

How old do you have to be to be an artist?

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What an honor it is to be selected as the 40th John and Betty Michael Distinguished Lecturer in Art Education. It is gratifying to know that my contributions to the field of art education might stand out in some way as unique and important. When I think of my time in the field, I think first of those events and encounters that have made my professional life so satisfying and currently make retirement so difficult to embrace. I have been privileged to find this profession and to live this life. My great thanks to Professors Stephanie Baer and Stephanie Harvey Danker for arranging this visit, and for carrying on the tradition of gracious collegiality that John and Betty Michael lived.

What is remarkable about John and Betty Michael's vision in instituting this series of lectures, beyond their recognition of people who have found their own way to contribute to the marvelous hybrid that is art

education, is their belief that, just as programs are people, so is a disciplinary field, particularly one such as ours that often feels like a small town, with its own shifting cast of characters. I am immensely comfortable in that environment, and have loved (almost) every moment of being an art educator. When I was younger, I was amazed at how quickly news traveled, even to elders who I had not officially met, including Professor Michael, who, learning of my interest in the Lowenfeld lectures, sent me a set of tapes and offered to supply copies of his book for University of Illinois students enrolled in Theories of Child Art. (He did also tell me that Betty wanted them out of her garage!) This was not the only time I received a phone call or email or letter from a distinguished member of the field who had heard of a project I had undertaken through the grapevine and extended an offer of resources or background. I was fortunate to enter the field at a time when such graciousness was common.

The title of my lecture this evening is borrowed from the children of Room 13, a unique and now international program, which brings elementary school students and artists together in school-based studios where children go to work on self-initiated projects when other assignments for that day are complete. I visited a Room 13 with my friends and colleagues Vickie Grube (who now buses around Boone, NC, in a portable studio she calls *Vroom 13*) and Marissa Sweeny when we were in England for a conference. The day we arrived, the children who served on the board of the organization met to establish rules for the year just beginning, to determine how to order supplies for projects still in the planning stages, and to monitor the participation of those who abused the privileges granted in the space. The artists who spent the afternoons with them in the space were present and involved, as adults and fellow artists. The respect for children evident in the project and the practice we observed was palpable.

Over the course of a long career, I have circled back again and again to some version of this question: How old does one have to be to be an artist? What do we teach when we teach art? How do children experience art and education in their lives in and out of school, and what can we learn from them about childhood and art, teaching and learning? These have not always been the most fashionable questions, but I believe they are the heart of art education.

Paul Duncum wrote that it is the responsibility of art educators to be experts in the arts and advocates for children, a summary that reflects his own enduring commitment to real live three-dimensional children.

Most art educators who wind up in higher education begin their careers, as I did, teaching in K-12 schools, seeing hordes of children for very short periods of time, working with limited resources, high expectations, and unreliable support. For five years in the 1970s, I taught 750 children each week in the small town of Tipton, situated

halfway between my own small hometown and Iowa City, home to The University of Iowa where I eventually earned my graduate degrees. The previous art teacher, the last in a sequence of five to have stopped by the district for nine short months before moving briskly on, had submitted an order for nothing but 144 half pan watercolor refills, all yellow, and a few reams of newsprint, extra flimsy. I rolled a cart from room to room (some newly carpeted) in the elementary school and met each class K-4 for thirty minutes per week. At the middle school, in my newly repurposed classroom, painted Pepto Bismol pink in honor of the new female art teacher, I saw fifth and sixth graders for forty-five minutes each week, and eighth graders for two hour-long sessions at the end of each day, Monday through Thursday. It was every bit as crazy as it sounds.

Although I grew up in a small Iowa town, similar in size and demographics to the town where I moved to teach, there were harsher

realities waiting to greet me. As Bill Ayers points out, young people in small towns and impoverished urban neighborhoods share many of the circumstances of their lives: too little to do or to hope for, too much frustration and too few rewards, and, perhaps worst of all, proximity to others whose lives more closely approximate versions of the good life represented in the media. While most of the children in town were well off, active in sports and music, high achieving and bound for college, another contingent, living in town or in the villages clustered around the Cedar River several miles away, were poor, minimally supervised by adults outside of school, and marginalized in a thousand small ways within its halls. Add to this the presence of every child in the county diagnosed with what was then called “multicategorical” special needs, and the fragmentation of the school population was complete.

By winter break, I was ready to admit defeat. But then I met the man who very soon became my husband, a first year teacher himself, with

whom I shared students and stories. His social studies classroom presented far fewer managerial challenges than an art room, even one with no materials to speak of. But his brilliance as a teacher, even in his first year of teaching, kept me from going under, helped me to envision different ways of dealing with the vertiginous differences between the band and non-band sections—read: wealthy and poor—of eighth grade that made planning a ludicrous enterprise; and, most importantly, laughed with me over the exploits of the *Welcome Back, Kotter* spinoff that unfolded daily in my classroom. We bonded over the “appealing and appalling” (Burman) students we shared, and he helped me hang two art shows that spring.

I learned so much from those children, every day. Staying in place for five years, I came to know every child in the community, and had the great privilege of watching them grow. Perhaps this is why the label of “special”—so often assigned to art, music and physical education

teachers—is not entirely ironic: We do become the constants in children’s lives, the people who are there as they transition from one year, one school, to the next, who knew them when. In a small town, that privilege extends well beyond the end of the school day, with preschool neighbors waiting for me to arrive home, drawings carried to church or the grocery store to bestow upon me, declarations of “I saw you last night,” following any encounter out and about. I continue to be grateful to and for the hundreds of children who taught me how to teach.

I stumbled into graduate school for the least noble of reasons: I was really bored. I simply could not endure one more summer with little more to do than eat Watergate cake and kill plants purchased on shopping trips with my fellow teachers. And so, living only 40 minutes or so from Iowa City and The University of Iowa, I decided to begin taking classes toward a masters degree. I knew so little then about

universities and the ways they work. I signed up for a course called Child Art Seminar, taught by someone named Marilyn Zurmuehlen. The morning the class began, I found myself lost in the Art Building on the shores of the IA River, without a clue as to where the classroom might be nor how to find that information. As I sat at the entrance to the interior bridge connecting what would soon become familiar wings of the building, a tiny woman balancing a towering stack of books happened by. We made eye contact, and I asked her if she knew where I might find Ms. Zurmuehlen. I realize now how that form of address must have rankled—she was Dr. Zurmuehlen or Marilyn, thank you—and she could be a tad prickly! But she and fate smiled upon me, and I found my mentor and, soon enough, my field.

I raced home over back roads every afternoon that summer to spend glorious hours reading the history of art education in the great books written about children, by Lowenfeld and Golomb and Kellogg and so

many others. After three years of teaching (and two tedious summers of kaffee klatsching), I saw what was happening with my students, and especially with the “tatty little drawings on notebook paper” (Wilson) that they brought in every week to adhere to the sides of my desk. I had been fortunate enough, in teaching myself to become an art educator, to gravitate toward drawing activities in those early years of teaching, to become an adept practitioner of the Lowenfeldian technique of verbal motivation, helping children to activate passive knowledge through guided visualizations. In a telling exchange, one of my students asked, one day, “Why do you always ask us questions we already know the answers to?” I had to confide that I actually was doing that by design. I was proud of the work my students did in paint or collage, but I loved their drawings. That summer, I produced my first primitive slide show, illustrating the stages of development through the work of my elementary principal’s sons and their great friend Eric, interspersed with additional locally-sourced images.

The boys whose work featured most prominently in that early presentation later prompted the questions that lead to my masters thesis. During my fourth and fifth year of teaching, I took one graduate class per week and two each summer. (My fellow teachers liked it best when I brought back stories from life drawing classes: they could not imagine me sitting for hours in a room with nude models, much less chatting with them during breaks!) The tremendous advantage of reading theoretical texts through the lens of the ongoing lived experience of teaching more than compensated for late nights, unpredictable commutes, and busy weekends. In the spring of my fourth year of teaching, money became available from the federal government to endow existing programs for gifted and talented students. My school had no such provision, but our principal decided that we should quickly cobble something together so that we could apply for funding the following year. Along with several other teachers, I

was asked to initiate a gifted class, just whoever I thought might benefit from such a thing. Well, obviously, the principal's sons would be included (legitimately, they were amazing and prolific artists) and their friend Eric. But who else? With no means of identifying students beyond our hunches, discussions ensued in the teachers' lounge that continue to haunt my dreams. Is so-and-so gifted, or just weird? My own dilemma only worsened as time went by: What *was* the difference between the children I had selected to stay for an extra session and special projects and those who lined up to return to their classrooms, wistfully regarding the children who were allowed to stay behind? The next year, as Eric moved to the middle school across town, I encountered another disturbing side effect of the identification of a child as gifted. The undisputed class artist since I met him as a first grader, Eric aggressively rejected all things artistic the moment he hit middle school. This child, who once filled notebook and after notebook with incredibly detailed dinosaurs marauding across prehistoric

landscaps and excelled at every project throughout elementary school, now complied grudgingly with assignments, consciously trying (and often failing) to fulfill them as haphazardly as possible. He violently rejected the thing that had always been his defining passion, trading it for a largely unrequited devotion to sports as if he had forcefully put away childish things.

Appalled and fascinated, I decided to see what I could find out about gifted children and their identification, hoping that there would be something more substantial to it than semi-snarky conversations in the teachers' lounge. During the year of sabbatical I had been granted by my school district, I returned to the elementary and middle school to interview children I had taught who identified themselves as especially interested in art. (Eric was not among them). I asked the kids to bring in three of their best works, and sat with them as we discussed their engagement in and outside of school. The office staff were mildly

appalled that some of the children I interviewed were among their most frequent visitors for less benign encounters. I did not find it at all surprising, knowing that school was not always the place where children's greatest strengths are manifest.

I have not explicitly addressed the issue of giftedness in my subsequent research, but finding and supporting children and youth who are magnetically drawn to art is undeniably a central preoccupation, and an inexhaustible joy, for all art educators. The children who shine in any classroom are those who, for one reason or another, have chosen art as a leading activity. Many years later, the mother of a student in a preschool Saturday class told me that he often woke up in the morning, saying, "I need to draw." And, she said, "He means it: He *needs* to draw." These have been the children who have taught me the most over the years about what art can do for children and how deeply it matters to them. How old do you have to be to be an artist? Not very old at all.

As my year as a full time masters student drew to a close, I realized I was not ready to return to the classroom. I loved research as much as I loved teaching, and I was completely hooked on this field and the discussions and readings that could be had within it. We had moved to Iowa City for the year, while my husband taught in another small district outside the city. The decision to stay was easy. And stay we did. It became an annual ritual to be asked by the staff in the School of Art & Art History if I had gotten tenure yet!

My doctoral experience was nothing short of remarkable. When Brent Wilson, Steve McGuire and I wrote about the program at Iowa for James Comer's book on the history of doctoral programs in art education, I noted the advantages of being a doctoral student in a program with only two faculty members: We amassed a great deal of independent teaching experience, and we roamed freely across

campus, taking courses in virtually every part of the university and bringing back news to share in the basement of North Hall. Seminars continued informally, all hours of the day and well into the evenings, in the repurposed Lab School shop area that was Art Education. The doctoral students formed a fluid community that to this day continues to resurface periodically. We grew old(er) together in that space, painted “art education green” with accents of acid purple and cobalt blue, a space clearly defined as our own. I have tried to recreate that camaraderie and intellectual support in the graduate programs that I have chaired since leaving Iowa, some years more successfully than others. I realize what a rare and delicate thing it is, how easily the balance can shift toward competition and conflict, and how important it is for graduate students to have relationships that tie them to the world of light and air and laughter and support.

My mentor Marilyn Zurmuehlen was a relentless scholar and artist, a unique presence in our field. I was astounded that first summer in her Child Art Seminar when some question or another would come up, and whatever it was, Marilyn would quote chapter and verse of 6 studies that had been done to support or contradict or answer that very question or something closely related to it. She was a voracious reader of everything, from academic texts to her weekly New Yorker to children's books. There were TV shows she loved. She was in close contact with her graduate school friends from Penn State, but they were not allowed to phone when her favorite shows were on. She worked late into the night to the company of David Letterman. She loved frosted brownies and freshly squeezed lemonade, the color turquoise, and her little nephews and niece, who became famous through her stories. Her graduate students knew all these things about her.

Marilyn was just discovering phenomenology when I began graduate school, and it was not something she shared directly with us. But as graduate students, attuned to her every mood and eager to follow her nimble intellectual journey, we began to read the texts she mentioned in passing. It took some detective work. She was always light years ahead. But we found our way into phenomenology early in the 'eighties, and were among the first in our field or in education in general to produce qualitative dissertations. In retrospect, her encouragement to undertake this work and to do so with confidence, in the face of a well established prevailing paradigm, was inspiring.

I read and wrote a great deal, in dialogue with Marilyn. This sense of education as dialogue was very much the norm among the professors with whom I worked most closely, particularly those who served as members of my committee. By the time I wrote my dissertation, in fact, there were things that I could take for granted that all of my readers

would understand. Like many doctoral students, I had struggled to master the language of academia to the point that my dissertation was less than entirely comprehensible. I have worked to reverse that. To cultivate a style of writing that is accessible and concrete, aware of Marilyn's suspicion of "compounding abstractions," with a sense of audience and a particular sensitivity to the multiple audiences that art education serves.

I stayed at Iowa for 7 years after I left my teaching position. I would have stayed forever had the funding not evaporated. I loved it there. Everything was accessible, we were close to our families, and our son was thriving. We had taken full advantage of the luxurious affordance of graduate school to spend the most time possible with him, alternating our writing time so that one or the other parent was with him most of the week; my youngest sister, living a block away in married student housing, filled in on mornings when we both taught and one evening

each week. But the natural order of things prevailed, as it must, and I began to look for jobs. My husband and I had decided when we both returned to graduate school that whichever of us found the best job first would determine where we ended up. The other would find something to do. There were not many openings that year in art education, and I figured that my husband, with a dual degree in Elementary Social Studies and Language Arts would be far more marketable.

But there was an opening at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I was reluctant to apply. I was a dyed-in-the-wool phenomenologist, a descendent of the line coming through Marilyn from Ken Beittel. George Hardiman and Ted Zernich, I knew, were hard core quantitative researchers, no nonsense in their approach to research (and nothing but nonsense in the rest of their lives!) Marilyn had insisted that George come to hear me speak early that year at a

conference in Urbana; he had commented. "She's good. Now if you could get her to do something serious." I thought that we were intrinsically incompatible and did not want to take on that struggle. But George insisted. He called me virtually every day leading up to the application deadline. This was 1984...there was one phone in the department, and it rang upstairs at our staff assistant's desk. This meant that she had to answer the phone and slog downstairs to my office to tell me, "It's George, again." Every day, for months. He would tell me that the job at UIUC was the best damn job in the country and I really needed to apply. Every day, for months. I finally relented. And I was hired. In fact, I was hired to do a different job than the one I had interviewed for, my first introduction to George and Ted's ability to make things come out right, no matter where they had been heading in the first place.

One of the great difficulties I faced in moving to UIUC was that I was no longer teaching in the same context that I had been at IA, and therefore unable to continue the research I had begun there. My dissertation was about becoming art teachers, and their reflections in dialogical journals during the nine weeks they were engaged in Saturday Art School, an intensive early field experience that I supervised for the last five years I spent at Iowa. There was a much larger and more elaborate version of that program at UIUC, but it was the longtime responsibility of my new colleague James Marshall, and a responsibility that George and Ted recognized as counterproductive for a tenure-track faculty member who was expected to publish a lot. I did not really know where to go from there in terms of the research that I had grown to love. I taught primarily in the undergraduate program, elementary and early childhood methods. A huge component of those courses was children's artistic development; another was studio practice for elementary education.

It took a couple of years for events to converge toward a solution. My son was then in Kindergarten, and I volunteered to work in his language lab, where the children wrote stories on huge, clunky computers in invented spellings. The stories were then printed out, fortuitously leaving huge margins available for illustrations. Because the big clunky computers were few and the children many, parent volunteers were recruited to conduct other language learning activities with the children who were not directly engaged in writing or drawing at any given moment. I was astounded by the richness of the drawings the children appended to their stories. It was as if Lowenfeld's motivation were turned inside out and personalized, with the children activating their own passive knowledge and bringing to the fore vivid exciting images with far more interaction and variety than typically characterized drawings by children of this age. At about the same time, several students entered the masters program at UIUC with strong backgrounds

in early childhood education. They were assigned as teaching assistants in the kindergarten section of Saturday Art Classes, and transformed the format entirely. For the first time, I allowed my child to enroll. (I had previously felt that the early childhood classes were too rigid and regimented and far too cute, infatuated with the smallness of children and their innocence). This was a grittier version that I could get behind.

I began to hang out in Saturday School. It became an addiction. When Jim Marshall retired and left Champaign Urbana for a new life in Florida, George and Ted brought in a former masters student and local teacher, Sandy Bales, to teach and supervise Saturday School. We eventually became neighbors, at home as well as at work. Sandy was an ideal steward of the program, always excited by new ideas, ready to try and to tinker with innovations, with an incredibly well tuned sense of pragmatics and values. As my fascination with Paul's experiences with art at home, in his day care, kindergarten, Saturday School and

elsewhere, continued to grow, I began reading in language arts education, where exciting things were happening in terms of the writing process approach that seemed to both involve and inform our understanding of children's drawing. I was particularly taken with the work that Anne Haas Dyson was doing with children drawing and writing in journals, and the social interactions that occurred as they practiced their work in classrooms. I asked Sandy if we could try giving sketchbooks to our preschool and Kindergarten students in Saturday School and setting aside 15 minutes at the beginning of their hour and a half sessions to simply let the children draw whatever they want in their own books. She was more than willing to try (and later to extend the practice to all age levels). The result from the beginning was nothing short of magical. Such a simple invitation opens worlds for children. The best things in life are ridiculously simple. My father knew this, as well as anyone. He conveyed to his children the importance of sunny days, a mild breeze, and a few hours in a sailboat. And so sketchbooks:

Spiral bound clutches of blank paper, ideally with covers of cardstock for durability and privacy, presented with the most basic of tools and instructions, a space for children to draw whatever they wished. Within them, the most astounding things occur. Practice, bold moves, explorations, false starts, fully blown explorations occurring over time, declarations of identity and interest, consolidation of personal styles of thinking and drawing. Around sketchbooks there is even more happening: Drawing as a spectator sport, peer tutoring and influence, the sharing of what matters, disclosures, revelations, forays into the social world. Sometimes there are stories to be inscribed, labels to append. Always, there are accompanying gestures, sounds effects, external speech, performance, inclusion of others in drawing events. Since we began using sketchbooks in Saturday School many years ago, they have topped my list of recommendations for teachers. They seem too good to be true, too simple to work. But they are, first of all, typical of good early childhood practice, of open-ended materials provided for

children to explore. They provide space and time for interested adults to learn about and from children. They have traveled with me and taught me so very much about children drawing and the thought processes that occur as they do.

Ten years ago, concerned that my enthusiasm for sketchbooks might be somewhat biased, given that I had seen them work their magic almost exclusively in and around the rarified university communities where I lived and worked for much of my career, I spent most of a year of sabbatical, drawing in sketchbooks with preschool children in the Chicago neighborhood of Pilsen at Guadalupe Reyes Children and Family Center, part of the larger community organization, EL Valor. The children I worked with were 3 and 4 years old, most of them bilingual, virtually all of them second or third generation Mexican immigrants. We drew together once or twice each week, and their drawings were, if

anything, more wonderful than those I had witnessed in Saturday art classes.

For the past 30 years, I have written primarily about young children and the work they do as they draw together in classroom settings. I can't begin to count the times I have received the reviews of a manuscript with a note saying that what I have written does not pertain only to young children or early childhood education. I believe very strongly in "trickle up" education, that not only does early childhood education boast clear advantages in the relative freedom from regulation and testing/performance anxiety it boasts, but also that much of what we can learn from young children applies in slightly different ways to learners of all ages. One of the most exciting discoveries I made was that young children when they are drawing tend to narrate their thoughts and actions, sharing their thinking with the ether. An attentive adult can listen and respond and become part of the assemblage that

accomplishes a drawing. In fact, the drawings themselves, charming as they may be, are only the barest traces of a much larger and more complicated process. So much of children's drawing is performative. Capturing even a bit more of the unfolding drama through rich description is a constant and exciting challenge.

I have been fortunate throughout my career to work in teacher education programs that support Saturday art schools as part of their curriculum. As a doctoral student at Iowa and many years later as a Professor at Penn State, I was in charge of these complex programs which involve both the creation of curriculum by beginning teachers, and observation of those teachers working with children and youth. At UIUC, I was first a parent and then a groupie and researcher in a program that was administered by others, except for a few years when the classes were taught by early childhood majors as a kind of school within a school, which I supervised along with music education faculty.

At Penn State, when I arrived in 2001, the Saturday Art Classes that began in the time of Lowenfeld were on hiatus due to increasing competition for children's activities on Saturday mornings and flagging enrollments. We began again tentatively, but were soon keeping waiting lists and filling classes before noon on the first day of registration. I loved everything about Saturday School (except perhaps the greeting "Have a good weekend" on Friday mornings, when I realized that more than half of my teaching week still lay ahead!) Blending my interests in teachers and children, in curriculum and pedagogy, in mentoring and community, this was the class I most loved teaching. When colleagues and friends asked, as they often did, why I was still doing that, why I had not passed on that responsibility to younger faculty, all I could say was that I was hooked on the energy of all those children flocking in to the building on Saturday mornings ready for adventures ahead, all those young teachers experiencing the highs and lows of unexpected events, finding their way into teaching. I miss it profoundly.

Each of these experiences increased my fascination and respect for children. I began with a very thorough grounding in the history of developmental theory in our field, a great respect for the close attention paid to children's drawings, and a fascination with the charming oddities that seem to crop up regularly as children teach themselves to draw. But the more time I spent with children, my own and others, the less reliable and the more partial those explanations began to seem. I saw children doing things they were supposedly unable to do on a regular basis, and I saw that they were not doing many of the things we were taught to expect. I began to look to things that mattered in individual cases, and then to notice how intensely social the practice of drawing is in preschools where thoughts are released into the air as full sentences and received as comments addressed to companions, The accidental sociability of the drawing table is a remarkable ground for performances, for gestures, and sound

effects, and discussions and disagreements. It is a space where the cultures of childhood, both the one adults create for children and the one children create among themselves, comes together.

When I was in graduate school, following Marilyn's lead in reading Walker Percy, Martin Buber and Alfred Schultz, I resonated with the concepts of everydayness, wideawakeness, and presence, the understanding that we can control the intensity of our participation in the ongoing rush of events, and that our daily lives are the ground against which exceptional events and encounters stand out. I developed a renewed appreciation for routine and stability, for the comfort of the taken-for-granted. And with it a determination to notice what is happening, to avoid the constant temptation to gloss over events, to classify too quickly and to see everything as the same. I have written about the importance of being there as a researcher; it is also essential to be there as a teacher and a person, a mother, grandmother, mentor,

and friend. It is simple, and incredibly difficult. A constant challenge,
and its own reward.