



Art in Early Childhood

# **It's a matter of distinction: Bourdieu, art museums, and young children attending early childhood services in New Zealand**

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## **ABSTRACT**

International education research literature shows clearly that an art museum or gallery can provide an important context for young children's learning. Nonetheless, research evidence suggests that whilst early childhood (EC) services in New Zealand sometimes take children on excursions to art museums and galleries, they are not visited frequently. Several barriers to early childhood sector access have been identified in the New Zealand context. These include: lack of government funding to enable art museum/gallery educators work with directly with EC services, limited marketing of exhibitions to the EC sector, and a lack of professional development for teachers in this area. However, the attitudes, dispositions and, perhaps, anxieties around engaging in art museum/gallery visiting by childhood teachers themselves can also influence decisions about visiting these sites. These factors contribute to an art museum visitor's entrance narrative. This paper discusses a Bourdieusian theoretical framework that will be used to analyse and interpret the entrance narratives of a group of early childhood teachers who are involved in my current PhD research, which explores the barriers and facilitators of young children's access to, and use of, art museums/galleries in New Zealand.

## **Introduction**

International education research literature shows clearly that an art museum or gallery can provide an important context for young children's learning. The rich experiences that these institutions offer can support Early Childhood (EC) curriculum goals (Bell, 2011), particularly in the visual arts. Whilst it is likely that many young children visit art museums and galleries in New Zealand (with their families, friends and relations), what is not known is the degree to which young children who attend EC centres (catering for the education of children from 0-5 years of age) visit these institutions as part of their centre's educational programme. Recent research evidence (Terreni, in development), suggests that whilst EC services sometimes take children on excursions to art museums and galleries, they do not visit them frequently. Several barriers to EC sector access have been identified in the New Zealand context in this research. These include: lack of government funding to enable art museum/gallery educators to work directly with EC services, limited marketing of exhibitions to the sector, and a lack of professional development for EC teachers in this domain.

In EC settings in New Zealand, excursion destinations are completely dependent on teachers' decision-making and planning processes and, consequently, teachers' positions of power can diminish children's agency and opportunity in this area. Whilst some of the barriers to EC sector access have been identified at an institutional level (described above), the most crucial

factors in determining young children's access to art museums and galleries are the attitudes, dispositions and, perhaps, anxieties around engaging in art museum/gallery visiting by EC teachers themselves. Doering and Pekarik (1996) suggest that an individual's prior experiences and knowledge, which embodies perceptions and expectations of museums, can influence decisions about art museum/gallery visiting. These factors, they believe, contribute to the development of an individual's 'entrance narrative' in relation to museum visiting (Falk & Doering, 2000). Consequently, a teacher's own individual entrance narrative is likely to play a part in their decision making about art museum/gallery visiting with children.

This paper discusses the proposed theoretical framework that will be used to analyse and interpret the art museum/gallery entrance narratives of 20 EC teachers who are involved in my current PhD research (Terreni, 2013), which explores the barriers and facilitators of young children's access to, and use of, art museums/galleries in New Zealand. The teachers' work in a range of EC settings – a kindergarten (licensed for 40 children aged 2 to 5 years), a privately owned EC centre (licensed for 25 children aged 2 to 5 years), and a community-based EC centre (licensed for 30 children under 5 years, including up to 10 children aged under 2 years). The study straddles Museum and Heritage Studies and Education Studies. In New Zealand, the work of Bourdieu has been used extensively in these fields (see, for instance, Harker & McConnchie, 1985; McCarthy, 2013). Consequently, the framework is likely to have resonance for both of these fields of study.

Using theoretical/conceptual tools based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, it is possible to develop a greater understanding of EC teachers' attitudes towards museum/gallery visiting by applying these tools to teachers' entrance narratives. This should illuminate and explain why attitudes and dispositions have developed and the ways in which these can create barriers to art museum/gallery educational opportunities for children or, conversely, facilitate them. However, to begin this discussion I will give a brief description of EC services in New Zealand, and describe the socio-cultural nature of the EC curriculum. The relevance of a Bourdieuan approach to this research, and its usefulness for investigating and critiquing art museum/gallery visiting by young children attending EC services, is also discussed.

## **Early childhood education in New Zealand, the EC curriculum, and the relevance of a Bourdieuan sociological interpretative framework**

In New Zealand, children under the age of 5 years old have access to a range of EC services. These include both teacher-led services (which include education and care centres, kindergartens, home-based education and care services) and parent-led services (which include playcentres and playgroups). Whilst it is not compulsory for young children to attend EC services, there is a social expectation that children will attend some form of service during the early years, and government initiatives over the past 20 years have resulted in very high rates of participation in the overall population. According to the Ministry of Education's (2013) EC education indicators, participation in the sector has been increasing steadily with 95.7% of children now starting school having attended some form of EC service.

The EC sector has a government mandated EC curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), which fosters a socio-cultural orientation to pedagogy and practice. Theorists, such as Bruner, Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky, who "placed the learning experiences of children in a broader social and cultural context" (May, 2009, p. 246), have been drawn on to develop

curriculum statements that embody this approach. For example, the curriculum document emphasises the “role of socially and culturally mediated learning,” where children learn “through collaboration with adults and peers, through guided participation and observation of others” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

Visual art education is identified in the EC curriculum as an area of learning that is vital for enhancing young children’s opportunities for communication, meaning-making, and making children’s thinking visible. Importantly, the curriculum recognises that not only do children learn through their interactions and collaborations with significant people in their lives (for instance, their families, peers, and teachers), but also with “places and things” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 21) in the EC environment as well as the wider community. Consequently, excursions to places of learning, such as museums and art galleries, can play an important role in young children’s education experiences, particularly in the visual arts. The relationship children develop with the places and spaces that exhibit the nation’s art collections, their developing familiarity with the artifacts and objects that are displayed there, how to interact with art works, and an understanding of the people who work in these institutions is likely to help lay a foundation or disposition for ongoing museum visiting throughout their lives (Bell, 2010).

The work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has attracted attention in a range of disciplines within the social sciences (education), museum and heritage studies (see, for instance, writing by McCarthy, 2013; Newman, 2005; Savage & Bennet, 2005). Many of Bourdieu’s conceptual ideas, or thinking tools as he described them (Grenfell & Hardy, 2007; Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002), have also had considerable traction in education research. Several New Zealand educationalists have embraced his theories as a way of explaining social and cultural differences in academic achievement in primary and secondary schooling (see Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990; Harker & McConnochie, 1985; Nash, Harker, & Charters, 1990).

Bourdieu’s ideas, however, also have relevance and application to the EC education context. Klibthong (2012), an Australian early education researcher who has examined inclusive education for young children, suggests that many of Bourdieu’s key ideas are useful tools for critically examining teacher practice. She believes that “Bourdieuian conceptual tools offer refreshing epistemological and reflective radars for re-imagining and enacting pedagogical practices” (p. 71), and that this mode of critical social theory can provide a helpful “methodological tool for analysing and critiquing educational systems, which are plagued with power, the status-quo and approaches that limit the enactment of equity, social justice and innovative practices” (p. 72). As in inclusive education, decision-making about EC curriculum, pedagogy and practice can be usefully critiqued in relation to teacher/child power relationships, particularly in relation to the provision of visual arts education opportunities such as art museum/gallery visiting.

Grenfell and Hardy (2007) consider that arts research and education are areas where a Bourdieuian perspective can offer useful insights and provide “exemplification of the ‘rules of art’ in various areas of the art field” (p. 3), particularly art museums. Bourdieu and Darbel’s (1991) seminal study into the characteristics of the European museum-going public in the 1960s contributed greatly to raising awareness of the, perhaps, less visible characteristics of barriers to access that are created by education and social class. Consequently, in the field of museum and heritage studies, many scholars (for instance, Stam, 2005) attribute Bourdieu’s work to the development of a critical rethinking of the role of art museums and consideration

of the variables that contribute to the hindering of equitable access by the public. Like Stam, New Zealand scholars Mason and McCarthy (2006) suggest the social critique inherent in Bourdieu and Darbel's research can be a useful way of considering who may be excluded (such as children attending EC centres) from accessing the elite stocks of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991; Bennet & Silva, 2006) that can be found in art museums and galleries.

Bourdieu and Darbel (1991) advocated strongly for schools to be active in the process of children's enculturation into the world of art, through facilitating their exposure to art museums and galleries. Their research suggested that intellectual access to art collections, i.e., the knowledge of, and familiarity with specific cultural practices that enable individuals to respond to works of art appropriately "increases very strongly with increasing level of education" (p. 14). Their research recognised that education is a tool to help children appreciate, understand and value the many forms of visual art in order for them to experience a love of art. One of the important roles of schools, they believed, was to provide programs that would help with the "inculcation of artistic culture" (p. 60). In EC visual arts education, consideration of Bourdieu's ideas in relation to art museum/gallery visiting has the power to create new pathways for EC programs. As Mills (2008) suggests, Bourdieu's ideas offer "transformative potential in his theoretical constructs and that these suggest possibilities for schools, [EC centres], and teachers to improve the educational outcomes of...students" (p. 79). EC teachers are in a position to provide new transformative opportunities for children's learning by offering visual art learning experiences that can develop fresh interests, awareness and understandings in areas where, perhaps, children (and their families) have had no experience or opportunities to acquire cultural knowledge. As a result, these experiences contribute to the development of children's acquisition of cultural capital in the field of art education.

It is important to recognise that Bourdieu and Darbel's (1991) research on art museum visiting, and Bourdieu's sociological analysis of taste and aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1984) have sometimes been criticised as too deterministic by over emphasising the effects of social class (Merriman, 1989; Mills, 2008; Newman, 2005) rather than an individual's personal agency. Prior (2005) suggests that museums have changed over the last century and, consequently, have made education and the accessibility of exhibitions central to their development. These observations will be important to keep in mind. Nonetheless, despite institutional changes and efforts to be more encompassing of diverse audiences, access to the education services offered by many art museums/galleries in New Zealand continue to privilege some groups of learners over others. Also, because EC teachers' individual dispositions towards art museum visiting remain key determinants of children's access to, and use of, art museums and galleries, a Bourdieuan analytic framework can be helpful for unpacking teachers' personal entrance narratives and, as a consequence, offers teachers opportunities for reflection and insight into their own teaching practices (Klibthong, 2012; Mills, 2008). Three of Bourdieu's major conceptual tools that are relevant for analysing and critiquing teachers' pedagogy and practice are described in the following section.

## **Bourdieu's theories of habitus, cultural capital, and field**

### *Habitus*

The notion of habitus i.e., “internalised embodied social structures” and “cultural unconscious or mental habits or internalised master dispositions” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 18) is a key conceptual tool used by Bourdieuan theorists to explain certain social and cultural phenomena. Klibthong (2012) suggests that habitus involves “the beliefs, values, norms and attitudes of individuals” (p. 72). Webb et al. (2002) believe that habitus can be understood “as the values and dispositions gained from our cultural history” (p. 44). They argue that dispositions, which embody “capacities, tendencies, propensities or inclinations” (Mills, 2008, p. 80), generally stay with us across the myriad of different contexts we inhabit, and while these enable us to “respond to cultural rules and contexts in a variety of ways” (p. 44), our responses are usually pretty much determined by our cultural history. Habitus is formed through family, class, ethnicity, and, importantly, through education. And as Bourdieu suggests, “the habitus acquired within the family underlines the structuring of school experiences...and habitus is transformed by schooling... [which] in turn underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences” (Bourdieu, 1972, cited in Baker & Brown, 2008). In the educational context, Klibthong (2012), for instance, argues that habitus can influence:

“...the ways teachers relate with children and how they teach and involve them in activities. The mental structures and dispositions from which teachers make choices of the types of teaching approaches to use, and how they teach to include or exclude children from active participation in school work, are generated within the habitus.”(p. 72)

Mills (2008) argues that whilst habitus shapes an individual’s life choices, it does not determine them. Whilst some individuals “will recognise the constraint of social conditions and conditionings and tend to read a future that fits them”, others “may recognise the capacity for improvisation and tend to generate opportunities for action in the social field” (p. 82). Awareness, then, has the potential to transform and change an individual’s action and choices. Insights gained through an awareness of the constraints as well as opportunities that habitus can generate may lead EC teachers to understand and/or examine their teaching practices more closely.

### *Cultural capital*

Habitus, in turn, influences the formation of another social phenomenon, that of cultural capital. Cultural capital is described by Bennet and Silva (2006) as a particular stock of cultural competencies which provide the knowledge of, and familiarity with, specific cultural practices. In an art museum context, for instance, these competencies enable individuals to respond to cultural works/objects (such as art work) appropriately through a process of internalised decoding (Mason, 2005).

Cultural capital is likely to shape an individual’s level of (art) museum literacy. As Bourdieu (1984) remarks, “a work of art has meaning and interest for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded” (p. 2) and that “the ‘eye’ is a product of history reproduced by education” (p. 3). Museum literacy is described by Stapp (1984) as the “mastery of the language of museum objects and familiarity with the museum as an institution” (p. 3), which, he suggests, is something that needs to be learnt. The types of skills needed to be developed to become museum literate are elaborated by Gazzeri and Brown (2010). These, they suggest, include:

- the possession of sufficient cultural capital for decoding and appreciating complex cultural products found in a museum;
- sufficient acquaintance with the consumption of complex cultural products and be motivated by this to undertake further visiting;
- sufficient self-esteem and trust in their own skills and education to negotiate and appreciate the museum context.

The way cultural capital shapes EC teachers' attitudes to, and competencies with using art museums and galleries is a relevant consideration for this study. It is possible that EC teachers' own cultural capital (perhaps unconsciously) and their own levels of museum literacy may either hinder or help young children's access to art museums. Both EC teachers' and art museum educators' understandings and awareness of the concept of art museum literacy and the role in which visual art learning opportunities in art museums can foster children's museum literacy can be illuminated with the application of notions of cultural capital in the visual arts field.

Bourdieu firmly believed that "all the means have to be used, from nursery school, to give all children the experience that children from well-off social groups owe to their families—contact with cultural works, and with other aspects of modern society" (cited in Grenfell, 2004, p. 90) and organised trips to museums, therefore, play an extremely important role in this equalising of opportunity. It is important to consider the implications of art museum visiting as part of an EC visual art programme for children and their families, and how such learning experiences can add to children's cultural capital in this field of visual arts education and socialisation. Added to this is the possibility that teachers' own cultural capital can be developed through use of art museums as part of the EC programme.

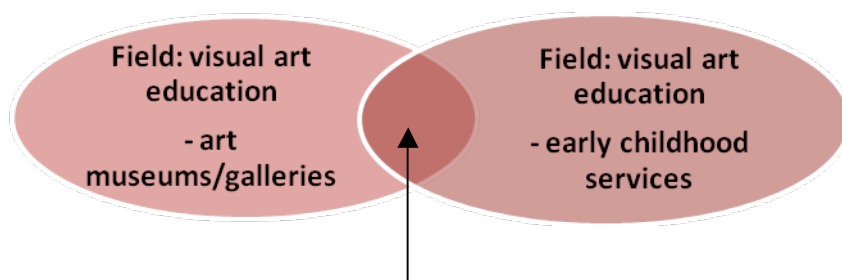
### *Field*

Habitus and cultural capital are acted out in what Bourdieu defined as a social field, i.e., a particular social space in which individuals are located. Each discrete field (and individuals can operate in a number of different fields) has specific rules, either explicit or implicit, with which an individual needs to comply in order to have access to positions of power within the field. Engleby (2011) suggests that "each field is defined by a set of social relationships (or social locations) that are organised according to a shared understanding about the meaning of what goes on inside the field" (p. 2). Webb et al. (2002), add that cultural field is defined by a myriad of factors such as "institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles" which create certain "discourses and activities" (p. 44) specific to the field.

Using a football analogy, Grenfell (2008) notes that fields "are shaped differently according to the game that is played on them" (p. 68). In my research, although participants share the same field of visual art education, the rules, discourses, and activities in each site (art museums and EC centres) may be shared, complementary, but also conflicting. For instance, EC visual art education in Aotearoa New Zealand is, generally, integrated into all EC programs where pre-school children explore visual art learning in holistic, play-based programs. In this context, teachers encourage children to use a range of traditional art media freely – including painting, drawing, clay, construction, collage, and printmaking.

The emphasis in most EC settings is on provision of in-centre art-making experiences with minimal intervention in the artistic process from the teacher” (Terreni, in press). This context for visual art education can differ considerably from the one delivered in an art museum context where art educators may offer programmes that use the museum’s art collection as the basis for more structured, educator-guided learning experiences.

Within each of these different fields of visual arts education, another of Bourdieu’s conceptual tools – the notion of cultural distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) i.e., where some forms of art and (art) experience are preferred and given distinction over others – is useful. Determining similar (and dissimilar) ideas about art education for young children held by art museum educators and EC teachers, and discovering the areas that each site considers are the most important and the most valued/valuable for children’s learning, can provide insights into programme development (in both contexts) that most suit young learners (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The place where values and practices may intersect, but which may also bring to light areas of distinction.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed Bourdieu’s conceptual constructs that will provide the theoretical framework to be used in my doctoral research examining the EC sector’s access to, and use of, art museums in Aotearoa New Zealand. This theoretical approach has provided researchers in the fields of education and museum and heritage studies with viable tools for inquiry, which are relevant to my study. As McCarthy (2013) suggests, “there is continuing relevance for a cultural sociology which can sharpen the social dimension of visitor studies” (p. 188). I also argue that while Bourdieu’s ideas continue to have relevance in the many realms of museum visitor research, this is particularly so when considering issues of access facing New Zealand’s youngest museum visitors who attend EC centres.

Bourdieu’s key concepts of habitus, cultural capital, and field provide the fundamental tools for this inquiry. However, as other museum researchers (Hood, 1983; Merriman, 1989; Newman, 2005; Prior, 2005) have suggested, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is likely that a multiplicity of factors can play a part in visitor access. However, Bourdieu’s conceptual tools still remain relevant and useful for considering young children’s access to art museums and galleries in New Zealand, where inequities exist in relation to access for this group of visitors. For those who believe that children should have the right to have access to, and participation in the rich opportunities for leisure, education and culture that art museums and galleries can provide, this research should provide knowledge and information that will support increased advocacy in this area.

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