



THE VISUAL ARTS AS A MEANS TO TRANSMIT AND EXPERIENCE VALUES

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ABSTRACT

This paper tells the story of a team of early childhood teachers who had developed a visual arts curriculum that was underpinned by the core values and beliefs of their educational community. The study from which this story was extracted, is a current doctoral research project that seeks to understand more about the contextual factors that influence how children come to value and use the visual arts within their learning. The research has involved three early childhood centres in Auckland, New Zealand. This paper focuses on the first centre at which data was collected as the process of analysing data from the two remaining centres is still in progress. One of the initial findings that emerged at this first centre, was that the visual arts were strongly value-laden. The key values transmitted through the visual arts included creativity and the dispositions that arose from creative action, taking ecological responsibility, community building, and bicultural practices. These values were conveyed and explored through the physical environment, the materials that were offered to children and through the teacher's practices, resulting in many rich opportunities for children to engage in a vast range of experiences through the visual arts.

INTRODUCTION

Curtis and Carter (2015) argue that "every environment implies a set of values or beliefs about the people who use a space and the activities that take place there" (p. 19). Visual arts environments, materials and teaching practices within New Zealand early childhood settings are greatly varied and speak volumes about how childhood, learning, and the visual arts are valued within each individual context. The visual arts continue to be a curriculum area fraught with pedagogical confusion and teachers' practices can contradict the sociocultural early childhood curriculum (Te Whāriki, Ministry of Education, 2017). This is concerning, as young children are increasingly exposed to visual and multimodal environments (Anning & Ring, 2003; Crafton, Silvers & Brennan, 2009) in a wider educational climate which currently focuses dominantly on language literacy and numeracy development (Schiller, 2000; McArdle, 2003). The visual arts, however, have been proven as a powerful domain through which young children can explore and represent their experiences, think through and deepen their working theories and develop their creative thinking (Brooks, 2009; McArdle, 2003; Vecchi, 2010).

This study has sought to respond to these issues by exploring the contextual factors that have shaped the visual arts pedagogies and children's visual arts learning at three early childhood settings in Auckland, New Zealand, that privilege the visual arts within their curriculum. Because the study is informed by sociocultural and social-constructivist theories, the contextual factors that shaped children's ways of valuing and using the visual arts in their learning have been examined at both their early childhood settings and at selected children's homes. The research questions are. How do children learn through the visual arts within the differing contexts of home and their early childhood setting? How do factors such as family/culture, teachers, peers, and exposure to visual media affect children's ways of valuing and using the visual arts in their learning? The purpose is to gain greater understanding of the differing ways in which children come to perceive the role of the visual arts within their lives, and to acquire further insights into what the unique qualities of this domain offers children when embedded within their learning processes.

The study was informed by the findings of a master's research pilot study (Probine, 2015). This research examined the connections between teachers' pedagogical ideas about the visual arts and how these impacted on the children's experiences of the visual arts in a single early childhood setting. This new study has endeavoured to widen the lens to explore other potential influences on children's perception and use of the visual arts within their learning. Whilst data at settings two and three are still being analysed, one of the initial findings that emerged at the first setting was that the kindergarten's visual arts environments, materials, and teachers' practices were intrinsically intertwined with the values and beliefs that informed and underpinned the learning community as a whole. This paper will share some of the stories from the teachers' life histories that had influenced their current practices and will consider the impact these practices then had on how the children engaged with the visual arts in their learning.

WHY ARE THE VISUAL ARTS SO IMPORTANT IN THE CURRENT EDUCATIONAL MILIEU?

It has been argued education has become a means to support economic growth, which has led to an increase in standardisation and an emphasis on literacy and numeracy (Christensen & Kirkland, 2010; McArdle, 2003). This has meant that the arts are often only valued for how they can support more valued curriculum areas. Eisner (2002) thought this belief may have evolved due to a restricted understanding of what constitutes knowledge. He argued domains such as mathematics and science were viewed as academic and therefore valuable in the development of intellect, but the visual arts were deemed emotional due to the widely accepted view that cognition was separated from affect. Since sociocultural theories have increasingly informed the early childhood sector, a number of authors have argued that the visual arts are in fact an intellectual complex domain within which experience can be explored, deliberated and communicated to others (Schiller, 2000; Vecchi 2010). McClure (2001) supports this argument, asking 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).

Christensen and Kirkland (2010, p. 88) explain "humans assimilate more information from visual stimuli than through any other sense". The images children view in their everyday lives and create themselves "are influenced by the cultures, values, ideologies and world

views through which they are created and consumed” (Callow, 1999, p. 2). The messages that images convey, however, are implied and can be understood in multiple ways (Callow, 1999).

Today’s children live in image-saturated environments where many of the ‘texts’ they are exposed to are increasingly multimodal (Anning & Ring, 2003; Callow, 1999; Crafton, Silvers & Brennan, 2009; Schiller, 2009). Therefore, McArdle (2003) believes that young children need to learn to decipher images as well as to understand that they are constructed, and that they can also create images to convey and explore ideas. Anning and Ring (2003) however, argue many teachers are ill-equipped to teach about visual literacy. Crafton, Silvers and Brennan (2009) and Sheridan (2009) believe integrating the visual arts into literacies learning would better serve the needs of 21st century learners. This study aims to make visible some of the explicit and implicit ways children acquire visual literacy in environments where visual art is valued.

TEACHERS’ ROLES IN FOSTERING MEANINGFUL AND LASTING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE VISUAL ARTS IN THE EARLY YEARS

Teachers are powerful. The values and beliefs teachers hold surrounding childhood, the visual arts and their role in learning fundamentally affect teaching practices in this domain, influencing how children then experience and engage in visual art (Bae, 2004; Clark & de Lautour, 2013; Eisner, 1978; McArdle, 2003, 2012; Wright, 2003). These experiences can impact children’s perceptions of themselves as learners and art makers and can endure into adulthood (Anning & Ring, 2003; Veale, 2000). Clark and de Lautour (2013, p. 131) argue that “teachers’ attitudes set the climate, contribute to the organisational culture of the setting and, along the continuum, creatively support, or ignore, the child’s engagement with all experiences, including the arts”. There are multiple ways of valuing the role of the visual arts in early childhood education. In New Zealand, these perceptions are hugely varied across different settings, including the development of fine-motor skills, emotional release, achieving realism or as a way of mediating thinking (Clark & Grey, 2013).

McArdle (2003) contends that a lack of examination of the impact of previous approaches of teaching the visual arts has led to the current pedagogical confusion in this domain. Some early childhood teachers however, have found ways to reconceptualise their visual arts pedagogies to be informed by sociocultural and social constructivist theories. They have achieved this through a number of avenues. Some teachers have explored their past experiences of the visual arts, both personal and professional, and the beliefs and values that have emerged from these encounters (McArdle, 2003; Probine, 2015; Vecchi, 2010). Active engagement in visual art making as a means for scrutinising pedagogical ideas in the visual arts (Craw, 2011) and in some cases, encounters with the pedagogical ideas of the social constructivist preschools of Reggio Emilia. Pohio (2013) have also enabled some teachers to move across pedagogical paradigms (Fleer, 2004). However, these teacher’s voices are not always easy to access due to the breadth and diversity of the early childhood sector. For this reason, there have been calls for further research that makes visible these practices and educational journeys (Richards & Terreni, 2013), as well as for further examination of the complexity of sociocultural arts practices (Bresler & Chapman, 2002; McArdle & Wong, 2010). This study sought to respond to these calls.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE? VISUAL ARTS PEDAGOGIES INFORMED BY SOCIOCULTURAL AND SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORIES

It was Vygotsky's proposal that intervention from adults was vital for children to deepen their understanding and to communicate ideas to others, that led to teachers no longer being relegated to the fringes of children's visual arts experiences (Vygotsky, 1962, cited by Brooks, 2009). Teachers did not dominate children with their own ideas, either, as behaviourist practices had previously done. Instead, they introduced skills, contextual information, and encouraged children to critically evaluate both their own and others art (Visser, 2005). Several authors have made visible the complexity of such practices. For example, Bae's 2004 research focused on a single early childhood setting in Mid-western America at which teacher's practices were informed by sociocultural theories, found teachers saw their role as multifaceted, including listening, showing value for children's visual art, developing skills, aiding transitions between stages of art making, and deepening children's thinking by reminding them of past conversations. (Forman, 1996; Kolbe, 2000; Robertson, 2000) highlight the role of documentation in this approach, due to the way it enables teachers to record and reflect on children's actions and dialogue allowing them to then provoke and deepen children's thinking through offering materials and questioning. Relationships are fundamental within this approach. Robertson (2000) argues that without sound relationships and knowing their students well, teachers cannot know when it is appropriate to step in and ask a question, offer support, or choose to stand back and observe.

My own masters study, Probine (2015), conducted in one community based early childhood setting in Auckland, New Zealand, where the visual arts were privileged as a dominant language, found teachers valued the visual arts as a mediating device in the construction of knowledge (Brooks, 2009). The teachers' understanding that knowledge was contextual and subjective meant that they valued children's images as artefacts through which they could begin to construct understanding about their thinking (Katz, 1998; Rinaldi, 2006). This meant they actively encouraged children to engage in visual art making, taught skills and techniques, promoted collaboration and co-construction amongst the children and valued children's perspectives and understandings of their world as a foundation from which all learning was built (Rinaldi, 2009).

Clark and de Lautour (2009), however, have raised their concern that teachers who have reconceptualised their visual arts pedagogies to be underpinned by sociocultural and social-constructivist theories can still be reticent to make and create in front of children. This discourse, underpinned by modernist theory, maintains teachers should not create alongside children, lest they intimidate or overly influence the child. Clark and de Lautour (2009) argue that:

A depersonalising of the teacher's role has led to teachers being seen as resources of environments, providers of rich teaching and learning environment, but in relation to where teachers are positioned in the milieu of children's artistic experiences, the teacher remains rooted in the hands-off/onlooker discourse (p. 116).

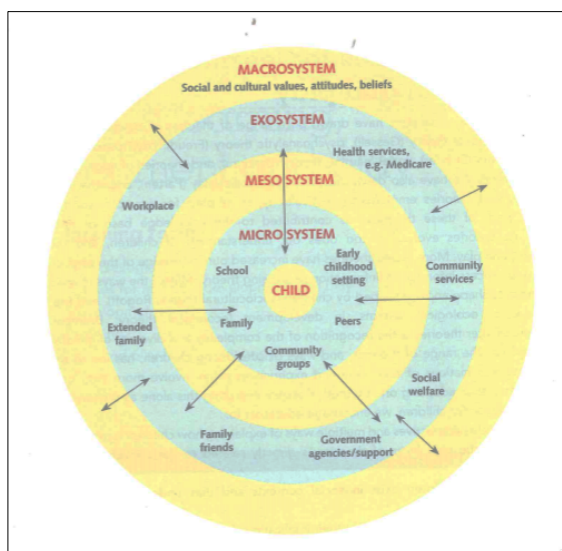
In response to this understanding, this research examined teachers personal pedagogical and personal journeys with visual art as a means to uncover clues as to how they had developed new and innovative ways of engaging in and with children's art-making.

ENVIRONMENTS AS PLACES OF VALUES

McArdle (2003) explains “What we decide to say to a child about his or her art, or what we choose to provide in the environment, will be contingent to some extent on a view of teaching and learning – a view of the role of the teacher in the education of children in and through art” (p.156). Therefore, the arrangement of the physical environment, the aesthetics of the space and the types of materials offered, and how those materials are arranged all communicate powerful messages about how visual art is valued within an educational setting. As Emmison (2011) asserts “[t]he places where we spend our lives – homes, schools, shopping malls, museums, work places, hospitals, parks and so on – are not just functional structures but residues of important cultural values (p. 244).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY OF THIS DOCTORAL STUDY

An interpretivist framework, with the understanding that knowledge is diverse and contextualised informed the research design (Rogoff, 1990). This approach acknowledged



the “situated nature of young children’s learning where the context is something that shapes and is shaped by those who participate in it” (Ring, 2006, p. 64). A cross-contextual approach was used in order to gain a broader understanding of the impact of both home and early childhood setting on the ways in which the children came to value and use the visual arts in their learning (Richards, 2009) and to draw upon Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model

*Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model.
Source: Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett & Farmer (2012, p. 74). Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979).*

(see Figure 1) in order to make more visible “the complex interrelationship that exists between children, parents, educators, community groups and policy makers” (Ring, 2006, p. 64). Therefore, a combination of visual and textual data collection tools were employed in order to develop a rich picture of the complex web of contextual factors that influenced how the teachers, children and families had developed relationships with the visual arts.

At each of the three settings involved in this study, the teachers of the group of oldest children were invited to create a reflective art journal. They were asked to share their stories about the role the visual arts had played in their own lives in order to trace back what factors had shaped their teaching practices in the visual arts. This method was informed by the practice of photo-elicitation (Emmison, 2011), as the purpose was to generate further discussion as well as reflection, however, instead of solely using the medium of photography, participants were also invited to write reflections, create visual art, collect found images, or to use a combination of all of these. The rationale for including art-making was to invite the teachers to engage in ‘living inquiry’ (Craw, 2011; Kind, 2010; Springgay, 2002) through which they could explore their relationship with the visual arts and consider how their beliefs and values had formed over time (Craw, 2011;

Kind, 2010). Such innovative methods allow participants to retain more power within research as participants are able to engage in data generation in practical and meaningful ways that allow them to reflect on and make sense of experience as well as retain ownership over what they choose to share (Kind, 2010). The use of images in research can also mean that research outcomes can be disseminated to a wider audience due to the way images can be read more quickly (Barone, 2008).

These visual and textual narratives were of fundamental importance to the overall research, as Richardson (2002) explains, we know ourselves or re-construct our identities through the stories of others. A key aim of this research was to make visible the pathways early childhood educators had travelled in order to form or reconceptualise their practices in the visual arts and to make visible the complexity and value of sociocultural and social-constructivist visual arts practices in early childhood (Bresler & Chapman, 2002; McArdle & Wong, 2010).

In addition to the teachers' journals, a focus group interview was conducted with each teaching team within all three settings. Classroom observations were conducted for the duration of each setting's morning session, over an eight-week period and parents' perspectives were gathered through an online survey. At the end of the survey parents and their child(ren) were asked to indicate if they would like to be involved in phase two of the research. During phase two, both children and parents were given digital cameras with which they were invited to record visual experiences they deemed significant within the contexts of their homes and the places they visited with their families outside of their educational setting. It was of particular importance in this study to offer both the children and their parents a role in collecting and deciding which images they wished to share, as Smith, Duncan and Marshall, (2005) argue that children's perspectives have been largely disregarded within research involving children and MacNaughton (2005) contends "in early childhood texts and practices parental knowledge is persistently marginalised and subjugated" (p. 46). Therefore, both the children and their parents were considered co-researchers in an attempt to disrupt the power imbalances between the 'researched' and the 'researcher' (Richards, 2009). Alongside the consent forms all the adult participants were issued with, all children involved in the study were given assent forms where they could indicate their willingness to participate in the project (Dalli & Stephenson, 2010).¹ Although each of these methods were employed at all three settings this paper draws upon the data collected during phase one, at the first centre involved in the study.

Introducing the setting

The first setting involved in the research was a public kindergarten, licenced for 40 children over the age of two in a mid to high socioeconomic area in the northern region of Auckland. In 2012 the kindergarten had made a commitment to become an 'enviroschool'. The enviroschools programme is a nationwide organisation that aims to create "a healthy, peaceful and sustainable world through facilitating action-learning; where inter-generations of people work with and learn from nature". It weaves in Māori perspectives, combining traditional wisdoms with new understandings"

¹ The children and their parent/caregivers were issued with pseudonyms except for the key child participants and their parents. Ethical permission was sought and granted to refer to them using their first names only.

(Enviroschools.org.nz, 2017). There were five qualified teachers, Maddie, Sally, Samantha, Margaret and Fleur, employed at the kindergarten who all shared a passion for the visual arts. This passion was reflected strongly through their teaching practices.

The ethnic demography of the kindergarten was recorded as predominantly Pakeha² with a small proportion of children identifying as Māori, Chinese, Asian, Indian or of 'other' nationalities (Ministry of Education, 2015). This was indicative of the cultural blend during the period of data collection.

The kindergarten's philosophy statement articulated an image of the child as an independent, self-directed learner bringing funds of knowledge with them from their family and culture. There was a commitment to fostering children who were investigative problem solvers that would become life-long learners. Therefore, the teachers valued developing professional knowledge and partnership with families. The philosophy statement also voiced their commitment to sustainable practices.

Teachers stories

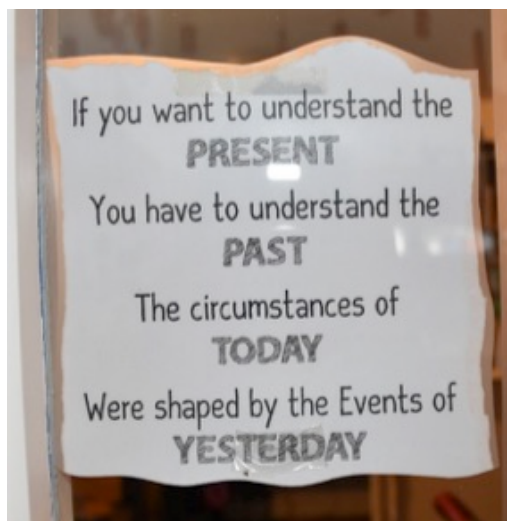


Figure 2: Quote on the kindergarten wall outside the teacher's office.

Just outside the teachers' office, a quote hung on the wall, reading "If you want to understand the present you have to understand the past. The circumstances of today were shaped by the events of yesterday." McArdle (2003) used the term palimpsest (a tablet used in ancient times to transcribe messages. As the surface was scraped away to hold a new text, fragments of past texts remained visible) as a metaphor to describe the way in which early childhood visual arts practices have evolved, with a layering of one theory over the other with little critical evaluation of the influence of earlier ideas. It was apparent that in this setting, the teachers valued the act of examining the past, as a means to understand and inform their current

practices. This was evidenced by the depth and quality of their journals, created as their contribution to this research. Using reflective art journals as a data collection tool made visible some of the factors that had allowed the teachers to travel to a place where the visual arts held such a privileged position within the curriculum, where they communicated so clearly, the core values that underpinned the kindergarten community as a whole. These next stories are gathered from these journals as well as from the focus group interview.

² The term Pakeha refers to New Zealanders of European ancestry.

Early role-models

Veale (2000) discusses the significance of early life experiences in developing a value for art, explaining “parents are not normally thought of as ‘teaching art’, but perhaps



Figure 2: Fragment from Molly's journal

children can ‘catch art’ in their home environment” (p. 31). For example, the first image Maddie created in her journal, referred to her earliest visual art memory of her mother’s artistic ability and her experience of growing up immersed in a creative environment (Eckhoff, 2007; Veale, 2000). She said during the focus group interview “my entire family was in some way or another always exerting creativity through different forms such as music, performing arts, photography and visual arts”. Margaret also shared an early life memory in her journal. She traced back to where her love of visual art had begun, sharing, “if I was to put my finger on it, I would have to say my love for the visual arts came from my mother. My mum loved to paint and draw and as a child I was in awe of her talent”. Sally also, had been inspired by her

mother’s creativity. As a child she had explored the off-cuts of material left over from her mother’s craft projects. Her childhood had been one full of creative exploration. She explained not having a television meant entertainment had to be sourced through other avenues.

Sally recognised the significance of these early experiences and how they had shaped how she valued visual art, both within her own life and within her own children’s experiences Veale, (2000). She wrote “I think from being exposed to the arts at a young age, and having the freedom to explore them, they have become an important part of my life”. Like Sally, Fleur also acknowledged the importance of her early role models as she articulated how her mother’s appreciation for Shakespeare and classical music had germinated her own passion for all things creative.

Exposure to multiple arts contexts

Each of the teachers had grown up in different regions of New Zealand and had different and varied exposure to different forms of visual art throughout their lifetimes (Eckhoff, 2007). Maddie, for instance had initially lived in England and had treasured memories of visiting the Egyptian exhibit at the British museum and Samantha and Fleur had vivid recollections of the art that had been displayed in family homes. Sally shared a memory of her introduction to New Zealand contemporary artists such as Richard Killeen during her teacher training. She had recently introduced the idea of working with silhouettes, inspired by Killeen’s ‘cut outs’ to the children as they worked on a collaborative canvas. It

was through engaging in the process of reflecting on her past, she found the connection to her current practices. She said *"It wasn't until I started going through the box of stuff from teachers' college...that I thought oh my gosh I've actually explored that with kids at kindergarten or, I used that artist as an inspiration... that it actually really made me think how much in those early years being a real part of who you are"*. Sally's statement highlights the value of the research process itself in making apparent the connections between history and current visual arts pedagogies Probine, (2015).

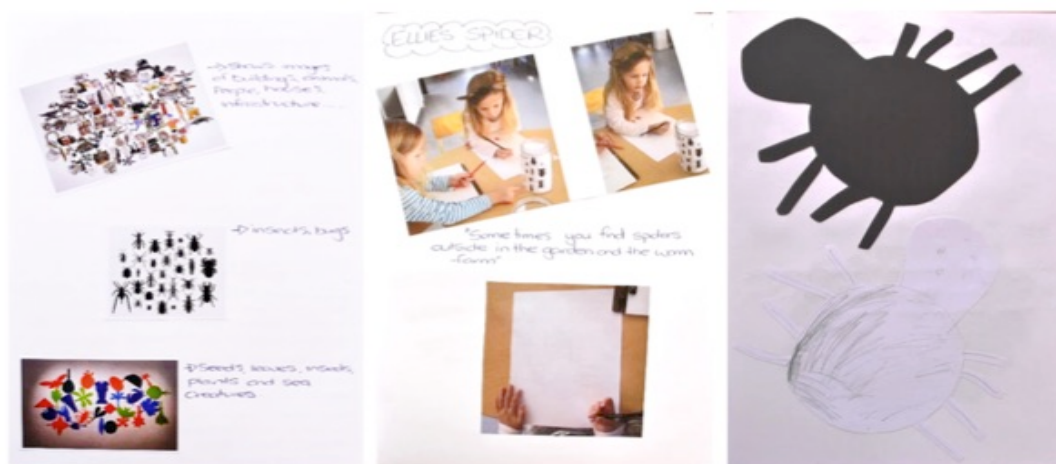


Figure 3: Pages from Sally's journal

Challenges in adolescence

Three of the teachers had experienced significant challenges as they studied visual art in their high school years. For example, Margaret shared her story of taking painting in high school and being forced to use a style and theme that had no connection to her own ideas of what art was. She remembered how this experience had been the catalyst for her ceasing to paint for ten years. Maddie shared a similar story where during high school she was told her work was incorrect. She said *"I found that very puzzling as I didn't know there was a wrong way of doing art"*.



Figure 4: Fragment from Fleur's journal

Fleur's story however, was perhaps the most poignant of all. She shared how on enquiring about enrolling in art as for her fifth form year, her school's art teacher had advised her to choose a subject she would have a better chance at being successful in. For Fleur, this had been a pivotal moment in the fashioning of her own teaching philosophy. She had developed an openness to new ideas and shared that she would never say no to a child in the context of art-making.

Each of these teachers had found ways of overcoming these previous set-backs. Margaret shared just how liberating it had felt to begin painting again later in life. These experiences had laid part of the foundation for what they had created within the kindergarten, a space in which art making was

integrated into almost all aspect of children's learning. As Sally explained in the focus group interview *"I think it's also that you've had these positive and negative experiences that have shaped who you are, but they have also made you aware of the kind of person you don't want to be, the kind of teacher you don't want to be"*.

Reggio Emilia

Samantha, Margaret and Fleur all made reference to the influence of learning about and working with the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia had had on how they understood the role of visual art as a means for children to inquire and explore their worlds and their understanding of their roles as teachers as dynamic, reflective and responsive to children's ideas and funds of knowledge (Edwards Gandini & Forman, 2012). They explained both in their journals and during the focus group interview that these ideas however, did not dominate their practices, but rather made up part of the fabric of their philosophies. They also acknowledged that their pedagogical ideas would continue to evolve and change.

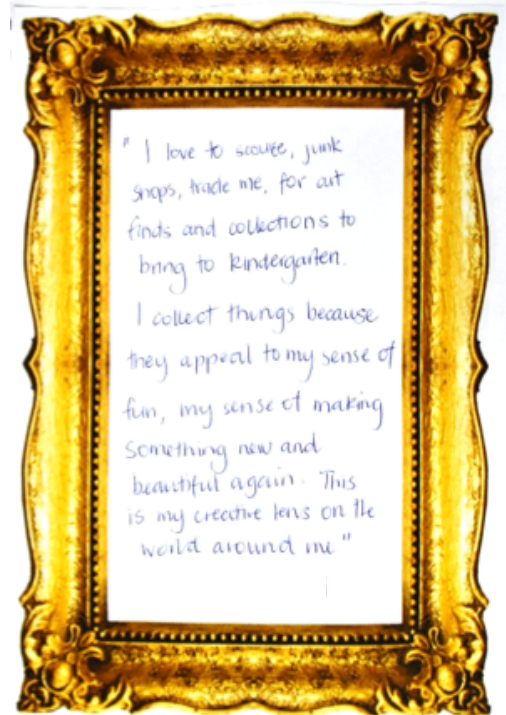


Figure 5: Fragment from Fran's journal

Fleur shared her personal love of junk shops and repurposing or transforming rubbish into something beautiful. She explained this value had initially evolved from her upbringing where a lack of resources had meant her family had had to apply their creativity to make the things they needed. This value wove its way into her pedagogy after a visit to the Remida centre in Reggio Emilia where she had seen the possibilities for using recycled materials in an aesthetic and creative way.³

STORIES OF HOW CHILDREN AND TEACHERS ENGAGED IN THE VISUAL ARTS

The physical environment

It was the collective value the teaching team held for the visual arts, both in their own lives and in their teaching pedagogies that resulted in the value of art itself being interwoven into almost every aspect of the kindergarten's physical environment. Visual art was not confined to one pre-defined art area but rather, opportunities to create,

³ The Remida centre in Reggio Emilia collects as aesthetically displays pre-industrial waste to invite reuse and reinvention by the many educational and community organisations surrounding Reggio Emilia. Since Remida's inception, more recycling centres have opened in other regions of Italy and internationally. Melbourne and Perth have both established their own versions of this concept (Ferrari & Giacomini, 2005).



Figure 6: The physical environment at the kindergarten

make and represent ideas were everywhere. There was a recycling station surrounded by repurposed materials arranged aesthetically in tall glass jars and rolls of tape and scissors ready nearby to transform them. A clay studio, with tools and space to store and revisit work was tucked into a quiet corner. Painting easels stood inside and outside.

Provocations that invited children explore current or emergent interests, develop skills and techniques punctuated the physical space.

Creative thinking – Teachers as creative role models and problem solvers

Visual art and creativity were not passively observed at the kindergarten, but rather teachers' role modelled their appreciation and value for visual art and creative thinking through their active engagement. Fleur, the head teacher, explained in her journal:

The idea of modelling being a creator and inventor sits within the heart of our learning environment here at kindergarten. We want our children to think outside the square, be problem solvers and develop their ideas and theories through collaboration and consultation with others and by trying things out. We often refer to this as a 'circle of creativity' where teachers work alongside children on an array of projects, where ideas are shared and unpacked.



Figure 7: Fragments of the collaborative canvas illustrating Ranganui and Papatūānuku

The notion of the 'circle of creativity' manifested itself in several ways. The teachers would sometimes work on their own self-directed projects where children could witness their creative processes. Children were also invited to work on collaborative art projects based on a shared idea or a value conceptualised by the teachers. An example of this was the five large canvases linked together by a central theme or concept, the teachers and children re-created annually. These works were then displayed in the kindergarten. This year's works were focused on the enviroschool value of 'sustainable

communities'. This piece was focused on the story of Ranganui and Papatūānuku.⁴ Fleur described the value of these projects during the focus group interview:

When children explore art, it's not just what they are exploring, it's a whole range of things that they are delving into, it could be social relationships, it could be about recycling, it's not solely about a product.

Teachers had conversations with children about technique and would ask questions about the children's work often responding by experimenting with children's ideas or strategies. In the focus group interview Margaret explained how important she thought it was to role model or articulate the thought processes of creativity, including the process of solving a problem or fixing a mistake. For example, one morning I observed Margaret and the children gathered around a vase of flowers arranged with pots of paint in corresponding colours. As children arrived for the day their shared endeavour generated interested discussion from both children and parents.

These practices affirm Clark and de Lautours' argument that teachers should explore and make visible their own artistic identities. Fuelled by their love of visual art as part of their personal lives, the teachers were able to converse with children as co-creators and collaborators rather than as observers and documenters. Clark and de Lautour (2009) support this notion questioning:

Perceiving ourselves as artists raises new awareness and possibilities as to where collaborative art experiences and co-learning could go. What are the possibilities if the child could see the teacher as artist? Does this increase the possibilities for collaboration and joint experience? (p. 118).



Figure 8: Both Margaret and the materials act as a provocation, inviting children's participation

These practices moved towards addressing the power-imbalances between teacher and child and their relationship became more of an authentic partnership together they co-constructed knowledge. Knight (2008) suggests such a shift moves beyond a more traditional reading of a "Vygotskian framework" where the child heads toward the more enculturated/knowledgeable position of the elder" (p. 312) to instead initiating a "two-way exchange". She argues this allows for better understanding of the child's "cultural field".

⁴ The creation story, drawn from Māori mythology tells the story of how Ranganui (the sky) and Papatūānuku (the earth) were separated by their children in order to create light and space so that they could grow and prosper.

Freedom to choose and make mess



Figure 9: The physical environment at the end of the session

The value of creativity was also seen in the freedom children had to make a mess as they created. Although both children and adults took responsibility for tidying up at the end of session, experimentation and exploration were encouraged by all the teachers. This meant that children were able to interpret and respond to the materials drawing upon their own unique and playful strategies for exploration (Christensen & Kirkland, 2010).

For example, Zara, Sally's daughter, had recently begun attending the kindergarten having previously attended a privately run centre. One day, she painted at the easel, initially using a brush, then carefully painting each finger. Sally noticing the paint on her hands, suggested she could make a handprint. "Can you paint my hand?" she asked. Sally complied and Zara created a series of handprints. Two weeks later, a large roll of cardboard was stretched along the floor of the kindergarten, a tray of paint arranged in the middle. This new space enabled Zara to take her investigation to a deeper level. She gleefully painted her feet creating prints on the cardboard. Eager to share the experience with someone, she invited Fleur who was happy to participate and have her feet painted. Zara repeated this process many times throughout the morning, washing her feet, then repainting them to create a fresh set of prints. Sally later explained the kindergarten environment was allowing Zara to explore with a freedom she had not previously experienced.

The combination of a rich physical environment, coupled with "time for investigative play and experimentation" (Danko-McGhee, 2009, p. 2) allowed children to conceptualise their own projects and then work through them, knowing there was support and expertise in their teachers should they need it (Terreni & Pairman, 2001). Children were also free to interpret and respond to materials, drawing upon their own unique and playful strategies for exploration Christensen & Kirkland, (2010).



Figure 10: Zara explores with paint

Developing a community culture of appreciating and valuing visual art

Disseminating the intrinsic role visual art played in children's learning and the life of the kindergarten was a critical aspect of the teaching team's pedagogies (Fuemana-Foa'i, Pohio & Terreni, 2009). Annually, the teaching team held two events involving their families and wider community in the celebration of visual art. Each year, the children and teachers made an annual trip to the Kaipara sculpture gardens, which acted as a wonderful provocation to inspire works that were later created by the children. These were then exhibited at the kindergarten's annual art show. This event was eagerly anticipated by the children, their families and the teachers as an opportunity to reflect on and celebrate the collective values of their educational community. Documentation also played a fundamental role in communicating the kindergarten's work and values. Documentation included wall displays, learning stories, and many self-published books. These documents also served to preserve a record of the children and teachers' work, allowing it to be revisited many times (Edwards, et al, 2012).

Sustainable arts practices: Developing ecological responsibility



Figure 11: Lana creates a princess mobile at the recycling centre

As an enviroschool, the kindergarten had made a commitment to teaching children to care for the earth. This was most predominantly visible at the recycling centre, an area of the kindergarten where the whole community contributed items that could be reused in some way. Fleur, the head teacher had shared her passion for repurposing items in different ways and this area of the kindergarten allowed her to share this passion with the children. The children utilised these materials in their own self-conceptualised art projects. For example, Lana said one morning *"I feel like making something. I am making a princess mobile and it's going to be super-fast"*. Through the aesthetic way the materials were displayed, and the freedom with which children were able to explore and utilise them, they came to value these materials not as waste, but rather as treasure as they delighted in the processes of discovering and imagining new possibilities for them (Ferrari & Giapopini, 2005).

Children were also invited to create ephemeral art in different areas throughout the kindergarten, in the sandpit, or through varying provocations the teachers provided. Maddie explained the value of such experiences in her journal:

It is important for children to embrace nature as a tool for many avenues of learning, especially art. Like many artists in the world children can be inspired by nature and find ways of bringing a new and resounding voice to their work...I always have a camera available for the children to take a

picture of their piece of art, while the rest of the natural materials can be returned to Papatūānuku.



Figure 12: Connecting with nature through engagement in art

Bicultural values

Guided by a commitment to the TeTiriti o Waitangi, New Zealand's founding document, TeWhāriki, the early childhood curriculum articulates the key role early childhood settings play in providing culturally equitable spaces and learning opportunities for Māori as well as ensuring Te reo Māori remains a living language (Ministry of Education, 2017). This commitment is echoed in the principles of the enviroschools philosophy. At this setting, the visual arts were an important vehicle through which Māori culture, language and mythology, could be explored. For example, Maddie had initiated a mosaic project, where the children and herself were creating representations of each of the Māori gods to be placed in the kindergarten gardens inspired by the illustrations of Peter Gossage⁵ (Figure 13).

"Which god do they think he is?" Maddie asked the children

"the birds... and the feathers" One of the children

"What else do you think he is the god of?...what's over there?" Maddie said

"The trees!!" several children exclaimed at once

Simon turned the pages of the book illustrated by Peter Gossage that was informing some of the design elements of the mosaic. "That's Ranganui" Maddie told Simon.

Projects such as this provided opportunities for children to exchange ideas and develop new understandings of a Māori world view and to develop shared meanings through collaboration (Christensen and Kirkland, 2010; Wright, 2012).

⁵ Peter Gossage illustrated and retold twelve Māori legends published by Penguin. His first title 'How Maui found his mother' was published in 1975.



Figure 13: Collaborative mosaic project initiated by Maddie

SUMMARY

Through the teacher's reflective art journals, the significant role that visual art had played in each of the teacher's personal histories became visible (Veale, 2000). All of the teachers revealed the significance of their early role models in the arts as they recalled their mother's artistic endeavours, significant artworks in their homes and galleries as well as the materials they had explored as children. These findings highlight the fundamental way in which early role models of the visual arts shape artistic identity, a notion affirmed by Matthews (1998) who believes children are "very sensitive to initial conditions" (p. 106).

Several of the teachers had each experienced the anguish of a shift in pedagogical approaches as they reached adolescence. This emphasised the contrast between pedagogical approaches to teaching visual art in early childhood compared with their particular secondary school experiences, albeit some years ago, and how fundamentally this can impact on artistic identity, a contradiction also noted by McArdle (2012). Examining different pedagogical ideas, such as those of Reggio Emilia had also been meaningful for these teachers as they deepened their understanding of children's capabilities, the potential of visual art as a mediator of learning, as well as their own roles as teachers of and with the visual arts (Pohio, 2013). Despite the challenges some of the teachers had faced during their adolescent years, each of the teachers had discovered ways to reawaken their artistic identities. Richardson, (2002) argues "we are restrained and limited by the kinds of cultural stories available to us" (p. 2). Overcoming these creatively limiting cultural stories had actually been the catalyst through which the teachers had individually, and, as a teaching community, become passionate advocates of the visual arts. These findings highlight that the act of examining personal history as a means of understanding pedagogy, coupled with an open, permissive educational environment can enable teachers to re-write their collective cultural stories, and to work together to ensure children experience a cultural story that is rich in opportunities to learn about and through the visual arts.

The teachers had also readdressed and reformed their images of childhood. Children were viewed and valued as co-artists (Clark & de Latour, 2009). In practice, this meant that the teachers' approaches were multifaceted. They would take the lead, and at other times would follow the lead of the children. Their practices were supported by the rich physical environment where materials were continuously available to children. Teachers were actively involved in creative endeavours, sometimes for their own ends, sometimes to provoke and encourage co-construction and intersubjectivity between children and at other times to encourage children to take on leadership roles, where they shared and communicated their strategies, ideas, and techniques to their peers and teachers (Curtis & Carter, 2015; Edwards et al, 2012). Creativity, but also resiliency were core values that underpinned these practices. The teachers articulated that they wanted children to have a deep understanding that art-making could be challenging and sometimes problematic, but that through perseverance, collaboration, imagination, and support, it could be both a joyful and meaningful process through which children could explore their ideas and experiences.

As a result, the children were independent image makers with a strong sense of self-efficacy (Richards, 2005). There was no simplified linear approach as to how children engaged in visual art making, but rather, they seemed to approach art making in unique ways, for a multitude of purposes, during different moments of their day, sometimes alone, sometimes with peers, sometimes with teachers. The majority of the time children initiated their own art making, however, it was evident the environment played a powerful role in influencing such decisions.

In the context of early childhood education, visual arts practices are deeply value-laden. They are informed by how childhood, learning, and knowledge are understood and valued. Although analysis of the two other settings is still in process, the stories that have been shared from this first setting reveal that visual arts pedagogies are strongly informed by teacher's personal relationships with the visual arts. These findings demonstrate that the inclusion of artistic identity within visual arts pedagogy can be a powerful way of re-envisioning the teacher's role in the visual arts in early childhood.

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Note

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"The story of a life is less than the actual life, because the story told is selective, partial, constructed and because the life is not yet over. But the story of a life is also more than the life, the contours and meanings allegorically extending to others, others seeing themselves, knowing themselves through another's life story, revisioning their own, arriving where they started, and knowing "the place for the first time"

(Richardson, 2002, p. 6 – 7)