



Art in Early Childhood

A history of visual art education in early childhood in New Zealand: Looking backwards to go forwards

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an historical overview of early childhood education in New Zealand and examines the influences on visual art education for young children. Over the past one hundred and forty years shifts in early childhood pedagogy, diverse philosophies and beliefs about the purposes of early childhood, as well as the influence of prominent international art educators, has seen the development of a range of different approaches to visual art provision. Teacher practice in visual art education has moved from a rigid, formalized teacher-directed orientation, to a developmentally based and child-centred orientation and, finally, to one that has a strong socio-cultural orientation. By examining the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of different types of visual art programmes that have been provided in the past, early childhood practitioners have the opportunity to use this information as a basis for critiquing their own practice and to consider how it can be informed by current early childhood pedagogy.

Introduction

Early childhood services in New Zealand have been in existence since the late 1870s (May, 1997). However, unlike the primary and secondary sector, early childhood education has never been compulsory, and consequently government involvement in developing a cohesive, legally mandated curriculum for the diverse range of services that have evolved within the sector has been relatively recent.¹ Prior to this, the overall development of early childhood services was unplanned, "with strong reliance on community initiative" (Meade, 1988, p. 25). Models of curriculum and pedagogy for the different types of services that came from these community initiatives were based on the philosophy and beliefs about the purposes of early childhood education held by those who initiated the development of the service. Visual art education for young

children was to be found embedded within these different curricula, often identified as a distinct area of play.

A teacher directed, rote art curriculum

The early childhood services that were dominant in New Zealand before World War 2 were kindergartens and Playcentres. The very early kindergartens were essentially philanthropic charities aimed at assisting poor children, and providing “a healthy and orderly environment” (May, 1997, p. 52). Programmes and teacher practice were based on innovative ideas developed by German educationalist Fredrick Froebel in 1837. Typical early kindergarten programmes in New Zealand echoed those of Froebelian kindergartens established in the United Kingdom and the United States (May, 1997), which included art and craft in the curriculum. Art activities were part of the “gifts” and “occupations” that characterized a Froebelian kindergarten. Art materials included “coloured tablets for design, coloured papers to cut and fold, clay and sand, pencils and paints, arranged in a series” (p. 61). The visual art activities that were taught included “paper folding, perforated paper designs for pricking, drawing on squared paper, intertwining, weaving, folding, cutting, peawork,² cardboard and clay modeling” (Lawrence, 1952, p. 23).

Not surprisingly, given the authoritarian and formalised approach to education of the times (Efland, 1990), teacher practice in the early kindergartens was very directive, and art activities strictly timetabled (Lawrence, 1952; May, 1997). Characteristics of a teacher directed, rote art curriculum are evident in these early kindergartens where the emphasis of art activities “involved dexterity and fine motor skills, neatness, memorization, and following directions” rather than individual creative self-expression (Bressler, 1994, p. 93).

The New Zealand kindergarten movement continued to expand during the first half of the 20th century but remained wedded to traditional Froebelian ideas. Influences from international developments in child psychology and education, for example, the Progressive Education Movement (based on the ideas of American educationalist and philosopher John Dewey, 1859-1952), began to have an impact in New Zealand educational settings (Visser, 2005). Dewey’s ideas called attention to the necessity of children’s play being grounded in “the child’s experiences of the real world” (May, 1997, p. 113) and learning by doing. He described free-play as “...the interplay, of all the child’s powers, thoughts, and physical movements in embodying, in a satisfying form, his own images and interests” (Dewey, 1900, cited in May, 1997, p. 113). This freedom, he believed, would act as a means of “unlocking the creative capacities of children” (Eisner & Ekner, 1970, p. 20). Ideas such as these began to be embraced by the fledgling Playcentre movement and the New Zealand kindergarten movement, and an emerging free-play philosophy was deemed by many early childhood educators and parents to be the most suited to the education of young children. These influences created the climate for change to pedagogy and teaching practice in relation to arts education for young children.

The child-centred art curriculum

The emergence of the Playcentre movement in the 1940's post-war New Zealand had an enormous impact on early childhood pedagogy and practice, particularly in the area of visual art. Needing to re-create strong connections with family and rebuild New Zealand society after the decimation of the war, Playcentre became a vehicle for a unique educational movement that was quickly embraced by many New Zealand parents. Influenced by educationalists from the British-based New Education Fellowship, such as Isaacs – a proponent of the works of Freud and Piaget – Playcentre exponents believed in social reform through education which would “release the creative powers of individuals” (May, cited in Stover, 1998). Ideas espoused in the writings of art educators Herbert Read and Viktor Lowenfeld, who believed “children’s art was universal in its symbolic forms” and “that it could serve as an instrument of peace if such art would be allowed to develop freely” (Efland, 1990, p.123) without the interference of adults, resonated comfortably with Playcentre ideals. Offering children art experiences as part of the free-play agenda in Playcentre was considered a very important aspect of the programme.

In 1948 Playcentre leader and writer Gwen Somerset wrote the first early childhood programme manual *I play and I grow* (Somerset, 1948) as a guide for Playcentre parents. Despite being intended for Playcentre, Gallagher, the newly appointed Supervisor of the Preschool Service for the Department of Education (1948) who had responsibility for “freeing up” (May, 2001, p 23) the rigidly formalised programmes offered by the kindergarten service, seized upon the manual and issued it as a departmental handout to kindergartens. *I Play and I grow* identified the types of art materials required in a free-play programme – clay, paint, dough, finger paint, paper, paste, wood, and waste materials. Somerset (1948) wrote, “As children explore and discover the world, they experiment with raw materials and use them to express how they feel about the world. They also use paint, finger paint, wood and waste; they alter, re-arrange, do and un-do, build and construct their creative play” (p. 5).

Visual art experiences, such as the provision of painting, collage, and clay, were important activities that needed to be provided in a free-play curriculum. The role of the parent was to let children play and create “freely and spontaneously” (Somerset, 1948, p. 14). It was considered important that adults did not interfere with the child’s engagement in art “in order to preserve the developing character of the child” (Boughton, 1999, p. 4), and to provide children with assistance only when needed.

Playcentre continued to lead the way in publishing literature for parents involved in young children’s learning. Several Playcentre publications cover aspects of children’s visual art education, notably articles in the *Playcentre Journal* (published from 1959), and Brownlee’s book *Magic Places* (Brownlee, 1983), which became a significant visual art text for New Zealand early childhood educators and parents. *Magic Places* provided parents and teachers with a comprehensive guide for the provision of visual art experiences for young children in a New Zealand early childhood education context, the first of its kind.

Brownlee’s book, although published in 1983, bears strong similarities to an influential Australian text *Art for the Child under Seven* for early childhood teachers by Derham published in 1961. Both books are rigid in prescribing the role of the adult, for example,

"We never draw, make or model for the child", "We never tell a child what to draw, make, or model", and "We avoid presenting activities that rob a child of their creativity" (Brownlee, 1983, p. 23). Lowenfeld's ideas appear to be the basis for Derham's conceptual framework and approach to visual art education (McArdle & Piscitelli, 2002); likewise for many of Brownlee's ideas on visual art education for young children. Both books were hugely influential in determining teacher practice in visual art in early childhood contexts in their countries of origin.³

Early childhood curriculum and programme planning, at this time, was left to individual services to determine, yet early childhood teacher training (available only to kindergarten teachers until 1975) had a strong Piagetian developmentalist orientation. This orientation supported ideas generated from visual art research by American educator Kellogg who researched children's drawing styles by examining hundreds of children's drawings. She determined from her observations that children's mark-making and drawing were cross-cultural, universalistic and believed, like Lowenfeld, there were distinct developmental patterns (Koster, 1997). Kellogg advocated unhindered access to drawing opportunities for children without adult interference and was extremely influential in condemning the use of colouring-in books, the use of templates developed by adults, and the use of other "adult gestalts" (Kellogg, 1969, p. 145) such as comic books, in visual art activities for young children.

From the late 1960s a plethora of new early childhood services sprang into existence as a response to New Zealand women's increasing emancipation and their demand for increased child-care, growing desire for Māori for self-determination and language preservation, as well as other ethnic minorities seeking first language and cultural maintenance. Free play was still very much on the early childhood agenda. May (1997, p. 118) describes the period of the 1960s and 1970s as one where "the boundaries of what had been defined as free play were beginning to be pushed...free play was now being conceived in more political terms as having to do with the rights and autonomy of children" (p. 118). Visual art education in New Zealand early childhood settings was predominantly open-ended and child-centred with teachers providing resources and inviting children to play freely with art materials, without adult interference (Bressler, 1994). Table-top activities, that is, art activities set up for children with an adult defined outcome (Lewis, 1998), were considered developmentally inappropriate in the early childhood programme.

Developmentally appropriate art curriculum

During the 1980s early childhood education in New Zealand was strongly influenced by the American Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) model of early childhood education. The 1988 Meade report to government about the state of the curriculum and programme planning in the early childhood sector stated "staff need to assess children's developmental stages, then plan integrated programmes which foster all-round development of individual children..." (Meade, 1988, p. 18). In the DAP model, visual art was seen as a vehicle for creative expression and exploration of materials (Bredekamp, 1986). It was deemed appropriate for teachers to provide materials, but it was not considered appropriate to: expect representational products, give children colouring-in sheets or templates, or ask "what is it?" as this was seen to lead children

to believe that “only the representational picture is valued” (Bredenkamp, 1986, p. 49). A popular mantra used by early childhood teachers when talking about young children’s art was that the process was more important than the product (Koster, 1997).

A uniquely New Zealand visual art initiative that built on ideas of developmentally appropriate practice focused on the provision of child-centred visual art experiences that emerged during the 1980s. Structured Environment Allowing for Communicative Original Happenings (known as SEACOH) aimed at liberating children from undesirable table-top art activities by providing specialised furniture, such as attractive open shelving and screen printing tables, in order to give children easier access to materials which in turn would lead to children’s increased self-determined engagement (Lewis, 1998).

An emphasis on developmentally appropriate curriculum and practice was evident in the Ministry of Education’s (1993) draft curriculum guidelines for early childhood4 - Te Whāriki: Draft guidelines for developmentally appropriate programmes in early childhood services. The draft curriculum centred on the “capabilities, needs, and interests of children at different ages and developmental levels” (p. 14) and an essential part of the document was the description of a developmental continuum (Te One, 2003), as well as explicit age appropriate teaching strategies. Recommendations in relation to visual art education included statements such as “assist children to acquire the necessary skills for expressive activities, such as scissor skills...” and “value the process and the experience, not just the product” (p. 96). It also suggested teachers “encourage and help children to try things out” and “understand that creativity sometimes means ‘breaking the rules’” (p. 96).

The guidelines, although still developmentally-oriented, in many ways heralded a shift from a totally hands-off approach to teaching to one of more involvement suggesting, for example, that “adults provide ‘scaffolding’ for the child’s endeavours” as well as encouraging teachers to create “challenges for creative and complex learning and thinking” (p. 14). Also significant was recognition of the importance of the bi-cultural and multi-cultural make-up of New Zealand, and the way in which social and cultural diversity contributed to children’s learning. In visual art, for example, it was recognised as important that teachers assist children to become “familiar with a selection of the art [and] craft ... which are valued by the cultures of the community”.⁵

An emerging cognitive orientation in visual art education

During the 1990s new theories in visual art education, and education generally, emerged which began to question some of the assumptions and practices postulated by the proponents of developmentalism in visual art education and the legacy of Lowenfeld (Kindler, 1996). Gardner’s (2000) work and theories on multiple intelligences, whilst retaining aspects of developmental theory with regard to visual art education, suggested that visual art was an important dimension to children’s cognition and thinking processes. Kindler and Darras (1994, cited in Koster, 1997) proposed a new model of art development that involved the two-fold process – physical and cognitive development, as well as social and cultural learning. Wilson and Wilson (1997, cited in Kindler, 2004) argued that there was nothing natural or developmental about children’s drawing skills, and that the graphic language of children is culturally acquired.

Alongside the emergence of new theories and debates about children's learning, ideas from the Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) movement in the United States, which promoted educating children about aesthetics, art criticism, art history as well as art production (Boughton, 1999), were being debated and applied in New Zealand. DBAE ideas began to find traction in the visual art strand of some early childhood teacher training courses (Lewis, 1998).

New socio-cultural/constructivist theories from theorists such as Bruner, Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky were beginning to influence early childhood pedagogy in New Zealand (May, 1997; Smith, Grima, Gaffney & Powell, 2000). The first legally mandated and government endorsed early childhood curriculum *Te Whāariki: He Whāariki Matauranga Mo Nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996) began to challenge some of the ideas enshrined in developmentally appropriate practice. As opposed to the draft 1993 curriculum, the new curriculum document introduced pedagogy which strongly emphasised the "critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning," where children learn "through collaboration with adults and peers, through guided participation and observation of others" (p. 9).

Te Whāariki reconceptualises conventional notions of curriculum (Haggerty, 2003) and has a focus on fostering positive dispositions towards learning, where "children and their learning, rather than subject areas, are the starting points for educational thinking" (Smith, 2003, p. 5). As a result, visual art, which had once been positioned as a distinct area of play, became subsumed under a more general Communication Strand in *Te Whāariki*. Learning outcomes for children in the area of visual art are, however, identified in *Te Whāariki*, for example, "Skill and confidence with the processes of art and craft, such as cutting, drawing, collage, painting, print-making, weaving, stitching, carving and constructing" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 80).

The increased emphasis on socially and culturally mediated learning gave extra weight to the need for teachers to recognise the significance of their obligations to bi-culturalism embedded in *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*. Reedy (2003), one of the writers of *Te Whāariki*, suggests that for Māori children visual art is seen as one of the vehicles for emotional expression, developing confidence, and helping create a sense of identity for Māori children. However, because of its non-prescriptive nature of the curriculum document (Nuttall, 2003), the role of the teacher and how teachers can support children's visual art education for all children is not explicit.

In the late 1980s increasing interest in the Reggio Emilia early childhood programmes in Northern Italy began to widen the debate about approaches to young children's learning and the role of the visual art in cognition. Several influential American educationalists, such as Katz, Gardner and Bruner, impressed by the Reggio Emilia approach to educational pedagogy, helped draw the attention of early childhood communities internationally to the Reggio Emilia early childhood programmes. The level of sophistication in children's art from the Reggio Emilia programmes astounded many early childhood educators at the time.

Vygotsky's theories about learning, which were gaining currency in early childhood in the west, were evident in the ways in which the Reggio Emilia programmes provided abundant opportunities for children to use multiple symbolic languages, particularly

visual art, to mediate their thinking and make their thinking visible (Brooks, 2005; Eales, 1996; Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001). A leading pedagogue of the Reggio Emilia programmes, Loris Malaguzzi (1993, p. vi), created the concept of “the 100 languages of children” which challenged the privileged position of spoken language as the central mediation tool for meaning-making and recognised that children have, and need, a larger repertoire of tools such as visual art, in which to explore, understand and learn about their world.

The role of children, teachers, atelieriste (artists employed in the centres), pedagogiste (pedagogues), parents, the wider community, and the environment were shown to play significant roles in supporting and actively scaffolding the social construction of children’s knowledge, particularly in visual art. Reggio programmes demonstrated how important the teacher’s role was in documenting and reflecting on children’s learning as they made their ideas and knowledge visible through their explorations with multiple forms of media. The elegance of the Reggio teachers’ documentation and an emphasis on attractive environmental design heightened awareness of the role of aesthetics in young children’s early childhood environments and how this impacts positively on their learning.

The Reggio Emilia approach (as it came to be known) has helped to position visual art learning experiences as central for children’s learning and cognitive development. Many educators throughout the world turn to Reggio Emilia for inspiration, and early childhood educators in New Zealand are no exception. New Zealand now has a committed core of early childhood educators who have developed two incorporated societies “dedicated to exploring the philosophy of the Reggio Emilia infant and toddler centers and preschools within the cultural context of Aotearoa/New Zealand”⁶ (Reggio Emilia Provocations and Reggio Emilia Aotearoa New Zealand), and interest in Reggio Emilia pedagogy and practice continues to grow.

Nonetheless, regardless of the recent shifts in thinking about visual education, several New Zealand researchers in early childhood visual art (Clark & de Lautour, 2007; Gunn, 2000; Lewis, 1998; Pohio, 2009; Richards, 2009; Terreni, 2009; Visser, 2006) have noted that many New Zealand early childhood teachers still retain a non-interventionist, hands-off position in relation to visual art education (reminiscent of developmentalist practices). This is despite evidence that in other areas of the curriculum teaching is more hands-on, where active scaffolding and co-constructing of children’s learning takes place. It is possible that, unconsciously perhaps, teachers are experiencing a tension and confusion about their role in relation to the teaching of visual art due to the paradigmatic shift in early childhood that has occurred over the last decade. Due to Te Whāriki’s strong emphasis on dispositional learning rather than domain-based learning it may also be the case that many teachers have not had the opportunity, for example through professional development, to critique their own practice in regard to how they are teaching visual art to young children.

Moving forwards

Recognising that visual art provides children with important tools for thinking and learning, and that it is important for teachers to be actively involved in children’s visual art learning experiences is, I believe, fundamental to a successful early childhood visual

art programme that recognises the importance of socially and culturally mediated learning. Teachers not only need to provide children with opportunities for “looking at art, talking about art, as well as well as creating art” (Terreni, 2005, p. 28), they also need to work alongside children, scaffolding or co-constructing work, actively teaching specific art skills and knowledge (Terreni, 2009). Kindler (1996) supports this idea and further argues that adults are pivotal in providing children with more complex experiences that enable them to move to new levels of development and competency in the visual arts by providing visual art learning experiences that are stimulating, challenging, and “slightly above the child’s current level of performance” (Nelson, 1980, cited in Kinder, 1996).

Smith (2003) recognises that sociocultural pedagogy is more culturally inclusive and visual arts programmes using this lens are more likely to be culturally responsive, validating and affirming of children’s identity, and interests. I suggest that teachers are well placed to access “resources and knowledge about the type of visual art children experience in their communities and culture and use this knowledge to enrich their visual art programmes” (Terreni, 2008, p. 67). By finding out information about attitudes to visual art and the types of visual art experiences that are meaningful to children, their families and communities, teachers can then offer a visual art programme that will help provide “an effective pathway for all children – particularly Pasifika and Māori children – to navigate their way through the teaching and learning environment, identifying and constructing their cultural identities...” (Fuemana-Foa’i, Pohio & Terreni (2009, p. 24).

I feel strongly, however, that as early childhood educators in New Zealand become more conversant, competent and confident with sociocultural theory and pedagogy, they will begin to align visual art education with this approach. An historical framework such as the one presented here, that plots the shifts in pedagogy and teaching visual art to young children, may help teachers to more clearly examine and critique their own practices in this domain. This should assist them to move forward in their thinking about visual art and how they can (more) effectively support young children’s visual art learning experiences.

Conclusion

Since 1870 the development of New Zealand early childhood services and emerging ideas about appropriate early childhood curriculum models has had a significant impact on the provision of visual art education for young children. Ideas from visual art theorists and writers (e.g., Lowenfeld, Kellogg, Gardner, and Malaguzzi) have had some influence in determining teacher practice in visual art in early childhood settings. However, changes to early childhood educational pedagogy – from rigid, formalized teacher-directed orientation, to developmentally based and child-centred orientation and, currently, to pedagogical practices that have a socio-cultural orientation – has been perhaps equally, if not more, powerful in determining an approach to visual art education in the New Zealand early childhood sector. To ensure that teacher practice of visual art education is congruent with socio-cultural pedagogy espoused by the New Zealand early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), it may be necessary for teachers to re-examine past practices to enable them to go

forward with new ones.

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(Endnotes)

1 Te Whaariki. He Whaariki Matauranga Mo Nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early Childhood Curriculum was legally mandated by government in 1996.

2 Froebel designed 20 sets of geometric toys (known as gifts). Working with peas and sticks constituted one of the activities related to several of the gifts. "Pea and stick work enables the child to create an endless variety of complex structures. Short sticks of a uniform length with pointed ends are inserted in to peas, which have been softened by soaking in water " (Froebel Web, <http://www.oocities.com/athens/forum/7905/gifts/peastick.html>).

3 Brownlee's book continues to be produced by Playcentre and remains very accessible and popular with teachers and parents.

4 During 1993 and 1996 this document was trialled in many early childhood centres and during this period the Ministry undertook several research projects, using it to develop appropriate "frameworks for assessment and evaluation" (May, 2001, p, 244), which contributed to the development of the final document Te Whaariki. He Whaariki Matauranga Mo Nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early Childhood Curriculum.

5 An aspiration that remained in the final 1996 document.

6 From Reggio Emilia Provocations website <http://www.reggioemilia.org.nz/>

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