‘Choosing the good things’: Reconceptualising and reopening discourses surrounding visual arts pedagogies in early childhood education

Sarah Probine

Lecturer Manukau Institute of Technology, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

In New Zealand the visual arts remain a domain that is often fraught with pedagogical confusion, despite the fact that sociocultural theories now strongly underpin both the curriculum and teaching practices of the early childhood sector. This paper endeavours to provoke discussion surrounding this uncertainty through demonstrating how the teachers in one early childhood centre negotiated the process of developing visual arts pedagogies that positioned the visual arts as a valuable tool in the construction and co-construction of knowledge. These narratives were collected as part of a wider study that sought to explore the connections between teacher's pedagogical beliefs in the visual arts and children's visual arts experiences in the classroom. A combination of traditional qualitative methods and ideas derived from the arts-based methodology of a/r/tography were used throughout each stage of the research process, allowing both visual and textual data to be privileged as important sources of knowledge. The findings revealed several complex influences that had informed the teachers' thinking, as well as some key factors that had allowed pedagogical shifts to occur. For instance, all of the teachers discussed the impact of exploring the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia. The teachers also shared that participation in the research project itself, particularly through the use of reflective art journals, allowed the teachers to further develop their visual arts pedagogies. This finding highlights the role arts-based research can play in exploring and re-thinking visual arts pedagogies.

INTRODUCTION

In New Zealand, sociocultural theories have become deep-rooted within the early childhood sector and they underpin the early childhood curriculum document, TeWhāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996). Despite this, current research shows that developmental, modernist ideas, where the child is considered innately creative and therefore not requiring adult intervention, and in some cases, a reproductive approach, where the teacher directs and controls the art experience, continue to influence many teachers' visual arts pedagogies (Pohio, 2009; Richards, 2007; Terreni, 2010; Visser, 2005; Wright, 2003). There is, however, promising evidence that some teachers have found ways to move across educational paradigms (Fleer, 2004). These teachers have reconceptualised their visual arts pedagogies, informed by sociocultural theories, and in

some cases have been influenced by the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia. Unfortunately, the narratives of these teachers are not always easy to access, and for this reason there have been calls for wider networks to be established where teachers can share their visual arts practices, and for further research to be undertaken that makes visual arts practices, informed by sociocultural theories, more visible (Richards &Terreni, 2013).

The aim of this research was to address some of these incongruities through conducting a case study in a setting in which the teachers had negotiated the process of reconceptualising their visual arts practices, and in turn, valued the visual arts as a mediating device in the construction of knowledge. The study drew upon both traditional qualitative methods (Punch, 2009) as well as ideas from the arts-based methodology of a/r/tography (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2009). A/r/tograhy values both text and image as important sources of knowledge within each stage of the research process (Leavy, 2009) and informed the use of reflective art journals for the teachers as well as the creation of two a/r/tographic images by the researcher at the conclusion of the study. These images responded to the findings in visual terms and allowed another way of seeing and interpreting the data. The integration of visual methods allowed the teachers to share their personal narratives about how their attitudes towards the visual arts had developed, and uncovered several key factors that had allowed them to develop their understandings of the roles the visual arts can play as children construct and co-construct knowledge. A significant finding was the teacher's engagement with the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia, which had provoked them to reconceptualise their images of childhood as well as to rethink and redevelop their roles as teachers. An additional finding was the value of engaging in the research process itself, which allowed the teachers to re-focus and reflect on their own visual arts teaching practices once again, and as a result to develop new pedagogical ideas. This research offers teachers wishing to reconceptualise their visual arts pedagogies some possible pathways through which they could begin to travel as they begin this process.

POSITIONING THE VISUAL ARTS AS A TOOL FOR LEARNING

Within the socio-cultural/constructivist framework that informed this study, learning was understood as a process through which children construct knowledge through their relationships with each other and with more knowledgeable others through negotiating shared meanings (Vygotsky, 1962). Brooks (2009) explains that a Vygotskian socio-constructivist lens allows us to understand the visual arts as a tool for constructing meaning. Brooks (2009) built on Vygotsky's theory which focused on the role of language as a "mediating system" (Vygotsky, 1962, p.6) and went on to argue when visual art is acknowledged as a language in its own right, it also becomes a mediating tool in the creation of knowledge, positioning it as an intellectual, complex domain through which human experience can be analysed, problematized and communicated (Robertson, 2000; Schiller, 2000).

WHY DO THE VISUAL ARTS REMAIN AN AREA FRAUGHT WITH PEDAGOGICAL CONFUSION?

It has been argued that the pedagogical beliefs that teachers hold about childhood, the visual arts, and the role the visual arts play in education, influence teachers' choices about when children create art, with what materials and how they will engage in this process (Bae, 2004; Clark & de Lautour, 2013; Eisner, 1978; McArdle, 2003, 2012; Wright, 2003). Teachers hold considerable power within the classroom, but they are also strongly influenced by the

cultural values of the contexts in which they work (Clark & Grey, 2013). Given both of these tenets, it is valuable to explore how attitudes and understandings of the visual arts and their role in education have developed. Three main pedagogical approaches to the visual arts have developed throughout the evolution of Westernised early childhood education. Wright (2003) referred to these as the productive (child centred), reproductive (teacher directed) and guided learning approaches (a collaborative approach underpinned by sociocultural theories). Each of these approaches reflects a markedly different understanding of learning and of knowledge construction.

McArdle (2003) used the metaphor of the palimpsest to explain how visual arts pedagogies have evolved over time with little critical evaluation of the influence of earlier ideas, and that the result of under examination can mean that previous approaches can sometimes inform teachers practices in unpredictable ways (McArdle, 2012). For example, modernist developmentalist attitudes towards visual arts practices continue to influence the work of some teachers. This productive approach positions the child as innately creative, a child who will unfold and develop if given appropriate materials and the freedom of time and space in which to explore and express themselves without adult intervention. McClure (2011) argues that this image of the child as 'expressive' and 'unfolding' has led to an under-theorisation of visual arts practices, and this has led to a deeply entrenched fear of intervention (Eisner, 1973; McArdle, 2012; Richards, 2007). Furthermore, this belief has led to many teachers not seeing the value in gaining content knowledge of the visual arts.

In New Zealand, this phenomena may have been further exacerbated by a lack of guidance from the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, TeWhāriki (MoE, 1996). A non-interventionist approach sits in opposition to the sociocultural framework that underpins the curriculum, however some of the language used could confuse educators. For example, the document states that children should "experience an environment where they discover and develop… skill and confidence with the processes of art" (p.80). This statement could be interpreted as a developmental perspective in which it is the teacher's role to simply provide the materials (Kelly &Jurisich, 2010; Richards, 2007). McArdle (2012) also identified that many teachers have grown up within a modernist paradigm themselves. Therefore their own teachers may have been mainly admirers and dispensers of materials and this may also have contributed to their lack of confidence in their ability to teach the visual arts. This notion highlights the potential for teachers past visual arts experiences, embedded in the cultural and social contexts they have grown up in, to influence their current visual arts pedagogies (Clark & Grey, 2013; Probine, 2014; Veale, 2000).

RECONCEPTUALISING VISUAL ARTS PEDAGOGIES

Despite the confusion of educational discourses surrounding the visual arts, some early childhood teachers have managed to move across educational paradigms to reconceptualise their visual arts practices within a sociocultural curriculum framework. For some of those teachers, exposure to the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia have been the catalyst that has allowed this to occur. Interest in Reggio Emilia began to gain momentum in New Zealand from the 1980's, and of significance is the role the visual arts play within this approach, whereby they are viewed as integral to children's knowledge construction (Gandini, 1998; 2005; Malaguzzi, 1998; Vecchi, 2010). These ideas have been interpreted by educators in varying ways, and in some cases this has provoked concern from educationalists who have warned that this

educational approach could easily be appropriated with little critical analysis of what it means when working in a markedly different cultural context (Miller & Pound, 2010). Johnson (1999) argues, in his critique of teachers seeking understanding of the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia, that many teachers maintain "a quick-fix attitude, an unwillingness to intellectualise important issues in our field" (p.69). Additionally, Tobin (2005) argues that educational standards should be culturally and contextually situated. Millikan (2003) however, values the way that exploring the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach can in some cases act as a catalyst for change. She explained how this process had allowed some educators to deconstruct and reconceptualise some of the foundational principles of their own educational contexts that have become assumed truths. This is a valuable potential outcome as McClure (2011) explains:

> As educators and scholars have noted for decades (Wilson, 1974; Thompson, 2003), common knowledge (what-goes-without-saying) skips over the accumulated insights of research and nestles itself reassuringly within myth (p.131).

Close examination and reflection on past experiences has also been noted by a number of authors as valuable in helping educators become aware of the images of childhood they hold and how their ideas surrounding the visual arts, and its role in education, have come to be (Clark & de Lautour, 2013; Eisner, 1973; McArdle, 2003, 2012; McClure, 2011; Pohio, 2009; Richards, 2007; Wright, 2003). Eisner (1973) argued that this was a fundamental process if educators were able to move beyond the influences of modernisim and McClure (2011) argues for "a repositioning of young children's art and visual culture as legitimate sites of cultural knowledge production in order to ameliorate a restrictive view of childhood" (p.127). Positioning the visual arts as such, highlights the importance of teachers developing clear visual arts philosophies (McArdle, 2003; Wright, 2003) as well as understanding how their images of childhood impact their visual arts pedagogies (Bayes, 2005; Edwards, Gandini& Forman, 1998; McArdle, 2003, 2008). As part of this process Vecchi (2010) also highlighted the importance of collaborative teaching discussions. She said "for years, the teachers and myself learned to undo learning" (p.108). The value of this practice was also noted by Bayes (2005) who found dialogue with others was a significant factor in impacting change within a teaching community. What role can arts-based research play in reconceptualising visual arts practices?

WHAT ROLE CAN ARTS-BASED RESEARCH PLAY IN RECONCEPTUALISING VISUAL ARTS PRACTICES?

Several authors have identified that a lack of confidence in the visual arts can impact on teachers visual arts pedagogies (Clark & de Lautour, 2013; Wright, 2003), however it has been found that through engaging in practical arts experiences and through becoming visually literate, teachers can begin to address these fears (McArdle, 2112; Pohio, 2013). For example, Craw and Grey (2013) maintain that "engaging with visual art, including responding to and critiquing artists' works can create new spaces to think in, through and with art in an early childhood context" (p.87). In this way, visual art itself becomes a domain through which new research can be conducted, a practice that has been embraced internationally (Irwin & Springgay, 2008; Kind, 2010; Leavy, 2009).

INTRODUCING THE STUDY

This study sought to explore how teacher's visual arts pedagogies had evolved and what

impact this had on the ways children used the visual arts as a tool for learning. The setting selected valued image-making within children's learning and was influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach. The intention was to present a transparent and carefully documented process of how educators, children and a community had travelled to their current practices and understandings, and to discover factors that had been significant in shaping the teachers' pedagogies, which were underpinned by socio-cultural/constructivist theories. This rationale aligned with the notion that visual arts practices are strongly influenced by teachers' beliefs and values (Craw, 2011; Lewin-Benham, 2011; McArdle, 2012; Pohio, 2009; Visser, 2005) and that the act of examining these values can be significant in shifting thinking (Lewin-Benham, 2011).

The centre selected for the study was a community-based early childhood centre in Auckland that provided for a diverse multicultural community. The teachers were also ethnically diverse. Ethical approval was attained from the University of Auckland's ethics committee. It was required that the anonymity of the research participants be maintained and the six teacher participants chose pseudonyms for the reporting of the data.

METHODOLOGY

A combination of qualitative methods (Punch, 2009) and a/r/tography (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Leavy, 2009) underpinned the methodological framework. A/r/tography acknowledges the complex roles the researcher navigates and makes space for the voices of 'teacher' and the 'artist' to also contribute to the research process (Leavy, 2009). This methodological framework acknowledges both text and image as important sources of knowledge (Leavy, 2009). A/r/tographers acknowledge 'knowing' as being subjective, and recognise 'doing' as a means of assisting 'knowing' more deeply (Irwin & Springgay, 2008). These concepts worked well with the socio-cultural/constructivist ideas that underpinned the study. A rationale for employing a/r/tographic ideas was also strengthened by the notion that engaging with visual images could act as a vehicle through which participants could explore their own relationship with visual art (Craw, 2011). Thus, including visual elements in each stage of the research process – what a/r/tographers refer to as 'living inquiry' – sought to evoke a different response from the research audience because images can provoke the viewer to 'see' in another way (Leavy, 2009).

These principles informed the choice of data collection methods. The teachers were asked to create participatory art journals within which they could reflect on and record their beliefs and values surrounding the visual arts. They were prompted to consider their own past experiences with the visual arts as well as how their beliefs around teaching had evolved and had influenced their ideas about the role of visual art in children's learning. This data could be recorded through self-made images, found images or textual entries. At the end of the data collection period, in which classroom observations, four interviews with children and evidence of children's visual art making had also been collected, all of the teachers participated

Figure 1: From a student journal.

in a focus group interview.

Validity was sought through communicating with participants during each step of the research process. Leavy (2009) argues that arts-based research has disrupted traditional means for ensuring validity due to the subjective nature of knowledge. Therefore the research participants were given several opportunities to view the findings and offer their responses. Data analysis was also approached within an interpretive, qualitative research paradigm (Punch, 2009). Textual data was transcribed and summarized and from this patterns and recurrent themes were identified across the data in relation to the research questions and to the literature. A system of coding was then applied to each data set gained from both teachers and children (Punch, 2009). A key component of each data set were the visual images. These images were not analysed with the intention of translating them into text but rather, they served to "build a bridge between the visual and the verbal" (Collier & Collier, 1996, p. 169). In order to comprehend the data in visual terms, it was also interpreted through two a/r/tographic pieces created by myself, the researcher. The purpose of these images was to make visible my own subjective interpretation of the data and the research questions, but also to offer another means to understand the patterns and concepts that had emerged from the data in a visual format (Stephenson, 2004).

FINDINGS

The five of the six teachers involved in the study recorded over a month long period some reflections regarding some of their past and present experiences with the visual arts in reflective art journals. These uncovered a range of factors that had influenced the teachers perceptions of their own abilities in the visual arts, the role images played in their everyday lives as well as how the visual arts figured in their teaching pedagogies. Although each teacher had a unique story to tell, parallels and connections could be made and several key factors emerged that had been significant in shaping current visual arts practices.

CHANGING EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSES

Kaeppler (1971, cited in Clark & Grey, 2013) contends that the ways that the arts are valued and are then taught within educational institutions are fundamentally influenced by the cultural context within which they are situated. Anning and Ring (2003) support this view as they explain that children are "encultured into using a wide range of graphicacy through their everyday experiences" (p.x) and through her research, Veale (2000) highlighted the significant influence early life experiences and role models in the arts had on how attitudes to the visual arts develop later in life. Given this, it was not surprising that all of the teachers made reference to some of their earliest visual experiences.

The majority of the teachers had experienced a didactic visual arts education as very young children within India and parts of Asia. They described these experiences as involving the rote copying of images and described the impact such experiences had had on their developing visual arts identities. For example, Hannah said:

> I had to listen to my teachers and did what they asked/said. This one-way teaching made me feel bored and frightened about learning. I did not have enough time to think and did not know how to investigate more deeply the information that I was 'given' and transform that information to something that would make sense of my life. It made me feel I was not

capable of learning…

For Hannah, the presence of a family members who shared their appreciation for the visual arts lessened the effects of such experiences. She explained that when she immigrated to New Zealand in her high school years she was able to embrace photography as a means to make sense of this experience. She said:

> It was possible to move with my camera and capture with my camera, and to communicate with images. It was a language that did not need any translation because photography can be read in many different languages.

Lucia, the head teacher in the centre, had experienced a childhood in which image making was valued as a cognitive act. Lucia perceived how these early influences still informed how she valued the visual both in the way she processed information as an adult and in her current teaching practices (Veale, 2000). She illustrated this idea visually in her journal, as shown in figure 1 where she expressed how she processed ideas through images.

Through the telling of these stories McArdles' (2003) metaphor of the palimpsest became visible, for, although later experiences continued to shape and influence the teachers'perceptions of the visual arts, fragments of these initial experiences remained visible and could be seen through the way they approached their reflective journals. For some of the teachers, creating images to think through ideas came naturally, whereas for others this is something they did by textual means.

All of the teachers who had first shared early didactic educational experiences later immigrated to New Zealand where they undertook their teacher training. Hannah and Ginger both shared how their experiences of tertiary education in New Zealand had changed their thinking. This had occurred after the publication of *TeWhāriki* (MoE, 1996) and they explained how the influence of sociocultural/constructivist theories had allowed them to value the visual arts as a valuable learning domain, and hence had developed strong visual arts philosophies.

Conversely, Lucia who had undertaken her teacher training before the publication of *TeWhāriki* (MoE, 1996) expressed her frustration at the dominance of a developmental perspective of the arts. These ideas sat in opposition to her own past experiences and this made it difficult for her to embrace the notion that children's creativity should be able to develop naturally without interaction from adults, an idea that continues to inform the practice of many early childhood educators within New Zealand (Richards, 2007). Lucia stated:

> I found it quite soul destroying because there was no space for creativity. You would watch children paint a single stroke at the easel and then that was it, they were done. I felt it was because we didn't ever sit, we weren't supposed to ask "tell me about what you are doing there, or what are you thinking?"… they were meant to be left free to express.

REGGIO EMILIA AS A PROVOCATION FOR CHANGE

The pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia were unanimously acknowledged by the teachers as highly significant in changing their perspectives on how visual art could be used within children's learning. Concerns have been raised regarding the misinterpretation or under-

examination of this pedagogical approach (Carter, 2009; Cadwell, 1997; Haplin, 2011; Miller & Pound, 2010; Millikan, 2003; Pohio, 2009, 2013). Others, however, argue that examination of a different cultural educational site can provoke another way of seeing, and a way of challenging implicit educational norms (Haplin, 2011; Pohio, 2009; Author, 2014). The findings of this research made it clear that this community had not appropriated these ideas without examination of their own identities and community values, but rather this contact had disrupted their assumptions about childhood and children's capabilities in the visual arts.

Lucia's trip to Reggio Emilia, in Italy, had been significant for the teaching team. Hannah said:

> When Lucia came back from Reggio, after that I understood more about how children can do it and art could be part of my work, not just my life.

Lucia talked about how engaging with the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia had altered her understanding of the role of the visual arts within children's thinking and learning. She explained how, even though she h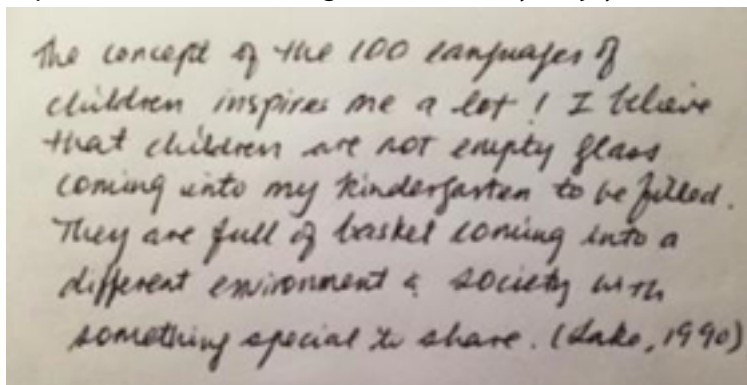ad always enjoyed children's art making, she didn't take children's ideas seriously until she saw the work the educators of Reggio Emilia were doing.

Figure 2: Fragment from Hannah's journal.

The teachers all agreed that the most important aspect of engaging in these pedagogical ideas was how that had been provoked to reconceptualise their images of childhood, as well as their understanding of their roles as teachers. Bayes (2005), Edwards et al (1993) and McArdle (2003, 2008) all contend that the images of childhood held by teachers strongly inform their visual arts pedagogies. For the participant teachers, their engagement with Reggio Emilia enabled them to reconstruct their images of childhood and to rethink how visual arts could be used as an integrated part of children's inquiries. I found in this setting that the provocation of Reggio Emilia had been one of the ways in which the teachers were able to make this shift and the visual arts had been repositioned as a dominant language within this learning community.

Of particular significance for the teachers had been the first long term project they had all collaborated on where the children had used the visual arts as a research tool. This had occurred soon after Lucia arrived back from Reggio the first time. These factors when combined created a catalytic moment in the centre's journey in using visual art as a tool for learning. Lucia explained:

> It was going to Reggio Emilia and learning something and coming back, getting excited as a team and having that project be so successful. It was a really powerful motivating force.

The teachers agreed that one of the reasons this project was so successful was that they were all at a point where they wanted to make a change. They needed a new challenge and they wanted to dig deeper in their practices. Malin explained that "all the children were suddenly drawing and we could see the collaboration". The success of this project served to motivate a long-term shift in the way the teachers now integrated visual arts experiences within children's everyday

experiences, an example of which can been seen in Figure 3.

Exposure to Reggio Emilia had also allowed the teachers to relocate themselves as learners alongside the children. Robertson (cited in Millikan, 2003) echoed this experience, as she explained that engaging with this pedagogical approach had given her a framework in which asking questions, not knowing, and research were all permissible. Tobin (2005) who challenges the importation of Westernised educational ideas, also states that "quality in early childhood education should be a process rather than a product, an ongoing conversation rather than a document" (p.434). The teachers at this educational community were continuously reflecting on, and renegotiating, their pedagogical approaches together (Edw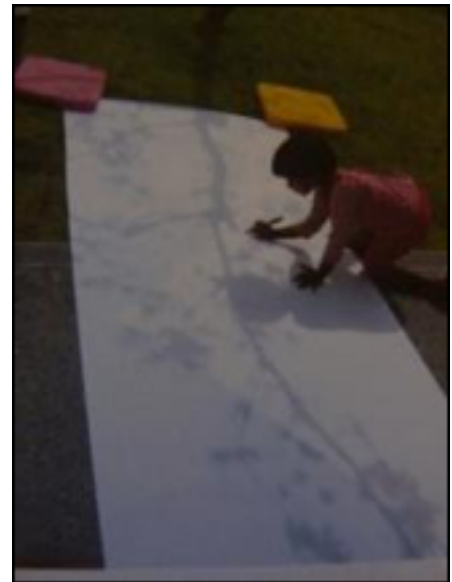ards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). They did not feel they had reached their destination in their practices, but were instead continuously renegotiating their approaches to teaching. This manifested itself through engagement in regular collaborative pedagogical discussions, at which the teachers expressed a desire to extend their content knowledge. These attitudes have been shown in the literature as fundamental to developing visual arts pedagogies that value the visual arts as a tool for learning. For instance, the examination of how past experiences have shaped teachers beliefs and values in the visual arts has been shown as a key factor in moving across educational paradigms (Clark & de Lautour, 2013; Eisner, 1973; McArdle, 2003, 2012; McClure, 2001; Pohio, 2009; Richards, 2007; Wright, 2003). The teachers demonstrated their value for this process through the way in which they committed themselves to the research process, a dimension that was particularly evident through the degree of reflection demonstrated in the participatory art journals.

Figure 3: Fragment from Hannah's journal.

DEVELOPING A SHARED COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Debate over the degree of content knowledge required to facilitate sociocultural visual arts practices has been addressed by several authors (Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Richards &Terreni, 2013). McArdle (2012) explains that in many cases a lack of confidence in the arts can lead to teachers not pursuing further content knowledge. Several of the participant teachers had shared narratives about the constraints and impacts of some of their earliest visual arts experiences and so their demonstration of their desire to learn and know more about visual art, expressed in each participatory art journal, was therefore a significant finding in its own right and the motivation provided by the centre's leadership was noteworthy in developing a culture of learning amongst the teachers. This was manifested in the way in which Lucia shared her experiences and learning following her two visits to Reggio Emilia. Her deep regard for the visual arts had enabled the teachers, in turn, to develop their understanding. In response, they demonstrated a thirst for knowledge and appreciation for professional development opportunities that allowed them to examine their own practices. Hannah explained:

Professional development helped to change how I see children, it helped me to examine my

past and choose the good things.

Under Lucia's leadership, the teachers engaged in collaborative pedagogical discussions on a daily basis. Vecchi (2010) regards such conversations amongst teaching teams as a means for reconceptualising thinking, and for making sense of the complex factors that inform visual arts pedagogies. The participant teachers explained that they constantly engaged in pedagogical discussions as they tried to make sense of children's representations and thinking.

ARTS-BASED RESEARCH AS A PROVOCATION FOR FURTHER THINKING

It was interesting to note how the process of making their participant art journals had provoked the teachers to think deeply about the role of visual art in their work and the impact of what they did, as teachers, and they had all approached the journals in different ways. Both Cathy and Malin had turned to literature in order to deepen their understanding, others, such as Lucia and Ginger, created images alongside their written reflections as a means to explore their ideas, and Hannah had used found images in order to express her ideas.

Figure 4: Fragment from Lucia's journal

Ginger noted that this research process had helped to reinforce her belief that visual art is a way for children to communicate, and she had changed the way she saw them. All of the teachers agreed that the process of being involved in this project had allowed them to focus on their practices in this one specific area. Lucia said:

> We have been able to see ourselves through your eyes which is a gift, because when you work in a place with other people you don't always see what you do as anything productive. So you have given us a glimpse of seeing from a new perspective and that has been a really powerful thing.

At the end of the data collection period the teaching team had decided to create a specific art studio, or atelier, within the centre and Hannah became the studio teacher. Lucia explained how a significant part of this decision had been due to participating in the research process which she explained:

> [E]mpowered us to think about the studio not as constraining children to do something, but as opening up possibilities for them to express their ideas and work deeply on something, rather than just flit through doing the easy thing. We are encouraging them to make some harder choices and to engage in a way that they perhaps have not done before.

These findings highlight the value of collaborative research inquires that integrate image making and image viewing as part of this process. In this way the integration of arts-based research methods, in parallel with the children's experiences, enabled the teachers ideas to become more visible. Their thoughts, values, beliefs and questions when presented in a combination of visual and textual means allowed them to share more easily with others and to

revisit their own thoughts as well.

SHARED BELIEFS ABOUT VISUAL ARTS TEACHING AND LEARNING

Clark and Grey (2013) contend that teacher's attitudes fundamentally influence the way in which the visual arts manifest themselves within early childhood settings. At this centre the visual arts, and drawing in particular, were valued as a language in their own right. Kind (2010) asserts that the use of the word 'language' highlights the way visual art makes children's thinking visible. During all four data collection phases, reference was made to the teacher's intentional emphasis on the visual arts as an integrated part of children's learning. This illustrated the value the teachers placed on the visual arts as a mediating device in the construction of knowledge (Brooks, 2003, 2009). At the focus group interview, the teachers shared their decision and rationale behind their purposeful promotion of the visual as a dominant language within the setting. They cited their value for the way visual art promoted collaboration amongst children, and the empowerment children experienced in being able to make their ideas visible. This, they said, in turn developed children's confidence as well as developed positive dispositions for learning.

The teachers believed in actively engaging with children and their visual art making. Their practices aligned with the guided learning approach (Wright, 2003). In line with Bae's (2004) research, which was conducted within a sociocultural paradigm, the teachers at this setting also saw their role as multifaceted. This meant they would teach children skills and techniques with visual media, and also expressed their role in encouraging children to collaborate and co-construct knowledge amongst each other. This is one of the foundations of social-constructivism and the pedagogical approach of the educators of Reggio Emilia (Malaguzzi, 1998).

The influence of Reggio Emilia was manifested in the classroom in several ways. Although each expressed their teaching approach differently, the teachers shared key values that enabled them to use the visual arts as an integrated tool in children's investigations. Each day, the teachers invited children to work together on shared projects and encouraged them to make their thinking visible. During these group times, children were encouraged to formulate and represent theories and to negotiate the answers amongst each other (Lewin-Benham, 2006). The teachers asked provocative questions, facilitated collaboration amongst the children, and encouraged them to revisit and extend on their previous thinking. Children's past representations were often used as a way of reminding them of their previous ideas (Vecchi, 2010; Wright, 2003).

Most fundamental was the teachers shared value of practicing a pedagogy of listening. This concept, articulated by Rinaldi (2009), values children's perspectives and understandings of their world as a foundation on which all learning is built. Underpinning this theory is the understanding that learning and knowledge are contextual and subjective (Gonzalez-Mena, 2011). Understanding knowledge as such, meant that the participant teachers valued children's images as artefacts through which they could begin to construct understanding about their thinking (Katz, 1998; Rinaldi, 2006). It also meant that most visual arts practices were contextualised within children's daily inquiries. These theoretical underpinnings, which then informed the teacher's practices, profoundly affected the ways in which children engaged in the visual arts at this setting.

IMPLICATIONS

This research reaffirms the notion that teachers can reconceptualise their practices in the visual arts through examination of their visual arts palimpsests (McArdle, 2003). Although most of the six teachers at this kindergarten had experienced very didactic approaches to the visual arts during their own childhoods, they had managed to develop rich visual arts pedagogies that were strongly underpinned by sociocultural/constructivist theories. This had occurred through the process of self-reflection that considered early experiences and influences in the visual arts, further education that was underpinned by sociocultural/constructivist theories, exposure to the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia, leadership that transmitted a value and commitment for the visual arts as a tool for learning and continued professional development that provoked collaborative discussion amongst the teachers.

The teachers continuously sought new knowledge and opportunities to reflect on their work with children. Highlighting the point that sociocultural visual arts pedagogies must be constantly renegotiated otherwise they become isolated from the context in which they operate. The teachers in this centre were in a state of constant renegotiation, and this acceptance of change was fundamental to their teaching pedagogies. Perhaps this is why they were so open to the idea of using images and image-making as a means to explore their pedagogical beliefs and values, and as a result, their practices evolved once again.

It was evident that within both the teacher's and the children's experiences in this setting the visual arts had truly manifested themselves as a language. Engaging with Reggio Emilia had not only allowed the teachers to reconceptualise their images of childhood, but had also offered pathways through which they could integrate the visual arts as a contextualised component of children's knowledge construction. Through passionate advocacy for the visual arts, displayed by the teaching team, the children were encouraged to make their thinking visible to themselves, to each other and to their teachers. These practices allowed the children to transform and deepen their understanding, to co-construct knowledge with their peers and teachers, and to develop confidence in their ability to use images as an integrated part of their learning.

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