Young Children Try, Try Again

Using *Wood, Glue,* and *Words* to Enhance Learning

Corinna S. Bisgaier and Triada Samaras, with Michele J. Russo

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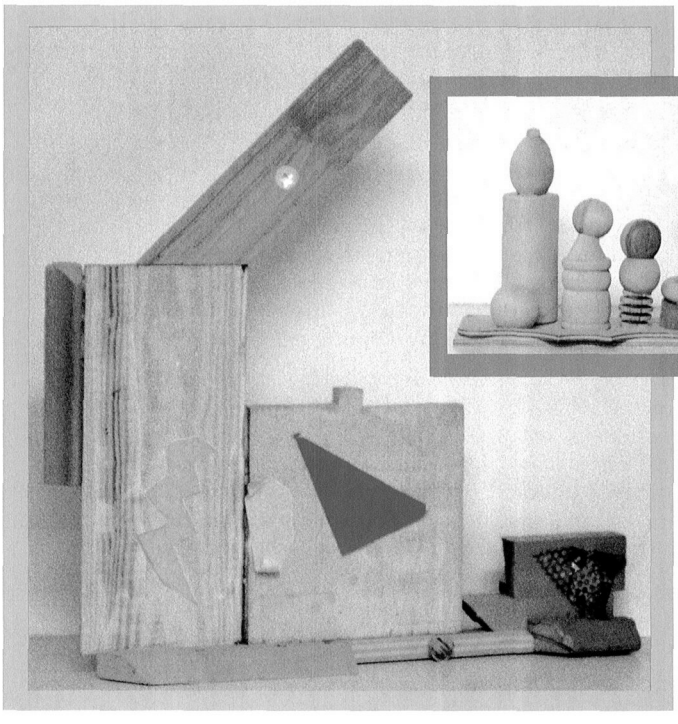


During a wood sculpture residency, Ms. Soto, the teaching artist in a preschool classroom, has a profound experience with a child prone to aggressive behavior. Spending time with Phillip as he builds his sculpture, Ms. Soto sees the child's tender and sensitive side. Phillip makes a sculpture of himself sitting on his roof watching the sun go down. He creates a chair out of cardboard and makes a sculpture of a person seated in it. With a delicate wash of watercolor painted over the whole sculpture, he represents the reflection of the sunset on his apartment building, which he calls "the sun all around."

Building sculptures from wood blocks, shapes, knobs, and scraps is a process that is easily explored in the classroom, rich with learning opportunities, and highly engaging for children. It allows children to learn new skills and the dispositions needed to create a work of art. Through a wood sculpture unit, children may learn the names of local trees; the different leaves, acorns, pinecones, and seeds that each tree produces; the types and colors of wood; the softness or hardness of wood from various trees; the customary uses of wood in our culture; a wood's suitability for sculpture or wood carving; the names of artists who use wood in their artwork. Opportunities abound for the teacher to help children make connections between their artwork and the world around them, relating the project to key curriculum areas such as science, math, and literacy while children develop as creative artists.

Artists in early childhood classrooms

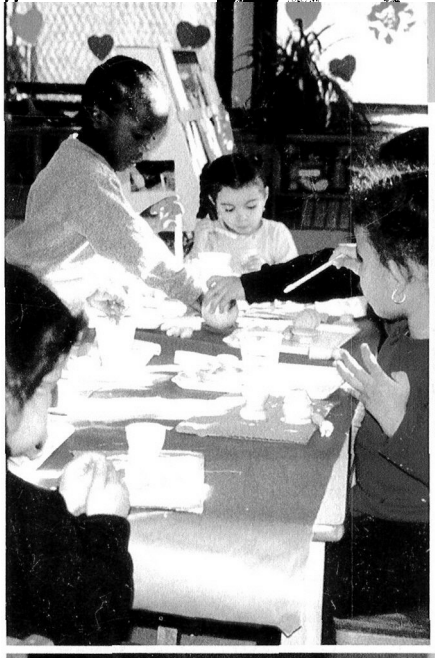
To help early childhood teachers integrate the arts in their classrooms, Young Audiences of New Jersey implemented the Creative Beginnings program in 1997 in the traditionally underserved cities of Newark and Trenton,

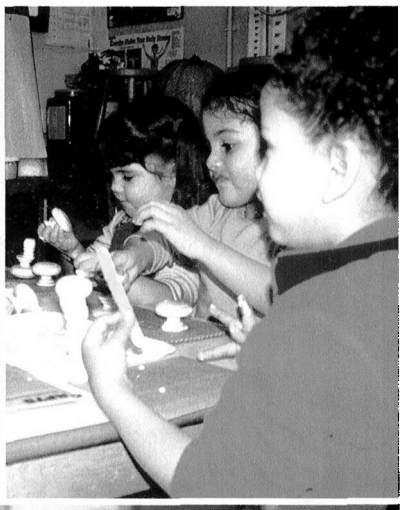
New Jersey. The program grew from an awareness that young children learn through play and that many early childhood teachers are no longer trained in the arts. Because of this gap between the teachers and the learners, Young Audiences of New Jersey saw an opportunity to forge partnerships between early childhood education centers and professional artists with backgrounds in early learning. These ongoing partnerships have demonstrated the power of the arts to make a difference in children's lives.

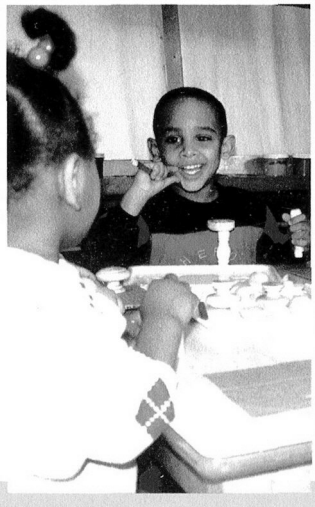
In the Creative Beginnings program, artists work with preschool children and provide teachers with tools to bring the arts into their classrooms. One artist, coauthor Triada Samaras, who trained at Studio in a School in New York City and at Teachers College, Columbia University, focuses on helping teachers lead the children through a unit on building wood block sculptures. Artists model teaching methods, strategies, and language for teachers. Many of the skills teachers learn can be adapted to uses besides art projects.

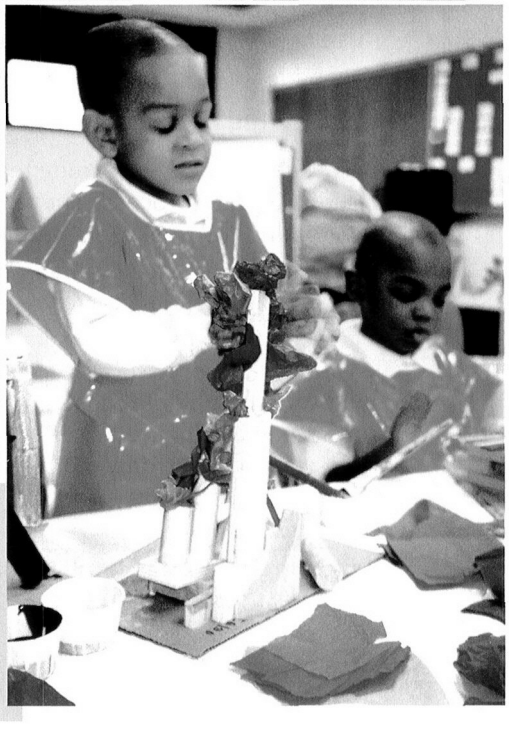
Teachers may incorporate a wood block sculpture project for a week or several months, depending on their comfort with the process. Children enjoy the project no matter how much time is given to it because, as Loris Malaguzzi writes in *The Hundred Languages of Children,* children have "surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities linked with an inexhaustible need for expression and realization" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998, 72).

To facilitate a wood block sculpture unit in the classroom, there are two areas to focus on: organizing the process and using language appropriately. Both areas are integral to maximizing children's learning.









Organizing the process

In planning a wood block sculpture project, consider ways to tie the unit to other learning taking place in the class. Begin with the simplest, most obvious connections. For example, how do the shapes of the wood pieces reinforce the math curriculum? Can the children find circles, squares, ovals, rectangles, hexagons, and other polygons in the wood scrap bin? What shapes result when two or more blocks are combined? Connect the shape search to the larger environment outside the school. Does a nearby building have interesting configurations of shapes? Does its architecture use wood in an interesting way? The sculpture project provides an opportunity for children to explore resources in the community, such as nearby parks, churches,

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or buildings with interesting architecture.

Adjacent to Bethany Academy in Newark, for example, an unusual wood structure modeled after an African hut adorns the roof of a church. It was both a visual and cultural point of departure for children. The hut sparked children's interest in African art. Viewing a small collection of African scuptures, the children were fascinated by the fertility figures. They discussed the sculptures and learned about their meaning, then drew their own figures. This classroom connection to learning—not only about simple math concepts through a wood sculpture unit but also about neighborhood architecture, trees, wood, and art—makes the wood unit come alive in a unique way in each classroom.

Connections to learning areas such as science and mathematics, physical development, social-emotional development, art, language arts, and social studies can be found in *The Block Book* (Hirsch 1996). The book provides concrete ways of using blocks in the classroom for exploration and learning. "The pleasure of blocks stems primarily from the aesthetic experience," states Hirsch. "It involves the whole person—muscles and senses, intellect and emotion, individual growth and social interaction. Learning results from the imaginative activity, from the need to pose and solve problems" (Hirsch 1996, vii). At Sarah Ward Preschool in Newark, a young child began building a cathedral during free block play. This led to much classroom discussion about a cathedral near the school and its striking appearance (especially at night). It resulted in a school trip to the cathedral.

Through extended discussions and natural curriculum links like these, wood block creations gain complexity in design and richness in meaning.

Steps of the process

The steps that follow guide teachers through the wood sculpture process. They are designed for use over several days or weeks (Samaras & Freer 2003).

1. **Order wood scraps** (see "Suppliers") or ask local lumberyards or home building stores for scraps. The children can collect twigs, small branches, nuts, acorns, leaves, and other natural resources. Bases for the sculptures can be purchased or made from cut-up corrugated cardboard boxes or larger scraps of wood. They need to be strong enough to hold a heavy block structure. A good size for a base is about 12 inches by 12 inches.

2. **Thoughtfully provide** about building, sculpture, architecture, or wood to encourage discussion, vocabulary building, and exploration. Books for adults with pictures of interesting buildings or sculptures help children focus on specific elements of design. Introduce the books to the class and then make them available in the wood center (see #3) for children to look at. Read aloud children's books that address construction, change, or creativity (see "Children's Books Related to Wood Sculpture"). Discuss them with small groups of children to help them make sense of what they have seen and read. If they ask questions you cannot answer, work with them to find the answers, showing them that you are a learner as well.

3. **Create a wood center.** Leave the wood for sculptures loose in a bin for children to explore. Play and discovery are critical in yielding imaginative results later. During their wood explorations, children will use the ideas they have gotten from the books. Allow several days or weeks for this stage.

4. **Put the sculpture bases in the wood center** and suggest that children play with the loose wood pieces on a base. Join the children in the center. Talk about arranging the wood in various configurations and then making changes. Talk about balance, shapes, sizes, and textures of the wood pieces. Include new vocabulary in your discussions.

5. **Introduce wood glue,** distributed in deli containers and applied with Popsicle sticks or tongue depressors. Show the whole class how to use the glue. (Do not show the children how to build sculptures, since this may limit their creativity.) Explain how glue is used to attach wood pieces permanently to each other and to the base. Emphasize the importance of experimenting to see where a piece of wood best fits before gluing it.

Make a few mistakes when you demonstrate techniques: glue large pieces with too little glue and note that the piece will not stick. Glue small pieces with huge amounts of glue and note that the glue and the wood pieces slide or that the wood scrap drowns in the glue.

Suppliers

Nasco—www.enasco.com or 800-558-9595. Suggested items: Wood Whacking Sack (wood scraps)

Vanguard Crafts—www.vanguardcrafts.com or 800-662-7238. Suggested items: Bag-o-wood (wood scraps/rounds); Sack-o-scrap (wood scraps/flats); Craft Sticks; Elmer's Carpenter Wood Glue; Luan Plywood Plaques (for bases); Coated Cards (for bases)

S&S Worldwide—www.ssww.com or 800-243-9232. Suggested items: 10-pound carton of wood scraps

Note: Try martial arts competitions or ask local builders or instrument makers for scrap wood.

Ask the children if you're doing things correctly and how you might do them better. Children love to help out on this. They learn to experiment if something doesn't work the first time. Talk to children about how difficult you find gluing, so they know that it's normal to get a bit frustrated, and so they will feel competent when they are able to do it themselves.

Now the children are ready to make their sculptures. [illegible] to the base first. Work with small groups in the wood center so you can provide help when children need it. Ask children questions about their work:

- How will adding this piece change the sculpture?
- When you look at your sculpture, what do you see?
- Is this sculpture made mostly of flat pieces or round pieces?

[illegible] so children can add pieces to their sculptures. Encourage them to use a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors. Be sure children turn their bases around to look at their sculpture from different vantage points. This may give them new ideas about where to add pieces of wood and new perspectives on their work. Consider having the children paint and add collage items (fabric, paper, ribbon, string, pom-poms, feathers, beads) to their sculptures.

Continue discussing children's work with them. Introduce the concept *three-dimensional* in a discussion, explaining that sculpture is a three-dimensional art form. Introduce older children to the concept of positive and negative space. A teacher might explain that positive space is the wood and negative space is the air around the wood.

Just Enough Glue

Triada uses a rhyme to help children learn how to get just enough glue on a Popsicle stick, and then onto their wood pieces: "Tap, tap, tap, / Wipe, wipe, wipe, / Spread, spread, spread / Like jelly on the bread."

"Tap, tap, tap" is for tapping the Popsicle stick on the side of the container to get rid of some excess glue; "Wipe, wipe, wipe" reminds children to wipe the Popsicle stick on the side of the container to get rid of more excess; and "Spread, spread, spread" tells children to spread the glue onto the wood piece to be attached.

Children's Books Related to Wood Sculpture

Barton, B. 1990. *Building a house.* New York: Harper Trophy.

Browne, A. 2003. *The shape game.* New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Fleming, D. 1996. *Where once there was a wood.* New York: Henry Holt.

Hoban, T. 1983. *Round and round and round.* New York: William Morrow.

Hoban,T. 1986. *Shapes, shapes, shapes.* New York: William Morrow.

Hunter, R.A. 1998. *Cross a bridge.* New York: Holiday House.

Hutchins, P. 1971. *Changes, changes.* New York: Aladdin.

Johnson, A. 2001. *Those building men.* New York: Blue Sky Press.

Jonas, A. 1983. *Round-trip.* New York: Scholastic.

Katz, K. 1999. *The colors of us.* New York: Henry Holt.

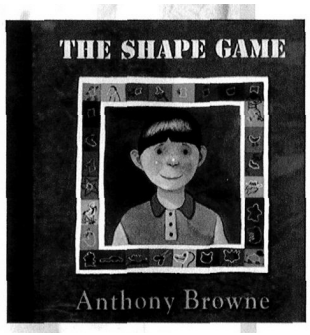
Laden, N. 2000. *Roberto the insect architect.* San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

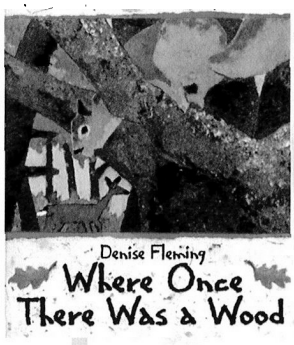
Lipman, J. 1980. *Calder's universe.* New York: Viking. (For adults as well. There are many photos of Calder's sculptures that young children find enjoyable.)

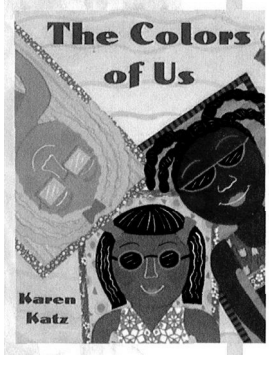
Pinkwater, D.M. 1977. *The big orange splot.* New York: Scholastic.

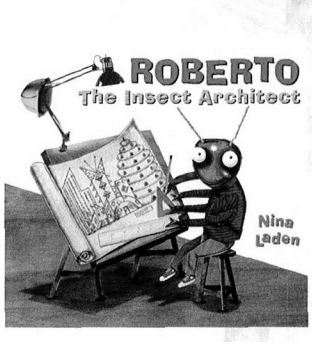
Udry, J.M. 1987. *A tree is nice.* New York: Harper Trophy.

Yenawine, P. 1991. *Shapes.* New York: Delacorte Press.









3. Hold a group discussion about the finished sculptures, encouraging individual children to share their work with their classmates. Ask children about the process of creating the sculpture as well as the finished product. Discuss with families how to talk to their children about art (more on this below). Explain the benefits children gain from participating in the project.

Art Evolves

As children add pieces of wood to their sculptures, they may come up with new ideas, especially after some time has passed. A child's sculpture may start out as a vehicle that later changes to a creature and ends up a robot. Talk about making changes to what has already been done. Welcome such changes as evidence of the creative process. Talk to the children about what it means to be "finished" when they tell you they are done.

Change during the art-making process is similar to the revision/editing phase of the writing process. If the children have experienced the writing process, you can stress this link.

Have the children host a sculpture exhibition in their classroom. This makes a wonderful forum for family-school activity. Children can act as museum tour guides for the visitors—and for children from other classes.

Using language appropriately

Working with Triada, teachers in the Creative Beginnings program learn how to talk to children about the art-making process to maximize learning and the development of higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom 1956). According to Judith Burton,

> Teaching through dialogue is not a laissez-faire pedagogical practice, nor a free-for-all conversation. For dialogue to promote learning, it needs to be thoughtfully structured around a sequence of questions that invite reflection. Sometimes a dialogue may be structured with specific learning in mind and at other times leading toward exploration and discovery. However, it always presupposes that the teacher knows enough about children's perceptions to pace the interchange to their needs, capacities, interests, and levels of understanding. (2000, 330)

In professional development sessions with teachers, Triada emphasizes the power of language used in all phases of the art-making process, from introduction of materials through closure of the activity: "The words

used by the teachers can hamper or enhance the success of the visual art process, as words have the tremendous power to awaken the child to imagination, observation, investigation, exploration, planning, utilization, contemplation, and reflection with the art materials." The language used in this process falls into three categories: questions, vocabulary, and concepts.

Questions

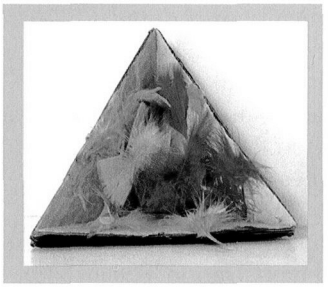
Triada asks open-ended questions that require children to think about their creations and why they made particular choices. Here are some introductory questions to use early in the project, when children are first exploring wood pieces in the block center:

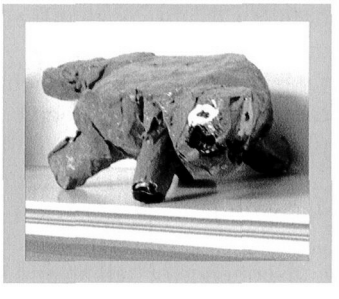
- Which block did you choose? Why?
- Where did that block come from?
- How many ways can you place the block so that it will stand up?
- How can you make it higher in space?

Teachers' questions can lead to rich and thoughtful discussions that enhance children's thinking and promote learning.

These questions require children to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate.

It is important to avoid questions that do not facilitate the art-making process. Never begin with a "naming" question, such as "What is it?" or even worse, "Is that a car?" Questions like these limit the child's range of answers and may interrupt the art-making process because the child feels pressured to come up with a single word to describe a complex creation. Especially avoid declarative statements like "It's a bird!" because the sculpture may have nothing to do with the child's concept of "bird."





"Tell Me about This"

Begin a dialogue with a child by urging gently, "Tell me about this." Take dictation from younger children. Write their explanations about their sculptures on sticky notes and attach them to the sculptures. (Some children will be able to write these notes themselves.) When a child sees that the teacher has documented the discussion on a sticky note, he or she is affirmed as an artist and a communicator.

The question "What is it?" can intimidate a child who has just built a block creation. It may elicit one-word answers—"A boat" or "A car" or "I don't know"—if any. Furthermore, merely naming an object requires less reflection than explaining how or why it was created. A good question is, "Can you tell me about how you made this?" or "What were you thinking about as you worked today?"

For example, a small group of four- and five-year-olds at Bethany Academy worked together in the wood center using the largest, sturdiest blocks to create a wood sculpture of the White House. When Triada asked them to talk about their work, they explained that they used strong blocks because "the White House can't move a muscle. When you shake the table, it won't move or fall. When you blow it, it can't fall." The children continued, "The president lives there, George Bush. A lot of dollars live there too, maybe $120. It has a beach. George Bush makes copies of dollars with a machine in the White House. The White House also has a drum. George Bush plays the drum with his children."

Teachers' questions can lead to rich and thoughtful discussions that enhance children's thinking and promote learning. While children are creating their sculptures, teachers can help them consider their wood choices when they ask,

- Tell me about what you are doing.
- What made you think of using wood that way?
- Did you see anyone else at your table using wood the same way?
- Would you explain to your neighbor how you built that?

Triada emphasizes that teachers' asking children about their sculptures guides children in their dialogues with each other about their artwork. She often uses circle time to engage in this kind of communication. When a child shows his or her sculpture at circle time, Triada asks the child to tell the class about the piece. She then encourages other children to ask questions about it. For instance, Triada may begin by saying, "I notice that you used a lot of round pieces." She then asks other children to share what they notice about the sculpture.

Triada walks around the room and encourages children to talk to each other when they are working. She asks them to tell their neighbor about what they are doing or to notice what their neighbor is doing. Children soon catch on to how to talk to each other about their work. Verbalizing their ideas and explaining how they accomplished specific tasks substantially enriches the learning process for children.

Burton writes that "the virtues of teaching through dialogue in the arts are many . . . [I]t inhibits the kind of uniformity of outcome in making and appraising that is the consequence of 'telling and demonstration'"(2000, 330).

Vocabulary

Vocabulary building is woven into the art-making and questioning processes. Teachers can ask questions that build vocabulary, such as,

- Are the edges of this piece *smooth* or *rough*?
- Did you use more pieces with *straight* edges or with *round* edges?
- What shape is this piece that you put *beside/behind/under/on top of/next to/near* the *rectangle*?

Introducing vocabulary words while giving instructions and reinforcing them while asking questions helps children learn new words in a meaningful context. It is a good way for children to learn about shapes because they can handle and examine a shape while learning its name. Introduce words like *rough, smooth, curved, straight, round, flat, edge, line, behind, beside, above, below, under, over, near.*

Teachers can use words posted on a wall in the classroom in dialogues with children during sculpture time or in contexts other than art making. Look for new words in children's books related to the sculpture unit (see "Children's Books Related to Wood Sculpture"). Words from the wall can be sent home for parents to use with their children and suggested for use during writing time both at home and in class.

Wood Word Wall

Here are the contents of a word wall (see Houle & Krogness 2001) compiled by the children:

wood, branch, limb, tree, pine, maple, oak, birch, sawdust, driftwood, knot, plank, rectangle, square, circle, tall, small, short, fat, thin, narrow, wide, artist, sculptor, carpenter, architect, termite, ant, leaf, bud, root, light, dark, saw, hammer, nail, glue, wood glue, dowel, furniture, sculpture, paper, seasons of the tree (spring/summer/fall/winter), berry, change, sandpaper, shellac, wood scrap, base, attach, connect, fix, build, construct, sculpt, deciduous, evergreen, lumber, chain saw, log cabin.

Concepts

Teachers have a great deal of influence over children's developing creativity and the dynamic in the classroom. This influence is evident in an examination of the concepts or "slogans" Triada uses with young children.

When introducing the wood blocks, shapes, and pieces to the children, Triada takes time to experiment in front of the whole class, and she talks to them about

her "failures." She stacks different shapes from the wood bin and says, "Now, what will happen if . . . I pile them up like this . . . and . . . Yikes! They all fell down!" Children seem to especially love this demonstration. They watch intently, seeing that it is okay for a teacher to "mess up." Triada says to the children, "Do I cry? No! I try, try, try again!" It is vital for children to understand that in making art, there are no mistakes.

Often, what seem like failures when making art can lead to new and better creative solutions and even more learning opportunities for the children. Triada asks, "Can we think of another way to make this work?" She explains that this is the way artists create—with a lot of imagination, patience, and hard work. Teachers can help children apply this concept to other areas of the classroom and to the larger world.

Conclusion

Burton states,

> A good dialogue will allow an interweaving of personal sensory, affective, and cognitive responses as youngsters reflect on their experiences and, through imaginative reconstruction, give them voice in and through visual materials. It will promote self-reflection, recognition, and tolerance for diversity, and an ability to listen to and learn from the thoughts of others. In addition, a thoughtful dialogue will offer youngsters insights into how ideas are constructed, relate to each other in sequence, and build in complexity to larger ideas. It gives meaning to an individual's personal development by opening them to the powers of scrutiny, investigation, inquiry, and questioning by others. (2000, 330)

At Sarah Ward Preschool, a young artist explained to Triada, "Last week, I made this sculpture and I only used a few blocks. That's because I was only still little then. Now I am big, and I am using many more blocks, and I can double stack them to build a very tall tower. Look! I don't cry! I try, try, try again!"

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For more information about the Creative Beginnings program, contact Corinna Bisgaier at cbisgaier@yanj.org or visit the Young Audiences of New Jersey Web site at www.yanj.org.