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Christopher M. Schulte
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Peter Webster
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Eeva Anttila
University of the Arts Helsinki

Mei-Chun Lin
National University of Tainan

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Once a Year...

Pat Tarr
University of Calgary, Canada

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Abstract

Taking the form of a personal letter, this work recounts and describes the collaborative scholarly efforts between colleagues over their careers.

Dear Tina,

I raise a glass to you as colleague, mentor and friend to congratulate you on your retirement. Welcome to the club! Raising a glass conjures up memories of the many glasses we have raised in the hotel bar following our presentations at National Art Education Association (NAEA) conferences over the years. This was not always easy to schedule, given the many roles and presentations you have had at every conference. In the following, I want to highlight the important part you have played in my career and to provide a glimpse not only into our own areas of research but also into the changes and trends in the field of art education for young children through the NAEA panel presentation we have shared along with others.

Once a Year, we met at the NAEA conference. Over that time period we have presented together on 19 panels that focused on issues in early childhood art education. We first connected in 1989 at NAEA in Washington, D.C. because of our shared interest in young

children and our developing interests in young children's social interaction in art experiences, and the how Vygotsky's social constructivist theory might inform art educators working with young children. I was still a graduate student at the time and presenting my first individual paper so you were one of my first professional connections, along with Annette Swan, outside of my local context. Tina, you were presenting your significant piece, "Michael Doesn't Like My Dinosaurs" (Thompson & Bales, 1991).

The following year, we reconnected in Los Angeles at the *International Early Childhood Creative Arts Conference* where Lilian Katz was one of the keynote speakers. She introduced images from a mural project from Reggio Emilia and we were amazed at the detail and sophistication of the drawings by pre-school age children. "How did they get those children to do that?" was the key question we pondered over post-session discussions. Literature was just beginning to appear about the preschools in Reggio Emilia (e.g. New, 1990). The evolving work from these Italian preschools and our deepening understanding of the Reggio philosophy has had an immeasurable impact on the work we have done individually and together.

In 1991 at NAEA in Atlanta, we met with others interested early childhood art education to discuss the mixed messages being presented about appropriate art experiences for young children. This meeting proved to be the genesis of a strong early childhood art educators' community within NAEA and the impetus for proposing annual panel presentations that have included three or four presenters each year (Tarr, 2010). The goal was to present examples of high quality early childhood art education that linked theory and practice. The annual scenario would begin with a flurry of emails a few weeks before submission deadline. Who wants to present? Who will submit the proposal this year? How many are you submitting? What common work do we have this year? What is the conference theme? Then drafts circulated. Panic just before submission, I need your member number, or phone number or... Done! Breathe. Once the proposal was accepted, we independently developed our 12-15 minute presentations. In Tarr (2010) Tina commented,

The remarkable thing was that, year after year, our presentations turned out to be cohesive and complementary. It so often turned out that we were reading the same texts and coming to similar conclusions and questions in the contexts of our research and teaching." (p. 280)

Through the years, the panel members changed and have included museum educators, academics and classroom teachers. Liz Cole and Claire Schaefer from University of Toledo and Toledo Art Museum, Marianne Kerlavage, Annette Swann, Pam Krakowski, Linda Louis, and Sayward Wilkinson Blanc have contributed their perspectives to these panels through the years.

Tina, thank you for being a coordinator for a conference on Early Childhood Art Education at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana in the fall of 1992 and hosting me in your home. It was significant because I was able to present my doctoral work just prior to my thesis defense. This experience gave me an understanding of how my work fit into current research in the field and confidence for my oral, as well as deepened our friendship.

Since then you have brought rich images of young children from Saturday School to our NAEA panel presentations that have explored the balance between voluntary and directed art experiences for young children (1993), examined and challenged the pervasive notion of young children's artistic developmental stages, irrespective of social or cultural context (1994), the museum's role in art education for young children (1995) and international perspectives in early childhood art education based on my experience in Japanese kindergartens and your work with children from diverse cultures attending Saturday School. (1996). The NAEA conference in Los Angeles in 2000 was a significant year because it was the official beginning of the Early Childhood Art Educators Special Issues Group (ECAE). Our panel focused on "Early Childhood Art in a New Millennium: Rent Past and Future Directions. Panels became increasingly influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education beginning in 2002 when we discussed "New Concepts of the Child as influenced by Reggio" and we returned to the question of artistic development in 2003, "Is Development Still Relevant?, asking the question, What understanding of children's art can we construct in place of stage theory?"

In 2004, the ECAE developed a position statement *Art: Essential for Early Learning* that was adopted the following year. This led to a panel based on this position paper, "New Visions: Art for Early Childhood" in 2006. Closely related was our 2010 presentation, "Living the Vision: Art Education in Troubling Times" in which we examined the importance of the arts in the lives of young children at a time when early education tended to focus more and more on literacy and early academic skills. We followed this up in 2011 with "Art, Play and Interaction: Supporting Creativity and Imagination Across the Curriculum", again to counteract academic pressures in early childhood education and highlight the importance of an arts based approach for young children.

In 2007 based on our overlapping interests in bringing pedagogical documentation (Rindaldi, 2006) as underpinning the work in the pre-primary schools in Reggio Emilia to our contexts of working with student teachers. Based on the recognition of the importance of collaboration in pedagogical documentation, we explored how we might do this through an on-line environment. We developed a paper for the AERA Arts and Learning SIG on "Documentation across Borders: A Collaborative Project through On-Line Conversations". This exploration opened up ethical issues of who could have access to what information, an important aspect in

research guidelines and privacy concerns. We continued this work when you were on sabbatical and researching in a Head Start Program and presented the challenges and benefits we encountered as we looked at the images and transcripts that you collected through our on-line conversation. We presented our experience at NAEA as “Pedagogical Documentation in an Online Environment” in 2009.

In 2009, we reflected back on the importance of professional networking within the NAEA, in “Tangled Threads: Professional Networking and the Personal Lives of Women in NAEA”. We reflected on the close personal and professional relationships that we had developed with members of the ECAE that had provided support, mentoring and intellectual challenges that were inextricably woven together with our personal lives and connections.

More recently we have explored the role of technology with young children, “Children as Innovators: Re-Envisioning Technology in Early Childhood (2014) and in 2015, we revisited the relationship between holding a strong image of the child and quality programs, “Designing for Quality: Keeping the Image of the Child in Mind.”

Over the past two years we have collaborated with Angela Eckhoff and Marissa McClure to write “Defining Quality in Visual Art Education for Young Children: Building on the Position Statement of Early Childhood Art Educators” that was recently published in *Arts Education Policy Review* (McClure, Tarr, Thompson & Eckhoff, 2017).

Our work together has come full circle. Among your many publications, you edited *The Visual Arts and Early Childhood Learning* (1995) that included my first book chapter, “Preschool Children’s Socialization through Art Experiences” and are now co-editor with Christopher Schulte, of *Art, Play and Aesthetics in Early Childhood* to be published by Springer that contains, what I suspect will be my last book chapter given my retired status, “Dancing Rainbows, Naughty Rainbows: Reflections on Teaching, Learning and Researching in the Arts with Young Children.” I am thrilled that this piece based on an experience with my granddaughter has found a home. I think it provides a metaphor that addresses the direction my career has taken.

We began our professional journey through a shared interest in the social context of young children’s art making almost 30 years ago at a time when the literature focused exclusively on an individualistic developmental perspective. Your work and our presentations over this time has both challenged and supported my own inquiry into implications of the Reggio Emilia approach for North American early childhood art educators. Our work with student teachers led us to consider how to support collaborative conversations around documentation. We have considered the social and physical environments that support young children in their visual

expressions and have revisited our image of the child. Over this time, your graduate students have become part of our NAEA conversations the ECAE community and have moved into leadership roles well situated to continue the research into early childhood art education.

Tina, I lift my glass to toast you with my very best wishes for this exciting next phase in your life (and there is life after retirement) and heartfelt thank you for the roles you have played in my academic journey as a mentor, colleague and friend.

To you, Christine Marme Thompson!

Cheers,
Pat

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