Creating a Children's Art World:
Negotiating Participation, Identity, and Meaning
in the Elementary School Art Room

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Abstract

Art making has been theorized as a way for children to develop the capacity to participate in social and cultural transformation. Yet, little research has been done to examine the role of art making in children's development as participants in society. This study used ethnographic methods to investigate children's art making in elementary school. Observations took place in one elementary school art room for one academic year. Children were interviewed, in small groups and individually, about their art making activity. In the art room, the children were found to be creating a community of art practice. This community of practice had implications for how the children were developing as participants within the community, and for how they made their school art making into personally meaningful activity.

Introduction

A persistent tension in democratic education is whether schools should socialize young people to reproduce the existing social structures, or prepare them to be agents of social reconstruction. The current education policies in the United States claim to oppose social reproduction, using strict accountability measures to ensure that traditionally poor performing groups improve their academic achievement and thereby leave school on equal footing with students who traditionally perform well. However, by aiming to "raise the bottom" in a limited range of academic subjects, this policy promotes instruction and curriculum that leaves children unprepared to address challenging social problems and create change in their communities. Educating children to transform their social circumstances requires not only ensuring equal academic achievement, but also providing experiential learning that develops "the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder" (Dewey, 1923, p.115).

As Dewey articulated almost a century ago, schools in a democracy must pay attention not only to *what* children are learning in school, but also *how* they are participating in school. Participation is at the heart of the democratic process, and students' development as participants depends on whether they are taught to submit passively to the superior knowledge of an authority figure, or to contribute to the production of knowledge with their school community. As suggested above, the question of how children should participate in school persists, and some theorists argue that children are not even true participants in the context of today's schools because they have no influence on how knowledge is developed and shared (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The tension between these different ways of participating in school is an important contemporary social justice issue. The children who most need the capacity to create social change are the ones in school contexts where passive submission is the primary mode of student participation. Their experience as submissive participants—or non-participants—in school does not prepare them to be full and influential participants in society beyond school. The study reported in this article originated in the need to better understand how children's *participation* in school can be maximized in the direction of preparing them to be full participants in the shaping and transformation of their society.

Many arts educators and scholars have argued that the arts are an area of the curriculum that prepare young people for full participation in a democratic society and develop the capacity for social and cultural transformation. The arts are believed to teach children to "think critically, act constructively in an informed manner, and collaborate in the conscious formation of personal and communal identities" (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004, p. 824). Theorists argue that the arts develop the awareness needed to build a just democracy (Greene, 1995), and that through the arts, children learn to participate in democracy by exploring and representing the self using socially constructed signs and meanings (Gude, 2009). The arts in

education have been described as "cultural activism" (Fishman, 2004, p. 66) because they enable children to assert their personal experiences as culturally valid. In the art room, students can take on roles such as artist, critic, and audience, and in these roles collaborate to produce shared cultural meanings out of personal experiences (Sullivan, 1993).

The arts, then, have been theorized extensively as an important way that children can learn to participate in the transformation and co-creation of society. What is less understood is how the practice of art making in school leads to such outcomes. Research on the role of the visual arts in school often centers on the academic implications of arts participation (Fiske, 1999; Hetland & Winner, 2004). Some research has investigated different approaches to art curriculum that might promote cultural meaning making, including the integration of the arts with other subjects (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2001) and visual culture education (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). However, there is little in the existing research that examines how children participate in art making in school and how it might prepare them to participate in society beyond school. This study aims to fill this gap in the research by investigating the question: How do the visual arts, as practiced in a school setting, prepare children to participate in culture and society?

Learning to Participate: A Sociocultural Theoretical Frame

This study is grounded in ideas that originate with Vygotsky's theories on learning and activity. Vygotsky's work focused on both the arts and children's development, and produced two lines of theory that, integrated, form the theoretical foundation of this study. First, Vygotsky's work on the arts has been developed through the study of creativity by examining his notions of internalization and externalization of cultural symbols and meanings (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). Through the processes of internalization—the appropriation of existing cultural meanings and symbols—and externalization—the creation and expression of new symbols and meanings—the individual and culture are mutually transformed.

Because this study is concerned with children's development as *participants* rather than as artists, the focus shifts at this point to another line of work that has evolved out of Vygotsky's theories—the constructs of activity systems and communities of practice. In an activity system the learner is an individual who uses instruments (tools, language, media) to act upon some object of interest, such as a problem, experience or idea, resulting in transformed cultural knowledge and social practice (Engeström, 1993). The unit of analysis in the activity system is action as it occurs in social activity, allowing for understanding to emerge about how the individual develops in relation to the historical development of the activity system. In terms of the elementary school art classroom, this suggests an investigation of children's art making as it occurs within the broader art world and the culture of school. Analysis of action within an activity system enables the investigator to observe the relationship between individual

development and the transformation of the social and cultural context, and thereby can illuminate the developing participation of the individual within that context.

The *communities of practice* construct is related to activity theory, but differs in its emphasis on learning as it occurs in social participation (Wenger, 1998). In a community of practice, participants adapt their skills and knowledge to the activity, while at the same time contributing to the knowledge of community and transforming the practice of the community. The transformation of both the individual and the community is referred to as learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In a community of practice, newcomers are considered *legitimate peripheral participants*—novices who are learning how to participate in the practice of the community, but through their participation have a role in the ongoing transformation of the practice. This study examines the elementary school art room as a community of practice, in which children are participants in the intersection of two activity systems—the school and the adult art world. The communities of practice construct enables an analysis of children's participation in the intersection of these two activity systems, and focuses the analysis on the participant identities that children develop in the art room.

Hedegaard (2009) elaborated a related model for the study of children's development. She argued against traditional developmental approaches to advocate for the study of development within the school setting, such that "the practice of the societal institutions and the activity of the person are the keys—persons are participating in and creating activities that realize and contribute to the institutional practices that society provides while also contributing to changes in society" (p. 65). Her framework recognized that children influence the institutional setting and practices of their school, and therefore their development should be studied in the relationship between the perspective of the child and the practices of the institution. This framework bears a strong resemblance to the theories just described, but adds the important element of the child's perspective in relation to the practices of school. The child's perspective reveals the motivations, experiences, and responses to what is encountered in the school setting. It is an important aspect of the theoretical framework of this study because how a child participates will be determined by their motivations, experiences, and responses to the setting.

The Present Study

In this study, I observed children's art making activity in school through a sociocultural lens to examine they ways they participate in that context. Through this lens, the art classroom is viewed as what Cole (1995) referred to as the mesogenetic scale—the level of culture that includes but is limited to: the children, their actions within the classroom, their interaction with teachers and other children, and their functioning within the system of school rules and expectations. This scale was used to examine how children shaped a community of art practice within the delimited culture of one art room over the course of a school year. The

children's participation in that community of practice was observed in their social interactions, use of artifacts, and artwork, as well as in how they engaged with the school while they made art in art room. By focusing the analysis on how children developed a community of practice, I examined how their art making in the art room consisted of actions and interactions that might shape their identity as participants in ways that address the research question: How do the visual arts, as practiced in a school setting, prepare children to participate in culture and society?

Methods

Site

This research took place in Haven Elementary charter school.[1] In a city notorious for failing public schools, Haven is a place where creativity and possibility thrive. The mission of Haven is to develop youth into educated and involved citizens through community and environmental programs, and the arts are a central feature of that mission. Haven had about 150 students in grades K-5 during the year that this study took place. The population of the school was about 65% African American, 15% White, 8% Latino, and 12% multiethnic and/or other ethnicities. About 80% of students received free or reduced lunch.

Haven students took two visual arts classes and one performing arts class every week, and participated in an arts integration session every week. The visual art curriculum was developed and taught by Ms. Murray, a veteran art teacher, who loosely based her curriculum on the Studio Habits of Mind framework (Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2007). Studio Habits of Mind proposes that the arts teach eight different thinking dispositions, and Ms. Murray focused her instruction on two: observation and engage and persist. Unlike a typical art curriculum at the elementary level, but more true to how artists work, Ms. Murray usually allotted several weeks to each project. She felt that spending time on a project was more educative than completing more projects over the course of the year.

Participants

Each classroom teacher was asked to help select three or four students from their class to participate in a focus group interview. Students were selected for their interest in art making and likely interest in talking about art. In the small group interviews, I learned more about their art making and willingness to participate in interviews. From these small groups I selected 14 children for case study. Children were selected for case study based on the criteria of having a group that was diverse in gender, ethnicity, age, and artistic interest. The 14

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[1] The names of the school and all participants have been changed to protect confidentiality.

children who were chosen include four first graders, two second graders, four third graders, one fourth grader, and three fifth graders. They were six girls and eight boys, and ethnically they represented the school's diversity. Some were avid artists who often worked intensively on art projects, while others were less interested in art and did little more than complete school assignments and occasionally draw at home.

Data Collection

Field observations.

At the start of the school year, the art teacher introduced me to her students and explained that I would be spending the year with them to learn about their art making. Throughout the year, I observed six art periods per week, and each first through fifth grade class was observed at least once per week for one or two semesters. While they made art, I sat at the tables with the children and spoke with them about their work, asking questions such as "Can you tell me about your picture?" "What made you change your mind about that?" And, "How did you get that idea?" Observations focused on the things that reveal art making as a social and cultural activity. I looked for interactions among students as they made art, noted their conversations as well as the instances when they used artworks and art materials to create a social interaction. I noted how they used materials in their art making, and how they developed and altered their artwork in response to the social and cultural environment of the art room (Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1999). Finally, I took note of how they influenced each other in their art making. I observed how they responded to instruction, how they handled art materials, and how they moved around the art making space. In the art room, I was able to observe projects over time, and I watched and noted as their art evolved from one day to the next.

Interviews.

To gain further insight about what was observed in the art room, I interviewed some children about art and art making. First, I conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with three or four children at a time, for a total of 26 children. In these focus groups, I asked the children broad questions about art and art making, such as: "what is art?" "What kind of art do you like to do?" and, "where do you make art?" These open-ended questions were intended to get a discussion going among the children, so that they would be responding not only to me, but also to each other. Artifact-based and photo-elicitation methods were also used to get at their understanding of their own processes in art making, what it meant to them, and what the experience was like for them. Artifact-based interviewing gets the interviewee to tell the story of how they created something by having them describe and respond to the thing that they created (Barron, Martin, Roberts, Osipovich, & Ross, 2001). Using this method, I asked the children to select an artwork from their portfolio and describe how they made it, how they made certain decisions along the way, and why they chose it over the other pieces in their

portfolio. With photo-elicitation (Collier, 1967), I asked the children to look at photos of themselves making art and describe what they were doing, what the assignment was, and what the other people in the picture were doing.

Then 14 children selected for case studies were interviewed once or twice at school in addition to the focus group. Interviews were conducted in the unoccupied art room during lunch or after school. Four of the children were also interviewed at home, so I could speak with their parents and observe them making art outside of school. In the interviews they were asked questions about their art making, such as: What are some things you like to make art with? Do other people at your house make art? Some questions were about abstract topics related to art making, for example: What is imagination? Again, they were shown their own artwork and photos of themselves making art and asked to describe in more depth what they saw. Finally, they were asked to choose one of several different art materials, such as markers, oil pastels or watercolor paints, and make a picture using that material. They were asked to talk out loud while they made the picture, to say what they were thinking and describe what they were doing as they made decisions about the picture. All focus group and individual interviews were audio recorded, and individual interviews were professionally transcribed.

Artifacts.

Throughout the year I took photos in the art room that documented how Ms. Murray used the space, how she provided materials and information for students and displayed their artwork. I also took photos of children making art and interacting with each other while making art. The photos captured children's handling of the materials, their expressions as they were working, and interactions among children as they worked. The photos of their artwork captured the work in progress and documented how some things changed as they were being made. The children's artwork and photos of children making art were used for artifact-based interviews with the children, as described above, in addition to being analyzed as data.

Data Analysis

To make sense of the wealth of data that resulted from a year spent immersed in the practice of the art room Haven elementary, I analyzed the data in two coding phases. First, I used open coding to identify themes that emerged from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I looked for patterns in the data to see what factors were important to children's art making, and developed the patterns into an emergent coding structure. Second, I applied a theory-based coding method (Miles & Huberman, 1994), using the theoretical framework to devise indicators and then searching for those indicators in the data, in order to prove or disprove the relevance of my framework to children's art making. Each of these two coding phases is described below.

Emergent coding.

In the first phase, a random sample of four interviews and five field notes were read with an eye to finding patterns and ideas that seemed important to how the children engaged in or talked about art making. From this sampling process, a list of emergent codes was made that reflected the patterns and themes that were identified. For example, one theme that emerged was social interactions that took place in children's art making. In the art room, children were constantly interacting with their classmates and the adults who were there as they made art. Their interactions were usually verbal conversations, but might also be physical interactions with the art materials acting as mediator. Sometimes the interactions were about the art making that was taking place, while other times it was about unrelated topics such as upcoming holidays, current happenings in the children's lives, or favorite T.V. shows and movies. Often, the art making conversation and non-art conversations were intertwined, revealing how their interests and other aspects of their lives got integrated into their art making.

As I coded the social interactions it became necessary to distinguish two different types of activity. *Social interaction* emerged as a code to capture interactions among the children as they made art, and the code *context of art making* was used to capture instruction and interaction with materials. The distinction between these two codes became important for understanding how children responded to different aspects of the social and cultural environment as they made art, and how those different interactions and contextual factors shaped their art making.

Theory-based coding.

For the second coding phase, codes were derived from the theoretical framework, which defined learning and art making as a sociocultural learning process. To arrive at these codes, I started with high-level categories that were pulled from the theoretical framework, such as "indicators that art is a meaning making activity," and "indicators that art making causes social and/or cultural transformation." I then looked to the sample set of four interviews and five field notes for behaviors that indicate how these abstract categories could be observed in children's art making. Indicators that could be observed with reasonable frequency were maintained for this analysis, while those that were rarely observed were excluded. The set of codes listed in Table 1 are those that resulted from this process and were used in this analysis.

The two theory-based categories that were used for this analysis were integrated with the emergent codes of *social interaction* and *context of art making*, which revealed how ideas and approaches in art making were influenced by the children's interactions. The following

analysis explains how the children individually and collectively negotiated with the school context to make the art making process meaningful for them.

Table 1: Theory-based Codes

Indicators	Codes (Observable Behaviors)
Indicators of new or transformed understanding, knowledge, concepts	• Child talks about new discovery or coming up with new ideas in/through art making • Child revises work mid-process in a way that shows a new way of thinking about what they are doing • Child transforms a concept while manipulating materials • Child learns about something through art making • Novel solutions to given problem
Indicators that art making activity among children changes or adapts as a result of how each child participates	• Copying, spread of ideas or methods, and deliberate rejection of copying • Group work that diverges from the assignment • Group work that looks different in each group but coheres within the group • Child talks about influence from peers and siblings

Results

As the children made art in the art room they simultaneously participated in two very different but overlapping activity systems: the adult art world and school. In the adult art world, children are peripheral participants at best. They use the artifacts and methods of adult artists, but they rarely impact the practice of the adult art world. As participants in school, children do impact the practice of the community, but their experience is similar to that of non-participants. They are objects of instruction more so than participants in a practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this section, I argue that through the negotiation of these two different activity systems within the art room, children develop a community of practice that provides them with a distinctive experience as participants. Within the art room community of practice, children participated as full members, shaping the art making practice of the community as they learn how to be participants.

Being in School

Participation in any community of practice is determined by rules, norms and expectations. In school, the rules are largely established and regulated by the teacher, whose instruction provides the context for children's participation. In the art room at Haven, Ms. Murray played a large role in determining how children would participate in art making based on the instruction that she provided. She set firm boundaries to the children's art making so that they could stay on track with her learning goals. Because the school provided arts integration for all students once per week, the children also received arts instruction from their classroom teachers, who were even more firm in establishing boundaries on students' art making. For example, fifth grader Jamari complained that a drawing he made for art-science integration was rejected by the classroom teacher because it was "off topic," and fifth grader Naima objected when her teacher exercised too much control over her work on an energy conservation poster that she was making for science integration: "Mr. Newman made me change my slogan and it's terrible. . . . He always changes your ideas and makes it his own." These students experienced school as a system that inhibits their art making and expression.

The teachers themselves are participants in an activity system where they are simultaneously agents who create the system and are objects produced by the ongoing activity of the institution. They make and enforce the rules that children must follow, but they do so based on the expectations established by the institution of schooling. Haven was an unusual school, but a school nonetheless. Teachers there had more input into how the environment was structured than at most schools, but because it operates this way, the school also must prove that its students can meet academic standards. Mr. Newman may have been responding to this pressure when he changed Naima's poster. The school itself is caught up in the negotiation between being a rule-bound institution and being a place where children develop through their learning and creative activities.

Being in the Art World

Another system was at work shaping the children's activity in the art room— the activity system of the adult art world. Art world practices were, for the most part, introduced by the art teacher, who provided materials and resources that are used in adult art making. Ms. Murray set up the art room with the familiar paints, brushes, clay, paper and scissors that artists use in their work, and taught her students how to use the materials like real artists. She taught them how to knead and roll clay, techniques for cutting shapes out of paper, and how to see new potential in recycled materials. Students were expected to rinse brushes carefully like working artists, and use language such as "analogous colors" and "self-portrait."

Following is a descriptive account of the negotiations that took place in the art room between the rules of the school context and the expectations of the art world. This analysis demonstrates how the children enforced the rules and expectations of the two systems, and how they responded when the rules and expectations conflicted with their art making goals. It is then used to explain how this negotiation process shaped children's participation in art making.

Enforcement and Critique—Rules in the Art Room

Ms. Murray was very clear about the learning goals that she wanted students to accomplish with each art project, and therefore set strong expectations through her instruction. For example, for much of the year her lessons were about observation, and she was explicit that students' artwork should reflect what they see. When drawing a skeleton that she had set up in the art room, some students included features such as hair and eyes. "Do you see hair?" She would ask, directing students' attention to the skeleton. When her classes made self-portraits she insisted that they represent only what they see in the mirror, "Look at your skin color before choosing the color of paper that you should use. Which color is closest to your skin color?" Some projects integrated very specific expectations with creative opportunities for students, such as an assignment to "paint anything you want using analogous shades of a single color." Occasionally, Ms. Murray expressed acceptance of creative response, for example when a child integrated three-dimensional elements into his collage, she told the class "He's a pioneer, discovering new ways for us to try."

More than any other teacher in the school, Ms. Murray straddled and integrated the two institutions that are described in this section. She spoke about how she saw her role in negotiating between the structure of the school environment and the creative permissiveness of the art world:

> I make people as they become part of society. They have to speak for themselves and express and advocate for themselves. But there are also social norms and behaviors in an educational setting and that kids need to function in when they leave school. . . . Sometimes my learning objective is not being met because they're exercising their preference for hearts and ponies. But sometimes I realize that I'm not going to win and this five-year-old is making something and is excited about making something.

On the one hand, she was a teacher, caught up in the same institutional demands of all teachers. On the other hand, she was an artist, and recognized the importance of those moments when her students were excited to be making something that mattered to them, even if it meant that her instruction was ignored.

When asked whether they should follow the instructions or their own artistic desires in the art room, all children said that they should follow the teacher's instructions: "We should always listen to the teacher and I just obey her rules." Observations in the art room confirmed this attitude, and children explained their artistic decisions with statements such as, "I did it all one color because Ms. Murray said we have to do it all one shade of color." The children not only followed the instruction themselves, but also tried to get their peers to stay within the boundaries as well, either by enforcing the rules or critiquing others' artwork. *Enforcement* is a school approach in that it is how children follow rules and also regulate the activity of the classroom so that everyone around them is working in accordance with the expectations of the classroom. *Critique* is an art world practice in which informed viewers align an artist's work with art world standards through critical commentary. Critique is a form of criticism that specifically addresses an artwork as it is in progress, and is aimed at altering the work as it develops (Soep, 2000).

On many occasions, children were heard enforcing the teacher's instruction with each other, such as when a third grader reminded her classmate, "You're only supposed to work with one color." They also enforced instruction through critique of their classmates' artwork, such as when third grader Davon told a girl, "That's not blue, that's ugly with yellow in it. You made a wrong color." Sometimes the recipient of the critique changed their work, but other times it was an opportunity for the child to assert that they were deliberately not following the rules. When first grader Javier told Rahsaad that he forgot to include a mouth and ears on his self-portrait collage, Rahsaad responded, "I don't want it." Rahsaad is operating within the bounds of two institutions simultaneously, and in this moment he is referencing the authority of the one that serves his artistic needs at the time. They want to do what the teacher tells them, yet they also understand that art making allows for and even demands agency and creative expression.

Children enjoyed learning and participating in the art world practices that Ms. Murray taught them, and liked to exhibit their art knowledge. While working with clay, first graders chanted "pinch and fold, pinch and fold," demonstrating that they knew the correct terms and techniques for using clay. Children helped each other to conform to art world practices through critique, as when first grader Deandre reminded Tania how to use clay properly, "Don't push it into the table so hard," and rule enforcement, as when second grader Nick scolded Saira about her misuse of the paintbrushes, "You're not supposed to use the brush like that, you'll ruin it."

In striving to enforce art world expectations, children also enforced cultural norms, such as expectations about what images should look like based on images from their culture. They

enforced cultural norms through critique, such as when first grader Tyree looked at Deandre' self-portrait collage and said, "Boy earrings don't look like that, they look like this," and gestured a curve around his ear with one hand. Children also critiqued their classmates' work when it did not conform to observed reality, and made suggestions to guide them toward creating art that looked like things really look. Second grader Obi described his painting of a tree to his tablemates, "These oranges fell to the ground," and Omar complained, "They're not orange." Obi responded by reminding Omar that the instructions were to use shades of one color only, "I have to use all green." Obi understands that oranges are orange, however, he is put into tension by the conflicting guidelines of the teacher's instruction, which demand that he use only one color in his painting. And while Obi was negotiating the demands of those two institutions, Omar was similarly choosing to favor one over the other by critiquing him.

In the art room, the children strive to follow the rules, and also try to get others to cohere to norms and expectations. However, even as they aim to align with the requirements of school, they face conflicting expectations from the art world. As they negotiate the expectations of these two institutions, they give structure to the art practice that is taking shape among them.

Breaking the Rules—Building a Community of Practice

In the art room, the children did not always reinforce and uphold the institutional rules and expectations. They often redefined the norms by breaking the rules, experimenting with assignments, and using art materials in ways that didn't conform to art world practice. In this way, their art activity reflected the goals, interests and knowledge of individual members. When these variations were accepted and reinforced by other children through copying or words of approval, they became part of the children's community of art practice.

Experimenting with, and bending, the rules.

Ms. Murray taught her students about using the materials, methods and resources of the adult art world, but the children did not always use those materials and methods as instructed. Sometimes, children were simply incapable of using the materials or techniques as instructed. At other times, however, students diverged from what they were taught in order to integrate their own ways of working. They showed that they could learn and use the techniques as instructed, but also experimented with the materials in unexpected and playful ways. Sometimes this playful approach took the children far from the assigned task. While working on a group assignment to create a terrarium out of art materials, first grader Tania, supposed to be making rocks out of clay, rolled and folded her clay as she was taught, but then stopped to look at it and started reshaping it by poking holes and manipulating it carefully with her fingers. Then she announced, "This is a potty. See, this is how you close it, and this is the handle." At another table, three boys were rolling the clay as they were instructed, but then

noticed the different things it could be made into. "This is a candy cane," said one boy, "No, it's an old man," said another, and pretended to use the cane as a walking stick.

Art making in the art world often requires that the artist bend or alter the rules in order to create something innovative, creative or meaningful. This is in conflict with school culture, which requires that children follow the rules in order to be successful. The children at Haven said that they wanted to follow the teacher's instruction, but also wanted, like artists, to manipulate the rules in order to make the project into something that would be more meaningful for them. Some children were simply defiant and did what they wanted to do. Fifth grader Jamari, a talented artist, said that he always tried to follow the instructions, but often ended up disregarding what Ms. Murray asked him to do. On one occasion he started making a background for his self-portrait, although Ms. Murray had asked him not to: "If you've already started making a background, you need to tear the paper like I showed you to make it look nice." Jamari rolled yellow tissue into balls and asked if he could glue them to the background instead. "No," she replied, but when she walked away he glued the tissue balls to his collage anyway.

In that example, Jamari already had in mind what he wanted to make, and was trying to get the teacher's approval before doing it. He had the confidence to trust his own artistic decision-making and to step outside of school expectations to realize his artistic needs. Others were less certain about going beyond the bounds of instruction, but still did so. When making paintings using analogous shades of one of the colors they had learned how to make (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet), some third graders wanted to use colors that were not among those six. Uncertain about varying from this requirement, but wanting to faithfully render his videogame player, Nasir asked, "Can I use black for mine?" Stephanie used brown for her painting because it was a color her mother had taught her how to make at home. This inspired other kids in her class to experiment with mixing colors beyond the six that they were asked to use, resulting in several paintings with brown, tan and gray.

Art materials invite exploration, but in a school setting there are typically guidelines that must be followed for using materials. These children tested the boundaries by going beyond the prescribed understanding of how the materials should be used. In a setting where the usual expectation was that children should solve problems with specific techniques and within expected guidelines, they create conflict when they choose to experiment with the materials instead. When children go beyond what they are a being taught, they challenge both the school context and the art world in ways that put them in a new context, that is, a community of practice in which they have a say in reshaping the practice.

Negotiating the boundaries.

The children were inclined to push beyond and outside of the boundaries of instruction, to make their art making activity into something more pertinent to their ideas and interests. They did so not only by challenging how they were taught to use techniques and materials, as described above, but also by altering the assignments in ways that made it more meaningful for them. As will be seen in the following examples, students negotiated with Ms. Murray to change a project, tried to explain why their way of doing the assignment was better, and ignored her instructions in favor of doing something more in line with their artistic interests.

When Ms. Murray announced that they would be making a painting of their favorite toy, students responded by searching for ways to make the project more relevant to their own lives, and when one child asked a question, another would follow up with a slightly different question:

> "What if I don't have a favorite toy?"
> "Does it have to be a toy I play with now, or can I do one I used to play with?"
> "Can it be something that I play with that isn't a toy?"
> "What if the thing I like to play with is not a toy, but my friend?"

This questioning led to paintings that went well beyond the assignment of painting a toy. Kenya painted a yellow rectangle on her paper, "I don't have a favorite toy, but I love to play with it. It's a swing!" Both Obi and Frida made pictures of trees that they like to climb. Omar's painting was of his friend, "This is a person I play with that I like. I like to play kickball with him."

On other occasions, the children tried to negotiate with Ms. Murray about the boundaries of an assignment. Ms. Murray assigned the first graders to make a person collage, and emphatically reminded them that they should use realistic skin color to make it look like a real person. First grader Caleb made his person's skin out of bright yellow paper, and when Ms. Murray asked him why, he explained that he was making the character General Grievous from *Star Wars*. "You're supposed to be making a person," she reminded him. "Well, it is a person; it's a ghost," Caleb argued. She told him that wasn't acceptable and asked him to change it. Caleb continued with his collage, and at the end of class Ms. Murray came by again. "I thought you were going to change it to a person." He negotiated: "It's a robot-person. It's like a person, but it's a robot of the person."

While Caleb was negotiating with Ms. Murray, Dominic had taken up his idea and was making his own General Grievous collage. As Caleb had done the work of negotiating with Ms. Murray, Dominic was able to follow in his footsteps with fewer repercussions. Like an

artist adopting the style of another artist who blazed the trail before him, Dominic validated Caleb's variations on the assignment and established them as acceptable within the children's community of art making, even though they were not acceptable to the teacher. At another table, Jackson announced that his collage was of a Cyclops. He argued, like Caleb, that his collage represented an acceptable variation on a person, and he proudly showed it off to the class. While Caleb negotiated to have his ideas accepted as reasonable variations on the assignment, Jackson tried to persuade the teacher that he was doing what she asked.

Each for their own reasons, these children challenged or dismissed the teacher's instructions in their art making. Caleb was caught up in processing and expressing his fascination with a movie he had recently seen; Dominic was following the model set by one of his peers in his art world; and Jackson was playing with variations on the human form to come up with something different yet still within the bounds of the assignment. They are being artists, participating in a way that would make them successful in the art world, but was considered inappropriate within the school context. The borderland where school and the art world intersect is a tricky place, where young children must navigate the demands of two different authorities. In other subject areas, this might result in failure. However, in the art room, Ms. Murray is confronted by the demands of the art world, and therefore must consider another authority. Can a student's artwork be deemed "wrong" because it didn't follow the rules, regardless of how creative or artistically skilled it is? Ms. Murray is in the borderland with her students, negotiating the demands of each and determining, moment-by-moment, which will take precedence.

Among children in the art room, divergence from instruction was sometimes approved—such as when a child copied another child's variation on the rules—and sometimes rejected, usually through vocal disapproval of a classmate's art making. Through this ongoing process of questioning the boundaries, trying out variations, and approval and rejection, the children at Haven shaped a community of art practice that transformed school art making into an activity that reflected their artistic interests. They learned what was instructed, but went beyond instruction to adapt the tools and techniques that they were learning for their own meaning making activity.

Discussion

The dichotomy of "control vs. freedom" is a recurrent theme in the research that examines learning in elementary school as a sociocultural activity (Rogoff, Turkanis & Bartlett, 2002). It explains how children can develop agency in their learning when the classroom environment necessitates teacher-imposed order (Rainio, 2008). Looking into the art room at an elementary school, this study explored a similar problem, but focused on how the nature of art making as a creative, self-expressive, and meaning-making activity put the ordered aspects

of school into particular tension. The tension between classroom control and art world innovation resulted in a distinctive community of art practice among the children, of which they were full participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This discussion focuses on the children's community of art practice as a context for developing participant identity, and how the participant identity enabled the children to transform school art making into personally meaningful activity.

Developing Identity in the Children's Community of Art Practice

The children at Haven created a community of art practice in the intersection of school and the art world by introducing new art making methods and ideas into the art room, and by reinforcing the variations on art making that their peers introduced. They incorporated these variations into the practice of the art room by expressing approval, copying each other's work, and building on each other's ideas. This was unlike the typical school context, in which children are objects of instruction who follow along with activities but have no role in shaping or creating the practice of the community (Wenger, 1998). In the art room, the children played active and central roles in determining what the practice of their artistic community would look like, and by doing so, developed an identity of participant with the capacity to determine the shape and direction of the their social and cultural world (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

As participants in a community of practice, the children at Haven played a significant role in shaping a culturally meaningful activity. Identity that arises from participation endures beyond the context of the activity (Wenger, 1998), thus the participant identity that the children developed—the identity as someone with the capacity to shape, influence, and create cultural practices—could potentially be sustained beyond the art room. These findings add to recent research demonstrating that arts education can contribute to children's development as participants in a democracy. For example, arts education appears to help children develop the social responsibility and social trust necessary to a democratic society (Albertson & Davidson, 2007), and also enhances social capital and improves children's capacity to build social networks (Buys & Miller, 2009).

Making Meaningful in the Art Room

People participate in social and cultural practices as a way to make life meaningful (Wenger, 1998). Meaningfulness exists not in the individual's mind exclusively, or in the cultural world, but at the intersection where individuals engage with their culture in order to make sense of their experiences in the world (Bruner, 1990; Little, 1993). The theoretical frame called for learning about children's development by analyzing the children's perspective along with the context and activity. In this study, the children's perspective reveals the intentions that they bring to their art making in school, that is, how they make it a personally meaningful

activity. The notion of creating meaning in relation to one's culture is often thought of in terms of what Vygotsky (1978) called internalization, and is described by one art educator as "drawing on, rearranging, reformulating, remaking existing shared, socially constructed meanings" (Gude, 2009). However, beyond internalization of cultural meaning is the need individuals have to extend personal meaningfulness into our culture. Exerting personal meaningfulness into the cultural sphere is how we gain a true sense of self as full participant in the creation of society and culture.

The children in this study transformed the art making activity in the art room in ways that made it more meaningful for them. They transformed art assignments into meaningful activity by redefining the rules, either individually or collectively. Did this happen because rule breaking and experimentation are inherent to art making? Or because art making is an important meaning making activity for children? The evidence suggests that both factors were at play; they recognized that art making requires transformation and variation, and at the same time, they adopted art making as an important way to make their learning more personally meaningful. They used art making to tell stories about experiences they had, express their identity, imagine new possibilities for themselves, and develop new understanding about things that were important to them. In doing so, they were not "consumers of learning" in the art room, but creators of learning (Lobman, 2010, p. 207); creating a learning community that has a culture built on what is meaningful to them.

This study contributes to the growing body of research supporting the view that the arts provide an important way to integrate students' personal meaning with their experience in school. For example, the arts offer a means for young people to inscribe the self in curricular texts that otherwise would not be open to personal meaning (Smagorinsky, 2010), and the arts create a "third space," where students' integrate their lived experiences with school learning and make personally meaningful connections to the curriculum (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005). Related to the findings of this study about the visual arts, research has shown that drama education can disrupt the power dynamic between teacher and students, enabling children to engage more deeply in the classroom (Aitken, Fraser, & Price, 2007). Together, these findings build the important case that the arts are not only valuable in how they support learning in non-arts subject matter (Fiske, 1999), but also how they enable children to create meaningful connections to school and the curriculum. As these findings suggest, art making is potentially an important way for children to not only make meaningful connections to school, but to develop an identity that empowers them to assert personal meaning in their social and cultural world.

Limitations and Future Research

This ethnographic exploration of one art room yielded insights about children's participation in art making that provide an important foundation for future study of art making in school. However, because this study examined the very particular context of one art room in one elementary school, it is not clear what aspects of the context resulted in the findings about art participation presented here. Follow-up research should compare how children's art making experiences vary, and do not vary, in different settings. Furthermore, while this study found that children developed the capacity to transform their community of art practice in the art room, further research is needed to better understand how this relates to participant identity formation that extends beyond the art room.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to gain some insight into how art making in school might prepare children for participation in society. In the art room at Haven, children learned that art materials and methods are not fixed to the specific application of a teacher-directed project, but are malleable and can be adapted to personal artistic intentions. As they adapted the activity of the art room for their own intentions, the children developed a distinctive community of art practice, and in doing so, appeared to be developing identity as both artist and full participant. By examining the community of art practice that emerged in the interaction of school and the art world, some insights were revealed that suggest the role that the arts might play in developing children as participants in society. The art room is a place where this learning and identity formation can take place in large part because it provides the space for students and teachers to negotiate what is important in art making, and pursue art the way real artists do: as a personal and cultural meaning making activity.

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