

Research Summary: Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) Domain in the DRDP (2015) Assessment Instrument

The **Visual and Performing Arts (VPA)** domain focuses on awareness and engagement in four areas of artistic expression. The knowledge and skill areas in this domain include visual art, music, drama, and dance.

VPA 1: Visual Art

The research literature on the development of abilities in the visual arts emphasizes the artistic structure of children's mark making and the growing ability to complete artistic works. In general, young children move through benchmarks that begin with scribbles and progress to realism (Kellogg, 1969; Matthews, 1994). Research reveals symbolism associated with this progression that appears in children's drawings; for example, near the end of the third year of life, children typically draw circles or sectioned circles in repeats, known as "mandalas" (Gardner, 1980). At the latest level of the continuum, developing artistic ability involves increased detail and accuracy in representational visual art, including human representations that go beyond stick figures, otherwise known as the emergence of "potato people" (Gardner, 1980). In sculpture, fine motor ability develops significantly during the preschool years, and by entry to the primary grades children, with appropriate learning opportunities and practice, will have learned techniques such as creating positive and negative space, pulling and indenting, rolling columns and balls, and representing objects in their sculpture (Weisman, 2007). Children's representation abilities in sculpture become a language of hands when they are given the time to explore and practice sculpting (Kolbe, 2001). Knowledge of color begins in the preschool years; as children progress into primary years, they demonstrate a rudimentary understanding of tint and hue, and how mixing colors produces new colors (Kolbe, 2001).

VPA 2: Music

The existing research literature on the development of musical abilities emphasizes children's natural curiosity about music and increasingly purposeful musical productions. Musical development in early childhood is a complex product of human potential mediated by socio-cultural influences. Regarding children's musical development, we consider not only discrete skills and abilities such as rhythmic and melodic development, but also whether or not children increasingly marshal their foundational musical skills. Gruhn (2008, p. 62-64) reports a commonality between developmentally appropriate stages that are applicable to musical development. He identifies four stages of musical development:

- 1) Enculturation in which infants absorb and begin to perceive musical information from environmental stimulation;
- 2) Attention in which the child actively and consciously perceives music as something different from his or her own body, and the child experiences music or sound as an object that can be observed, explored, and imitated;
- 3) Imitation in which the child imitates movements and sounds while developing a mental image of what he or she wants to do; and

- 4) Coordination in which children respond to music more consciously with development of mental representations in progress; at this stage, they match what they understand with what they want to do and accommodate their activities to newly developed cognitive schemas.

“Preschoolers are able to reproduce phrases of songs they hear, recognize a melody, and gain some understanding of pitch when exposed to instrumental music instruction (Shuter-Dyson and Gabriel 1981)” (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 23). “Younger preschoolers organize, reflect about, and respond to sound” (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 23). Children in preschool are “capable of responding to tempo changes in music, but their movements rarely coordinate with the beat (Moog, 1976)” (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 24). In the development of singing, children gradually gain control of their voices and use them expressively and in tune (Jordan-DeCarbo & Nelson, 2002).

In addition, children who have the opportunity to experiment with instruments discover their “capacity to control, refine and express musical ideas (Moorhead, Sandvik, and Wight 1951)” (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 24). Children also attend to music and listen to music with and without words (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 24).

VPA 3: Drama

This measure highlights how children’s engagement, skill development, and creative expression increase in drama. Dramatic play can be defined as a type of play in which children accept and assign roles, and then act them out. It is a time when they break through the walls of reality, pretend to be someone or something different from themselves, and dramatize situations and actions to go along with the roles they have chosen to play. This type of play remains an integral part of the developmental learning process by allowing children to build skills in such areas as abstract thinking, literacy, math, and social studies in a timely, natural manner. The majority of research studies on theater and dramatic play mainly focus on the implications of drama for other domains of development (e.g., drama and language learning, drama and social development) rather than the development of particular skills in drama. Thus, little direct research addresses developmental markers for the progression of theatrical skills. The research literature on the development of dramatic play emphasizes the importance of pretend and cooperative play in developing children’s dramatic abilities. In the preschool years, the child communicates details about a character’s emotions or thoughts when contributing to an improvised drama. By first grade, the child collaborates with peers to plan an extended improvised drama including characters, sequenced plot, relevant dialogue, and setting.

Research into drama practices in preschool and kindergarten show that children engaged in dramatic play are fine-tuning their living skills, social-emotional capacities, and language skills (Heathcote, 1975). In language development, “dramatic play is associated with gains in story understanding, oral language skills, and reading readiness at around ages four and five, across multiple research studies” (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 25; see also Podlozny, 2000). In the development of social-emotional capacity and living skills, “acting out situations from stories, such as demonstrating empathy or resolving a conflict through negotiation, can supply a child with some social skills, an opportunity to practice and experience a different way of interacting (Catterall 2007)” (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 25).

VPA 4: Dance

This measure highlights how children develop the capacity to respond, express, and create through movement in dance. In the early stages of the continuum, children move their whole bodies or parts of their bodies through space in response to music, rhythms, others' movements, or adults' cues. Following this stage, in the preschool years, children try out a variety of movements through space, with developing body control and awareness, in response to music, rhythms, others' movements, or adults' cues. At the beginning of kindergarten, children improvise dance movements without a plan. By the end of kindergarten, children understand the concept of beginning and end, and they plan their actions. During the first-grade year, they understand that, in between the beginning and end, there is a middle, and they coordinate a plan that demonstrates beginning, middle, and end. Children "decenter" and understand that there is something in between the beginning and the end. Jean Piaget articulates this cognitive development as the Intuitive (4–7 years) sub-stage of the preoperational stage (Cowan, 1978). The progression of "responding to dance" reflects children's developmental progression from doing the action to using words to describe the action. Stinson (1990, p. 35) states, "The important link between movement and cognitive development is a major reason why the early childhood curriculum involves concrete experiences in which children may encounter and interact with their world. Words, which are abstract symbols, gain meaning only through experience with what the symbols stand for. Dance in early childhood provides concrete experiences in which children become more aware of the movement they see in their world, try it on for themselves, and notice how it feels." The progression is also supported by the National Dance Education Organization Standards for Dance in Early Childhood (2009). These standards articulate the creation of dances from improvising movements in response to music, to creating dances with a beginning and end, and then to creating dances with a beginning, middle, and end for students' ages four through five years.

"When movement becomes consciously structured and is performed with awareness, for its own sake, it becomes dance (Cone & Cone, 2004)" (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 26). "Mara (1987a, b, c, and d) describe the specific stages of development of dance skills relevant to children at around 48 and 60 months of age" (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 27). The older preschool child coordinates movements much better than a year earlier and moves effectively with a growing sense of balance. The child does running leaps and follows spatial directions. "The preschool child, at around 60 months of age, adds more technical dance terms to her vocabulary. At this age, children can initiate a brief dance sequence and depend less on teacher prompts or instructions to engage in expressive dance" (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 27). Older preschool children are more interested and patient about observing dance presentations, either by dancers visiting the program or more formal, staged productions.

"By around 60 months of age, children can typically coordinate and control more parts of the body into dance steps or routines and can work more effectively with others in moving through a dance space. At this age, children are more able to dance and move in time to music or percussion. Older preschool children are more inclined and able to create and perform dances that depict stories. They often invent dance moves and sequences of their own and are increasingly able to convey feelings and mood through dance" (California Department of Education, 2010, p. 27).

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