

What I Have Valued in Practicing CONNECTEDkind

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I have worked for over forty years as a specialist teacher of art and craft at a public elementary school in Tokyo, engaging in creative activities with children from first through sixth grade.

During art classes, children interact with a wide variety of objects, events, and people, and through these encounters they sense and think about qualities such as goodness, interest, beauty, and mystery.

In the process of drawing pictures and creating objects, children fully use both their minds and bodies as they try many things, sometimes pausing, sometimes retracing their steps, as they strive to realize their own ideas. I continue to redesign my lessons so that each child's innate strengths and individuality can be opened up and allowed to flourish.

Several years ago, I encountered CONNECTEDkind. One activity begins with a single photograph depicting a natural element—light—and its shadow. From this image, participants freely add drawings inspired by whatever comes to mind.

As I continued to gaze at the photograph for some time, changing its orientation, I experienced the joy of a sudden moment of insight—an “Ah!” realization. Wondering whether it could be made even more engaging, I copied the same photograph many times and continued drawing on it.

I then carried out this activity with children in my art classes. In the following section, I introduce what I considered most important in the process of practicing CONNECTEDkind.

Handing Over and Entrusting

At the beginning, I gather the children close to me—within a distance where we can share our breath—and, through dialogue, hand over and entrust the activity to them so that they can gain a sense of its appeal and possibilities.

Together, we look at the photograph *“Dandelion Seeds and Their Shadow,”* and I ask questions such as, “What do you see?” “How does it feel?” “Do you hear anything?” and “What kinds of images or stories come to mind?” The children share their thoughts freely: “nature,” “light and shadow,” “withered,” “alive,” “I feel both kindness and sadness,” “it feels fleeting,” “it connects life,” and many others.

In front of the children, I demonstrate by actually using the drawing materials. Like a silent film, I show actions such as changing the orientation of the photograph, switching or combining different materials as I draw. Rather than simply showing them, I invite the children to align themselves with my actions and movements.

Using the dandelion seeds and their shadow as clues, I briefly explain two approaches: finding shapes and reimagining them as something else, or expanding one’s imagination based on personal feelings and impressions. I carefully considered what to draw in advance and tried it myself many times.

I also share the available choices of drawing materials. While using only a pencil is perfectly fine, I prepare materials with different colors and drawing textures—such as watercolor pencils, color brush markers, fine black pens, water-based crayons, and pastels. I believe that allowing children to choose for themselves helps their images and ideas expand.

Aligning Myself with the Children

At first, some children remain silent, gazing intently at the photograph, while others chat—“Is it starting to look like something?” “What could it be?” “What if we turn it upside down?” Gradually, each child begins to draw using the materials they have chosen.

After handing over and entrusting the activity, I wait with trust that every child will initiate something, no matter how small. I try not to interfere, instead using my imagination to sense what the children are feeling and thinking, watching over them with empathy and staying close. I observe their actions and gazes, wondering: “What are they doing now?” “Why did they choose that color?” “What meaning might lie in the shapes they emphasize again and again?” “They seem focused on the shape of the shadow.” “Is anyone struggling?” I move quietly around the classroom, repeatedly reading the emerging forms and colors, and the works that are gradually taking shape.

At times, I gently ask a child, “How are you feeling right now?” When I do, I am often delighted to encounter thoughts and ideas that I had not been able to perceive on my own.

As the children use the natural object and its shadow as clues to let their imaginations drift toward what cannot be seen or heard, they may have encountered sensations within themselves that they had never expected. With relieved or quietly proud expressions, they come to show me their completed works.

Sensing Value and Interest

The children give titles to their completed works. Adding words helps them further shape and give meaning to their own thoughts.

I also set aside time for the children to view their classmates' works and create titles for them as well. This activity was especially enjoyable and lively. Rather than simply looking at the artworks, imagining a friend's thoughts and putting them into words became a highly active form of appreciation. When children read the titles their classmates had given their work, they responded with delighted expressions: "So that's how you felt," or "I didn't realize it could be seen that way." It became a moment of encountering ways of feeling and thinking different from their own.

The themes expressed in the children's works ranged widely: playful reinterpretations of shapes, personal feelings and imagination, stories and narratives, shadows and tangible objects, light and shadow, paired or contrasting ideas, emotions and states of mind, changes of seasons, the passage of time, and perspectives on society and the world. In particular, shadows were not perceived as something negative; rather, the children seemed to view them as existing together in connection—balancing one another and circulating in harmony.

Upon completing this practice, I strongly felt the depth, richness, and expansiveness of CONNECTEDkind.

"A Sense of Wonder: A Sensitivity That Opens One's Eyes to Mystery and Marvel"

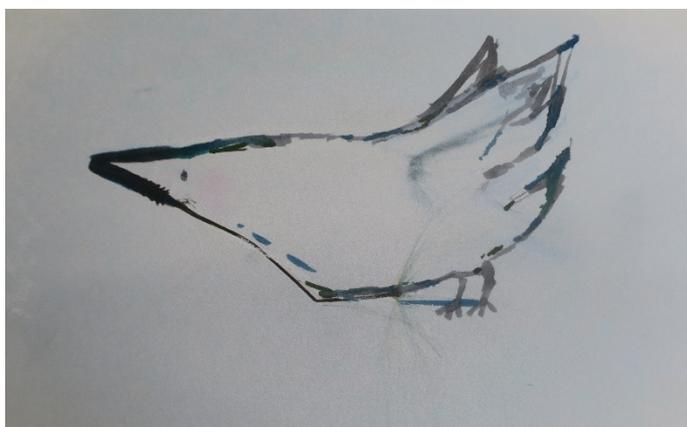
For children living in Tokyo, who have limited opportunities to come into contact with nature, I intentionally incorporate activities that help them feel and experience nature through everyday art classes. These include collecting soil from the ground and comparing its colors, turning that soil into paint, drawing winter buds on trees, giving form to wind and water, shaping the sound of rain, drawing the sky, creating stories of the forest through craft, regenerating thinned wood, sensing the warmth and scent of wood, and shaping and firing clay. Through such experiences, I aim to provide children with foundational encounters that will stay with them.

Rachel Carson wrote that in order to keep a child's innate "sense of wonder" alive and fresh, there must be at least one adult nearby who can rediscover, together with the child, the joy, awe, and mystery of the world we live in, and who can share in that sense of wonder.

I hope to be such a person for the children.

References

- Carson, Rachel. *The Sense of Wonder*. Translated into Japanese by Keiko Kamito, photographs by Nitaro Morimoto. Shinchosha, 1996.



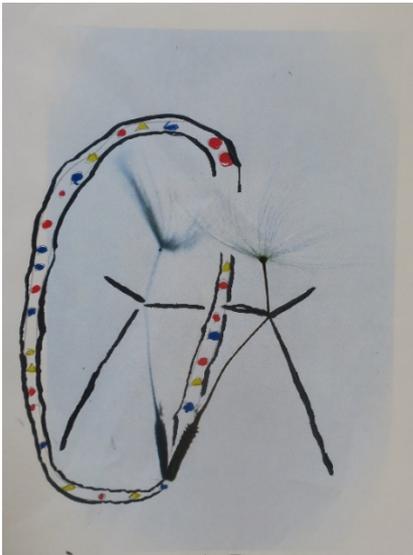
"A Bird That Spreads Its Wings Even in the Cold"



“An Entrance to Another Dimension”



“Flowers of Light and Flowers of Shadow”



“The Person Who Enters the Mirror”



“Gathering Emotions”