inferiority, or whether we live basically free, uninhibited, and well adjusted for the rest of our lives" (p. 171).

This certainly is reflected in my life and in the lives of my children and most definitely in Larissa's life. Today, she is a confident, strong individual who is not afraid to express her opinions. There is no doubt in Larissa's mind and in my own that Larissa's love of art and her access to art activities played a big role in her development as an adult.

Runco (1993) writes that a creative environment keeps children highly motivated and interested. Furthermore, art activities that are completely open-ended, process-oriented, such as finger painting or clay work, are particularly helpful to children with limited life experiences. Sensory art activities are critical in helping these children focus, develop their concentration skills and promote good work habits. "There is no right or wrong in the creative expression for the young child because art comes from within the child, not from without" (Edward & Nabors, 1993, p. 80). They also look at process-focussed art activities as a way to value children's original and creative work.

Doherty (1997) also touches on open-ended activities but tackles it from a different perspective. She looks at the negative aspects of "academic" instruction as a cause of "stress, lower levels of self-esteem, poorer language skills and earlier drop-out rates" (p. 14).

When children work on their open-ended art activities they learn to share materials, and to discuss and comment on each other's work. These are important interactions that help children acquire the appropriate social skills of sharing, listening and talking at the appropriate time.

Cherry (1972) records these social skills throughout her book. One indicator of school readiness skills in Doherty's (1997) study is that children need to have the appropriate social skills to work in a group, solve problems, share the chores and absorb the learning around them.

The three educators felt this was the most critical skill of all. The artists also touched on this by referring to people getting along and living within communities or societies in harmony and peace.

Second Principle:
Children need positive feedback; talking to and asking appropriate questions about their artwork extends the learning and promotes school readiness skills.
The participants said that:

- talking to children and asking questions about their art activities can promote self-worth, confidence and self-esteem
- talking nurtures children's emotional, social, and cognitive development
- positive feedback is instrumental in helping children progress from drawing to writing
- open-ended art activities provide a good venue for talking and providing opportunities to give positive feedback.

Children need positive feedback when they are working with open-ended art activities. All the participants agreed. This positive feedback can help children feel accepted, provide successful social interactions with an adult, help develop appropriate language, and extend their learning.

Seefeldt (1995) in her paper quotes Harris (1963), who says art "is a language -- a form of cognitive expression" a way to express experiences, feelings and emotions. Schiller (1995) and Oken-Wright (1998) underline the importance of talking to children and of discussing their work in a positive way. Although children can be critical of their work, the teacher's talk about the artwork should be enthusiastic, sincere and encouraging (Lowenfeld, 1965; Dighe et al., 1998).

In her journal Seefeldt (1995) details the great attention the teachers of the Reggio Emilia schools pay to the conversations they have with children. Discussions about the children's art activities, which illustrate their experiences, encourage children to extend their knowledge and represent what they have learned or enjoyed in their art activities. "Through provocative questions and interactive conversations, they are doing something with the experience, they are

mentally acting on their experience" (p. 40). In other words, by asking the right questions teachers involve the children fully, with all their senses, in creating what they have experienced. All five participants would agree.

Engel (1996) analyses a child's painting and illustrates how adults should interpret, understand and talk to children about their art. She encourages adults to: "closely observe the visual art of young children and, as a result, see more in it, have more questions to ask and say more about it" (p. 74). She analyses one child's painting for the reader before describing the conversation with the child about the artwork. Her preliminary question considerations are very useful and a good reference for parents who are not quite as confident as they could be:

- What (size, tools, medium) is it made of?
- What (lines, angles, shapes, symmetry, colours, overlaps) can the observer see ?
- What (design, scene, story, symbol) does it represent ?
- How (perspective, composition, action, view, completion) is it organized ?
- What (violence, peace, love, sadness, danger, humour, persuasion, information, experimentation) is the nature of involvement ?
- Where does the idea (imagination, observation, imitation, TV, conversation, assignment, messing about) originate? (p. 76)

Oken-Wright (1998) is interested in children's transition from drawing to writing. She illustrates in chart form how children progress from drawing to reading and writing. The teacher's questions are instrumental in the children's progression from one form of symbolic representation to another. This interpretation of the teacher's role was also carefully explained by one of the participants. Oken-Wright (1998) also understands the importance of the discussions about children's experimentations and explorations of a medium. Stories are not always required in order to have a talk about the artwork. The two artists would strongly support this position.

Talking to children about their art activities was a very important point made by all the

participants. However, insincere remarks by adults were considered damaging. Again, I refer to the example of a useless, off-the-cuff remark used by adults was: "Good job! Good job! Good job!" This was provided by one of the participants who had heard it too often.

The artists were especially interested in sincere exchanges with children. They felt that children were most astute in sensing who really cared about their artwork. They recognized that adults working with children must be truthful, or, as they said, "special". Engel's (1996) remarks in her concluding passage remind me of the statements made by all the participants. Engel wrote:

> It is important, however, that the adults' comments and questions be genuine, direct responses to the work, not made for ulterior purposes. Careful attention to a child's artwork may indeed result in raising the child's self-esteem, increasing his or her interest in painting, or giving the child a new sense of the possibilities for expression.
>
> Nonetheless, the comments themselves must be authentic so that both the child and adult benefit from the exchange. (p. 79)

Lowenfeld (1965) places great attention on how art is encouraged and what is said about it. He indicates rather fiercely that open-ended, process-focussed art activities are what matters. His theory is that open-ended art activities provide the basis for emotional, social and cognitive growth in children, and the way that adults approach children's art makes a huge difference.

Third Principle:
Children need to have access to a variety of materials and tools that are appropriate for their developmental stage.
The participants said that materials and tools should be:

- made available and easily accessible to children
- of a challenging and interesting variety
- manipulated and experimented with by children till they have mastered them
- encouraged to be used in an appropriate way or their use be demonstrated if the children are ready for such instruction (eg. use of scissors)
- things included from nature or from the environment so that these materials help children understand the world around them.

Open-ended, process-focussed art activities require materials and tools to be appropriate and accessible. Schiller (1995) advocates both a variety of materials of good quality and lots of time for children to work on their art projects. All of the participants talked about a variety of materials, and the importance of them being appropriate for the children's age and for their developmental level. Dighe (1998) promotes a wide range of materials that give children the opportunity to experiment. Dighe also points out that children need sufficient time to explore a medium or material. Changing things too quickly does not give children time to express themselves through a medium in a satisfactory way. Seefeldt (1995) describes the Reggio way: "And children are never expected to move on to something new until they have exhausted their own ideas fully" (p. 42).

Two of the participants commented on when it was appropriate for the teacher to demonstrate a tool or direct an activity. Dighe (1998) agrees, and advises that there are times when teachers should demonstrate how to hold and use certain tools. This should be done in a matter-of-fact way without causing stress or frustration, so that "they have enough control of the media to be able to use them to express their ideas and feelings" (p. 8).

Both Schiller (1995) and Dighe (1998) suggest bringing things in from the outside that the children have collected to use in art activities. One participant indicated that bringing things from the outside helps children to understand where they come from and what their relationship is to the things around them. She used pine cones as an example. They can be used in painting, sculptures or pasting. Having found the pine cones under the pine tree, the children can look around and understand how they got there, why they are there and what their function is. As one participant explained, these adventures help children understand the things they see. Seefeldt (1995), writing about the Reggio schools, talks about children having such experiences, so that

they can observe, discuss, and come to a better and fuller understanding of things. Only then can children represent things in a satisfactory way. Seefeldt writes, "For an experience to be meaningful, children must act upon it, do something with it" (p. 40).

Sensory art activities have enormous value for children who are not emotionally or physically ready to progress to the next level. These children need more tactile experiences. The literature and the experience of all participants suggest that sensory art activities take time to prepare and arrange, and that children engaged in those activities fully enjoy and benefit from the experiences. Cherry (1972) gives practical instructions on how to successfully conduct a messy art activity such as finger painting.

Fourth Principle:
Children need to be engaged in group art activities which provide opportunities to develop social and cognitive skills.
The participants said that:

- open-ended group activities promote the development of all skills, especially social ones
- open-ended group activities should be readily offered to young children
- adults should ensure that the social interaction during group art activities is appropriate
- the group's art efforts should be properly displayed
- the teacher/parent should act as an observer and a facilitator
- collaging as a group activity is one of the best in promoting all aspects of development.

Group art activities, according to all the participants, should be open-ended. The participants described how children plan, organize and create their "masterpieces". As a group, 5-year- old children are more able to negotiate, discuss and create something complex than younger children. Edwards and Nabors (1993) indicate that children can produce marvelous creations if they can choose the topic and decide on the materials.

Edwards and Nabors also say that group activities are often successful with younger children. They recount how a group of 4-year-olds decided to recreate the story *Three Billy*

Goats Gruff by using hardwood blocks to make the bridges. Then they had to decide on the roles, the props, the costumes. These children enjoyed the whole activity, encompassing art, language, and cognitive skills; at the same time they were learning how to function within a group in a cooperative and friendly spirit. One of the participants gave many examples, not all of which could be recorded, of children acting out well-known stories or creating original ones.

Cherry (1972) describes a group art project where children used boxes to create a city. As one looked at the project, the following observation was made,"The result was a delightful collection of houses, buildings and cars" (p.171). Again the participants all talked about how social skills were practised and learning extended as children planned and organized art projects.

Children who are involved in group projects like to have their creations displayed. This gives them the opportunity to talk to each other, to a parent, to a teacher about their group art project. Great attention to children's art displays is the trademark of the Reggio Emilia schools. Displays often encourage conversation among children, teachers and parents but, as Seefeldt (1995) points out, care must be taken to ensure that each child's art contribution is valued and appreciated. The participants felt that displaying children's work validated their efforts and provided discussion material for other children or their parents.

Group art projects or activities require that children interact socially in an appropriate way. In their *Kindergarten Teacher's Manual,* the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (2000) includes a section on personal and social development with a page on social relationships. In terms of group activities some expectations are that children:

- act and talk in appropriate ways with their peers and adults during activity periods;
- demonstrate consideration for others by helping them (e.g., assist with clean-ups; help care for materials);
- share responsibility for planning classroom events and activities. (p. 88)

All of these were mentioned by the five participants. They made many references to group discussions and the cooperation/collaboration that goes on in an art project, as a valuable social and cognitive experience.

The teacher's role in group activities should be one of facilitator and of observer. Dighe, Calomiris, and Van Zutphen (1998) describe a situation in which a spider found in the classroom created such a great stir that 12 children were motivated to create an assortment of fuzzy spiders. The teacher in this story helped the children overcome their initial fear of the spider by encouraging the group to observe and talk about it, and then gave the children art materials to use and create a spider of their choosing. This experience provided an appreciation for spiders, acquisition of new information, an exchange of ideas, and a creative activity.

One group art activity, that of collage making, was repeatedly mentioned by the three educators as being helpful in developing all the readiness skills. As an activity it is open-ended and process-focussed, it allows for the use of a variety of materials and tools, it encourages cooperative work, and it requires a sharing of responsibilities and appropriate social interactions. All of these skills and more are listed by Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (2000) under creative activities (p. 92). Cherry (1972) also writes about the cognitive value of collage work.

Fifth Principle:
The role of the teacher or parent is to facilitate children's learning and help them to acquire school readiness skills.
The participants said that the teacher's role is:

- to provide activities that develop a child's full potential
- to observe, facilitate and apply diagnostic skills to promote development
- to have the ability to talk to children about their art
- to explain and inform parents about the value of art activities
- to know when children are ready to follow directions when working on art activities.

A teacher's role is to help children achieve their full potential. To do that, teachers and parents need an understanding of how children grow and develop. They need to have the ability to work in a positive and effective way with children. Engel (1996) talks about how teachers and parents need more direction in understanding and relating to children's art work. The Reggio schools' teaching staff strive to provide stimulating and appropriate experiences that extend to all areas of development through art activities. Seefeldt (1995) and Dighe, Calomiris and Van Zutphen (1998) attest to the special skills of the Reggio staff, their positive and nurturing approach to young children and to creating the environment needed to produce marvelous artwork.

> Stepping into the building, you wonder exactly where you are. Are you in an art museum? After all, everywhere you look splendid works of art are displayed. Perhaps, because of the abstract quality of the artwork, you are in a museum of modern art. But you are not in an art museum at all. Rather, you are in a city-run child care center of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy, acclaimed as one of the best preschool education systems in the world. (Seefeldt, 1995, p. 39)

Educators such as Seefeldt (1995), Engel (1996) and Dighe, Calomiris and Van Zutphen (1998) talk about the importance of a teacher's critical observation skills and the ability to apply those skills to extend learning into all areas of children's development. The artist participants expressed concern about who works with young children. This was of great interest to them.

The artists talked about the teacher's role as the facilitator, someone who could stand back and allow children to create. Again, the word they use in connection to teachers was "special." What interested me was that neither one of them felt children needed an artist for a teacher in order to have children create freely the things or emotions which are important to them. The literature supports this: Schiller (1995) and Cherry (1972) make reference to facilitators, as people who can set the scene and allow the children express themselves in their own way.

The teacher's or parent's role is also one of providing the appropriate materials to encourage, challenge and develop specific readiness skills. An adult's ability to talk to children and question them in a way that encourages growth and development is critical, and has great influence in shaping children's progress.

Engel (1996) and Oken-Wright (1998) both write about how to talk to and question children. Schiller (1995) states, "Children need many opportunities to look at and talk about art" (p. 34).

The three educators mentioned that teachers often have to help parents understand what is possible for children to achieve. This is not always an easy role for teachers. Reference was made earlier to art displays in a classroom which makes it easier for the teacher to discuss children's abilities. Kindergarten teachers should help and inform parents tactfully. McCain and Mustard (1999) advocate and stress the importance of involving parents in their children's preschools as a way of educating them about how children develop and learn.

The Kindergarten participant said that the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board has devoted a great deal of energy to helping parents understand and appreciate their children's achievements. This has been quite evident to her as parents, regardless of cultural origin, seem to value the art activities in which their children engage. She did say that some parents still had unrealistic expectations, but there has been a big improvement.

Sixth Principle:
Art activities need to be inclusive and involve children with limited experiences or special needs in successful experiences.
The participants stated that in order for all children to have successful experiences:

- teachers should ensure that art activities which include all children are available
- activities should be open-ended and multisensory to involve children with special needs
- certain art activities can be used to help children understand and follow basic instructions.

These were the premises about which the participants felt strongly. The inclusion of all children was considered a fundamental right. The literature supports the position that open-ended activities are critical for children who need to experience success, and that art activities with sensory experimentation are helpful and soothing. An adult's attention to and talk with children about their art is necessary and most helpful. Furthermore, Runco (1993), and Seefeldt (1995) both indicate that children with limited experiences must not be hurried along, but have time to explore and progress at their own rate to the next level or to another activity.

Seventh Principle:
Children in Kindergarten are ready for some direction in art activities but product-based art (recreating a model) has negative implications for children.
The participants said that:

- some children who are ready for reading and writing require some instruction in order to produce more sophisticated representation
- product-based art activities can be detrimental to a child's development
- children should be encouraged and exposed to explore various cultures.

Oken-Wright (1998) supports the educators in providing some specifics in terms of helping children develop writing skills. Letter recognition and letter writing require discipline and practice. Children who are interested in text reading and writing do not find this a taxing activity.

The participants all indicated that some art activities should have a component of directed work, as children who are entering first grade need to listen to a teacher's directions and be able to follow them. The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (2000) expects children at the end of Kindergarten to be able to "describe some aspects of visual art forms from a variety of cultures" (p. 97). If the authentic thing is not available, things can be created from picture books -- for example, things like masks, Inuit sculptures, or even totem poles. This activity is similar to the participant's account of the turkey with the dark brown body, and is considered open-ended because it does give children creative scope in their representation.

Dighe, Calomiris and Van Zutphen (1998) will use an object that acts as catalyst for children, and inspires them to create a piece of artwork. In Reggio Emilia schools, teachers go a step further, and model and involve children in a direct way to encourage better representations. Seefeldt (1995) claims that the Reggio teachers are not "neutral observers" (p. 43). Their involvement may be too direct for some educators. Nevertheless, the Reggio teachers would agree that a product-based art activity is detrimental to children's artistic efforts and, "undermines children's sense of psychological safety and demonstrates disrespect for children -- their ideas, abilities, and creativity -- more than anything else can" (Seefeldt, p. 42).

Comments and Reflections:

In writing this thesis I tried to demonstrate that art activities are effective and useful in helping children acquire the ability to express their thoughts and emotions; especially, those thoughts and emotions which really matter and are of importance to children. In order to represent with interest and pleasure, children need to have the ability to do so in a free and creative way. Only then will they be better able to acquire the necessary school readiness skills.

An encouraging fact is that it does not need to be a complex or costly exercise to provide art activities for children. However, art activities do require that adults have some time, patience, and an understanding and appreciation of children's "representations".

There are many well respected books and materials which describe children's art stages and would go a long way to help parents understand that particular developmental process. However, it should be pointed out that the participants did focus on the approach used when presenting art activities to children to ensure that they provide meaningful experiences and so, help children develop school readiness skills. The following points are offered as a summary of their recommendations:

- Talk to your children as they create and give them lots of positive feedback.
- Provide suitable materials of good quality and variety, and collect things from nature.
- Organize social experiences so that they can learn to share materials and responsibilities.
- Give children the freedom to create from their own experiences or from their imagination.
- Ask questions which extend the learning.
- Facilitate a variety of experiences for your children so that they can understand the world around them.
- Find out what the expectations are for children to be successful in formal school.
- Give children time and patience and understand that they will progress faster if you appreciate their developmental stage and encourage them in a positive manner.
- Offer some directions if, and only if, the children are ready and interested.

In terms of school readiness, Doherty's (1997) study addresses the issue of success in school. This success depends largely on children acquiring readiness skills. The above list gives parents some positive ways to help children acquire readiness skills by providing appropriate art activities. Doherty also points out that staying in school relates directly to success in life.

One educator believes that open-ended, process-focussed art activities can be used as a "lever" for children to focus on, feel competent in and good about "doing", because these art activities have no right or wrong way. Furthermore, positive experiences provide children with successful social interaction either with other children or with adults. Being able to have positive social interactions is an indicator of school readiness (Doherty, 1997).

Although the participants directed a greater part of their remarks towards teachers, most of what was said could easily be addressed to parents, including the fourth principle which has to do with group activities. Group activities require a greater effort for the parents; they would need to find other families who want their children to participate in social interactions. Art activities could provide useful and pleasant reasons for families to meet regularly. One suggestion, which is great fun for all, was for outings to parks or the country to collect treasures for collaging.

The two artists made the following key contributions, emphasizing two values. One

is the importance of having the right ("special") person working with children, and the other is the word "freedom". The word "freedom" and its interpretation is of great significance to the artists. For the artists, "freedom" is defined as the ability to create without restrictions. Applied to art activities, freedom allows children to come to terms with their own emotions and understanding. Denial of "freedom to create" for children can lead to unhappy and unfulfilled lives. The three educators and the literature uphold and support the artists' position. Parents who need more encouragement to accept the premise that children's art should be an expression of their own making, may be more readily convinced if the support comes from diverse voices.

The literature appeared to contain little that looked at open-ended, process-focussed art activities as a preventive strategy for children with limited life experiences. Children with deprived opportunities, who have emotional needs, poor language skills and who have difficulty interacting with other children or adults, all have needs which must be addressed before they can sit still and learn in a school setting. For example, children, who do not have the language skills to follow basic directions, lack a critical requirement for formal school. Unfortunately, children with this limitation in language and inability to understand the meaning behind the words find themselves lost and, on the road to becoming an irritating and annoying presence in the classroom. The future in formal school does not bode well for these children.

There are other issues which were briefly addressed in this thesis but certainly they would benefit from more attention and research. For example, both McCain and Mustard (1999) and Doherty (1997) make reference to the importance of nurturing children. None of the participants addressed this particular area, which surprised me. As this was a key concern in the literature, it would be interesting to research and explore how art activities could help children who have had poor "nurturing" in their preschool years.

The two participants who lived and worked in a multicultural environment were sensitive to cultural differences and reciprocal respect in the community. The Kindergarten teacher involved the children in her class in discussions about different cultures by using art activities as a way to capture their attention. For her, it was a way of familiarizing children with people of different ethnic origins. Although cultural awareness is touched on in the literature and by the participants, this topic of teaching acceptance and respect by engaging children in art activities could benefit from more extensive research. It is a particularly timely issue as the demographics are indicating that Canada is becoming a very diverse country.

There were few references in the literature to group activities, their function and relationship to school readiness. More research in this field would be helpful, as group art projects were so highly valued by the participants, and were promoted as an excellent way to help children cultivate all the skills but especially, social and language skills.

This thesis only deals with one aspect of enriching and encouraging developmental growth in children. It is supported by the participants, by the literature and by personal experiences. However, the opinions expressed by the educators tend to be areas which most of us overlook, in particular, the power of talking to children about their artwork. Engel's (1996) list of questions is helpful for anyone seeking a way to begin this dialogue with a child. The only thing I would add is a short visual depiction of the stages children progress through in their art.

One limitation to the study concerns the interpretation of the term "school readiness". Even school districts differ in opinion regarding when children should acquire certain skills, so children enter formal school at different ages across Canada. Kagan (1992) tackles the dilemma of understanding the term "school readiness". She makes a distinction between "readiness for school" and "readiness to learn" (p. 48). She defines the two terms as:

"Readiness for school sanctions a fixed standard of physical, intellectual, and social development sufficient to enable children to fulfill specific school requirements and to assimilate the curriculum" (p. 49). Whereas, the term "readiness to learn" she defines as, "Unless exceptional problems exist, almost everyone of any age is "ready to learn" something new and worthwhile" (p. 48). This study relied mainly on the former term; as used by Doherty (1997). Kagan (1992) also suggests that there are different interpretations for the term "readiness". She brings to attention that in education there is an ever constant evolvement, or a search for, a "readiness" term which is more acceptable and less rigid. Kagan predicts that "readiness future" will still consist "of five essential domains" (which were referred to and were the basis of the questions put to the participants in this thesis), although, she states that these five domains "need greater amplification and specificity" (p. 50). Hopefully, the term "readiness" will become a more inclusive, flexible and fluid one and this will be reflected in the schools and communities not only in philosophy but in practice. However, the term "school readiness" is still questioned by educators and needs to be clearly defined.

In conclusion, I want to return to Larissa. I wrote this thesis because my child had great difficulty adjusting to school life. It seemed to me that no child should feel a failure at such a young age. Schools should be more than places where children are measured against certain rigid standards. They should be places of learning and joy. For Larissa that learning took place because she had a creative outlet ... something that made her happy, something that meant a great deal to her. Surely, we can ensure that every child has the capacity to express themselves in ways that are meaningful for them. For Larissa art activities were the vehicle which provided her with many happy experiences; and for me, her experiences were significant and revealing to observe, and the motivation in part for this thesis.

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Appendix A
Educator

June 30th, 2000

Dear Participant,

I am currently working on my Masters in Education at the University of Prince Edward Island. My field of interest is preschool education and my thesis and research question is "How can art activities/experiences be most effectively used to develop readiness skills?"

The significance of school readiness is well documented. There are a number of current studies Zero to Six: the Basis of School Readiness, (1997) Reversing the Brain Drain: the Early Years, (1999), that correlate school readiness and transition into formal schooling. The studies point out that a successful "transition is a determinant of later academic success and positive social and emotional development. Children who are successful in grade one are socially and cognitively prepared to learn. They are able to concentrate, work in groups and solve problems and they see themselves as learners with the foundation required for further literacy, numeracy and social development" (What Determines Health? 1996, p. 9).

The importance of art in a child's life is also well documented. The literature review looks at the art activities that promote large and small motor skills, self esteem and creativity, ability to work cooperatively, to talk about their art in age-appropriate language and to display a certain proficiency at representing the world around them.

The study will blend the two issues together. It will explore how art activities can be most effectively used to develop school readiness.

The research study is qualitative in design. I hope to interview people like yourself, who have the expertise and experience in this field. I am enclosing the readiness skills and the questions I will asking you. The skills listed for the five basic school readiness requirements are there to help focus the answers. In total I will require four hours of your time. I hope to do two interviews. Each session will be no lomger than two hours. I will be audio-taping the interviews and taking notes. At the end of each interview an informal review of the session will take place. I need to ensure that the information is understood and recorded accurately.

There are no risks or benefits for the participants. Nor will you be identified at any time. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without explanation and without any negative consequences. The only requirement is that the research questions be answered honestly and to the best of your ability.

All the information will be kept confidential, and none of the participants will be identified in any future presentation or in the dissemination of the data.

I am including two copies of the consent forms, and I am enclosing a self addressed stamped envelope. Please return one consent form to me as soon as possible.

I would be most grateful to you should you consider participating in my research study. I do feel your expertise in the field is valuable.

Sincerely,

Chrystyna Holman

Appendix A
Artist

June 30th, 2000

Dear Participant,

I am currently working on my Masters in Education at the University of Prince Edward Island. My field of interest is preschool education and my thesis and research question is "How can art activities/experiences be most effectively used to develop readiness skills?"

The significance of school readiness is well documented. There are a number of current studies Zero to Six: the Basis of School Readiness, (1997) Reversing the Brain Drain: the Early Years, (1999), that correlate school readiness and transition into formal schooling. The studies point out that a successful "transition is a determinant of later academic success and positive social and emotional development. Children who are successful in grade one are socially and cognitively prepared to learn. They are able to concentrate, work in groups and solve problems and they see themselves as learners with the foundation required for further literacy, numeracy and social development" (What Determines Health? 1996, p. 9).

The importance of art in a child's life is also well documented. The literature review looks at the art activities that promote large and small motor skills, self esteem and creativity, ability to work cooperatively, to talk about their art in age-appropriate language and to display a certain proficiency at representing the world around them.

The study will blend the two issues together. It will explore how art activities can be most effectively used to develop school readiness.

I am asking you to participate in this study because you are an artist with an interest in children. There are two questions that I would ask you to answer.

1. Can you define art for a person who works with young children?
2. What meaning should "art" have in a child's life?

I hope to do the interview in one, two hour session. I will be audio-taping the interview and taking notes. At the end of the interview an informal review of the session will take place. I need to ensure that the information is understood and recorded accurately.

There are no risks or benefits for the participants. Nor will you be identified at any time. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without explanation and without any negative consequences. The only requirement is that the research questions be answered honestly and to the best of your ability.

All the information will be kept confidential, and none of the participants will be identified in any future presentation or in the dissemination of the data.

I do require you to sign a consent form that outlines the participants obligations. I am including two copies of the consent forms, and I am enclosing a self addressed stamped envelope. Please return one consent form to me as soon as possible.

I would be most grateful to you should you consider participating in my research study. I do feel your expertise in the field is valuable.

Sincerely,

Chrystyna Holman

Appendix B

Statement of Informed Consent

I,_____, agree to participate in the research study on, "How can art activities be most effectively used in developing school readiness skills?" This research study is being conducted by Chrystyna Holman, a Masters of Education student at the University of Prince Edward Island. The information she collects will be used for her Master's thesis.

The aim of this study is to indicate art activities that develop school readiness skills. Recent studies have documented that the acquisition of school readiness skills provides children with the opportunity to succeed in formal schooling and in life, by developing positive social and emotional skills.

I understand the study involves two, one and a half hour interview sessions. The interviews will be audio-taped and Chrystyna Holman will also take notes.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and if I wish to withdraw from the study or to leave, I may do so at any time. I do not need to give any explanation or reasons for doing this.

I understand that all the information I give will be kept confidential, and the names of the participants will also be kept confidential. I understand that Chrystyna Holman is the only person with access to the data.

I understand that I can reach the researcher, Chrystyna Holman at 892 5165 or her research supervisor, Dr. Graham Pike at 628 4304 at any time to discuss this research.

I understand that I will not receive any benefit for participating in this study. Any questions I might have about the study or my participation in it, will be answered by the researcher. I understand that I may keep a copy of this form and return the other.

I have read and understand this information and I agree to take part in the study.

_____ _____

Today's Date Your Signature

_____I wish to have a copy of the final results.