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Mentor's Introduction

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The Child Study Centre at the University of British Columbia is the early childhood research and demonstration laboratory facility of the Faculty of Education. It provides a facility for first hand observation of preschool children in a variety of learning situations. Over the past decade, research into conditions under which children learn has been progressively focused, particularly through government-funded studies and through student projects.

Growth and development of art learnings and skills has been monitored by a small number of students and faculty, particularly in the area of first skill acquisition. Perhaps it is not surprising that the results of initial studies have led to consideration of an ecological model for art development - and by extension, for educational development in general - rather than elaboration of the person-centered models favored by Bruner, Piaget, Lowenfeld, and the art education theorists of the 1950s and '60s.

Ecological models are perhaps most closely related to social psychology and anthropology, in that the environment is seen as a crucial and dynamic element in learning. If an environment is assumed to have its own character, one that changes because of pressures exerted on it, then the effects upon those persons who interact with it will result in varied behavior on their part.

What this means for research is a focus on long-term rather than one-shot studies, the construction of matrices of behavior rather than concentration on single tasks, and a drawing of parallels among natural activities rather than the undertaking of specific experiments.

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Sociology, particularly that of Alfred Schutz and his followers, offers a reservoir of techniques that can aid the researcher who works ecologically. The product is likely to be thick description, but the description ought to be classifiable as patterns that reflect general modes of conduct. Ecological models are to quite an extent concerned with stability; it is anticipated that children from different backgrounds, operating in circumstances that change from minute to minute, will nonetheless achieve similar increments in growth over time.

Pat Tarr's project focuses on how five two-year-olds, observed for a two-year period in the Child Study Centre, acquired art skills in a group context and developed the repertoire of techniques that we associate with preschoolers . She is developing a description of how these children come to use art materials in sanctioned ways, and how each innovation comes about because of a particular situational dynamic.

This study will make a contribution to a field that already possesses a body of related literature. It differs from many others dealing with preschoolers in that it is an attempt to explain learning as a cultural phenomenon, and as an outcome of an interaction process that strikes sparks among the participants.