

A Preschool Education Beyond Sequins and Stickers

Erin Young

When I decided to get my certification as an art educator, I knew that it was a requirement to complete two student teaching placements: one at an elementary school, and the other at a secondary school. My elementary placement required less lesson planning and more classroom management. We glued pictures of river animals onto glittery backgrounds and practiced how to raise our hands. I felt like a glorified babysitter, and was thrilled to begin my high school placement. At the high school level, I could teach my students about more advanced concepts. After completing both placements, I knew without a doubt that I was meant to teach high school. But this is not how things panned out—shortly after receiving certification, I was hired as a preschool teacher.

Life with the Horses

I entered into the "Horses" classroom (the class for 4-year-olds) thinking that I would be there for a year at the most. I took comfort in the fact that I had some sort of teaching job to pay my college loans until I found a "real" job at a high school. We finger-painted, I cringed. We glued sequins, I felt defeated. I found myself saying to other adults things like, "After we eat our growing foods, do you want to get dessert?" Something had to change.

A month or so later, the Horses started a unit on jobs. A colleague suggested I teach the students about being an artist. I took this assignment very seriously. How could I allow these young minds to think that being an artist was equivalent to pasting foam shapes on construction paper? Over the next week, my 4-year-olds helped me stretch a canvas and make a collaborative painting (yes, they learned the word "collaborate"). We also studied the surrealist painter Frida Kahlo and looked at Mexican works of art. At the end of the week, I asked myself an important question: Was it my fault if these children were not getting an early childhood education that challenged them to their full potential? The answer was "Yes."

There isn't a rule book on how to teach preschool. In fact, while completing my degree, the topic of early childhood education was hardly touched on. I think sometimes it is assumed that very young children can't learn sophisticated concepts, when in actuality, nothing could be further from the truth. Sometimes my students surprise me with little examples of how well they understand what was taught to them. Once, a group of boys built a house of Legos for the (late) American sculptor Alexander Calder and assured me that he would love to live there because they had only used primary colors to build it. Calder, known for his giant mobile sculptures, usually painted his pieces blue, red, and yellow. These young learners are imaginative, take joy in soaking up new information, and run with it. They're incredibly curious. If I, as an early childhood educator, did not believe in their capabilities, then how could I expect them to excel? It was my fault for underestimating such young, eager minds.

Recognizing the Real

I am currently working on my fifth year as a preschool teacher. As it turns out, the preschool job became my "real" job. I have never needed to seek out a high school teaching job to fulfill my interest in teaching more advanced concepts, and have received so many fulfilling teaching opportunities as a preschool teacher. My students learn about art history and aesthetics and produce inspiring works of art. Although in some circles, preschool may be viewed as an unnecessary step before elementary education begins, I now know that my young students' age makes them perfect candidates for higher learning.