

The Visual Arts and Children's Thinking and Theorising in Early Childhood

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This article explores the role of visual arts in the early childhood education curriculum with a strong contention to more closely examine them as a tool to enable children to develop critical thinking and learning dispositions. In New Zealand and elsewhere, the visual arts have largely been seen as a medium for children to express their creativity, feelings and ideas, as well as their personal and cultural values (Clark & de Lautour, 2013). There are much wider, more complex and multiple ways that the visual arts can provoke and support children's learning and earlier research has opened up a lens of enquiry regarding this that needs further consideration. Te Whāriki, New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017), makes broad statements about children's engagement in the visual arts.

As authors and early year's educators, we advocate that more attention and scrutiny be given to the visual arts as a way of enabling children to develop critical thinking, and enhance learning dispositions. A case is presented for the visual arts being viewed as a central integrating force within the early childhood curriculum where greater emphasis is placed on the theorising and intellectualisation that children's art may reveal. We further contend that the

critical thinking skills and learning dispositions formed through engagement in the visual arts are transferable to other curriculum areas. Thus the teachers' role is pivotal in fostering these skills and dispositions in intentional and well considered ways. This article gives a brief re-examination of the historical positioning of the arts in early childhood education while making a strong statement as to the value and significance for art to become a central focus of the early year's curriculum for its potential and power to be a profound tool for children's learning in the future.

Key words

Critical thinking, dispositions, early childhood, curriculum, pedagogy, teacher's role.

Introduction and background.

Visual arts have long been embedded in the early years' curriculum as an essential part of children's experiences. Despite this there is still some uncertainty on how best to view the place of visual arts in the early year's curriculum and its full potential for children's learning (Terreni, 2010). The fine arts support critical thinking dispositions for children in the school curriculum (Laird, 2012; Lampert, 2006; Winner, Hetland, Veenema, Sheridan, & Palmer, 2006,

Nilson, Fetherston, McMurray, and Fetherston, 2013), but little evidence of similar attention and focus has been given to children in early childhood education. Beyond the New Zealand context, there have been strong calls for art education to provide children with opportunities to connect their art experiences to their visual and cultural worlds (Hausmann, Ploof, Duignan, Brown & Hostert, 2010, Rollings, 2010, Nilson et al, 2013). This article seeks to give a stronger recognition of the visual arts as more relevant than ever as children navigate less certain, but more complex worlds where the arts can be a significant medium for transformative meaning-making. The same call requires art educators who are prepared to perceive the visual arts as more than mere aesthetics, expressive cultural tools and skill development mediums. Whilst not undermining these as significant, it is time to add to this range in a more overt way celebrating and positioning children's art making in the early years as pivotal to their learning.

Visual arts has been positioned as a holistic endeavour within a play-based curriculum in early childhood emphasising the child's creative expressions as revealed through their art making, (Fuemana- Foa', Pohio, and Terrini, 2009). In early childhood, the art curriculum is set up for children to engage with a variety of art media and materials within a community of learners. Visual art experiences may be set up by the teacher or initiated by the child with access to a range of materials. Visual arts are integrated into the day to day curricula experiences of children in early childhood within a New Zealand context. As a mode of expression and outlet for children's creativity, it may well be that a deepening

recognition for transformative learning may have well been diffused. Richards (2014) drew on Dewey's work who contended that "Expression, was not merely an emotional outburst; rather, it was the channelling and transforming of self and material through art" (p.146). This offers a further insight into the power and possibilities that art work in early childhood may reveal. Aspects of critical thinking can be applied to the early childhood context when considering the place of visual arts. Eisner (1965,1966) was one of the first to ask what the visual arts actually teach and contributed to the role of critical thinking and the arts. Scriven and Paul (1987) provided a useful statement at the American 8th Annual Conference in Critical Thinking and Education.

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness. (para 1.)

When the key aspects of critical thinking are turned to very young children and the arts it was clear that as researchers in earlier research, (Clark and de Lautour, 2011), were witnesses to children's art making within two early childhood settings over a week and noted the levels of deep engagement and the care, attention, and focus that children were immersed in

through their art creations. Critical thinking through this lens saw the children draw from knowledge, emerging working theories, and skills that allow them to see things in new and different ways and to think unconventionally, (Nilson et al, 2013). Illuminating moments occurred throughout the researcher's week in each centre as they were invited into children's inner worlds and thinking as trust and the relationships grew. Comparisons to Scriven and Paul can be made when relating the attributes of critical thinking to young children's art experiences in early childhood and seeing it as a more complex undertaking. A move towards a stronger recognition of children's deep thinking through the visual arts does not signal a shift away from the importance of the arts for expressive and creative endeavours. Wright, (2010), considers children's art as a vehicle and form of expressive language that offers a space for children to communicate. Children's art experiences in early childhood, allow them to "actively construct understandings of themselves and their worlds, rather simply becoming the passive recipients of knowledge", (p.7). The act of art making is seen to give children a voice yet Kress, (1997), contended that less scrutiny was given to it as communication and information gathering and more to do with a mode of expression.

Within a New Zealand setting the role of visual arts in the curriculum has been outlined in both The New Zealand Curriculum for schools (Ministry of Education, 2007), and the national early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017). The New Zealand curriculum states that the "arts are a powerful form of expression that recognise, value and contribute to the unique

bicultural and multicultural character of Aotearoa New Zealand" (p.20). By referring to the unique bicultural character of New Zealand, this document recognises and affirms the significance of indigenous Māori people and their culture to our society while also recognising our diverse and growing multicultural communities. This document further states that the visual arts allow learners to discern, participate in and celebrate their own and others visual worlds. The English translation of the Māori term Te Whāriki is 'the woven mat' as this curriculum is seen as woven with the principles that underpin each child's learning and development with strands and learning that can be interpreted to reflect the diversity of the community of learners. In contrast to the New Zealand school curriculum, Te Whāriki includes the general statement that children are "developing increasing competence in symbolic, abstract, imaginative and creative thinking" (p. 72). So Te Whāriki recognises the visual arts as a vehicle through which young children can communicate verbally and non-verbally within their diverse learning communities, but is less explicit in the details (Nuttall, 2013).

What the curriculum does is identify key strands, goals and learning outcomes that include reference to expressive arts that are general. As an example, Goal three of the Communication strand states, "children experience an environment where they experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures" (p 42). This goal can be interpreted through the lens of language and literacy with scant acknowledgement of the specific contribution of the visual arts. The exception is one reflective question: How

are children's cultural backgrounds represented in the arts and crafts? However there are few examples outlined that would provide guidance as to how a teacher would incorporate this as a goal within a visual arts curriculum. Additionally, Goal four in the Communication strand states that "children experience an environment where they discover and develop different ways to be creative and expressive" (p.42). The learning outcomes in this goal give examples of the ways expressive arts support learning in general and in particular in relation to 'expression of feelings and ideas' with little attention to how this directly engages the learner cognitively through visual art experiences. Instead Te Whāriki focuses the teacher, (kaiako) on the relationship between the visual arts and a child's development of skill and confidence as key features and terms associated with the benefits to the child. Although these curriculum documents have begun to link the visual arts to a total learning process, it remains for each educator to critically reflect and dialogue on how these aspirations can be enacted through practice. An assumption prevails that teachers will demonstrate adequate pedagogical awareness of how to foster and build meaningful learning experiences.

Although the visual arts has long been a taken-for-granted part in the early years curriculum, it appears there is little evidence of pedagogical awareness and understanding of the multiple and complex ways that the visual arts can provoke and support a child's learning. Without this awareness, visual art learning experiences run the risk of being superficially introduced, or worse still, totally marginalised (Kindler, 2010). The scant attention paid in discussing the role of the

visual arts in the early years learning highlights a challenge for teachers of the visual arts that may explain why some teachers struggle with the place of the visual arts in the early years' curriculum and how to effectively teach it (Clark & de Lautour, 2009; Twigg & Garvis, 2010). This article explores the value of visual arts learning experiences for children's thinking and theorising. In grappling with the questions of what children learn while engaging in visual art, and how teachers can either promote or diminish the value of visual arts to young children's learning, a pedagogical awareness of a deeper, more complex epistemological role for the visual arts is formed (Laird, 2012). In doing this, the two learning outcomes of Te Whāriki (for children to form their working theories and to develop dispositions that encourage learning) are combined and enacted (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The value of visual arts in early years learning through a historical lens

Although differing perceptions may arise in forming a clear definition of the visual arts, and this could act to hinder teachers' ability to form clear goals for teaching, this can also be viewed as an advantage, as it allows teachers' to form a philosophy and pedagogy that can be constantly redefined and reconceptualised. A retrospective glance at teaching the visual arts suggest that the values underpinning teaching the visual arts have shifted according to the various theoretical lenses employed (Terreni, 2010). An example is the shift from a traditional developmental theoretical lens to a lens that is more strongly focused on learning dispositions through a socio-cultural pedagogy.

Froebel, the father of the kindergarten movement, divided children's learning into work and play. Literacy and numeracy were work, while art was viewed as play (Visser, 2005). It could be thought that the legacy of this view has persisted and has contributed to the current undervaluing of the visual arts in the curriculum. Additionally, Froebel prescribed art activities that involved cutting and folding coloured pieces of paper in a set way (Terreni, 2010) that is felt to have created a legacy of teaching the visual arts in a teacher-directed prescribed manner. At a later stage, as the influence of psychology and the progressive education movement gained in popularity, a free-play approach to early years' curriculum emerged. The visual arts were seen as a way for children to express their feelings in a way that avoided a mind body split (Moore, 2012). A laissez-faire approach to the visual arts was adopted to enable a natural-unfolding of free expression, and this approach remains evident today (Twigg & Garvis, 2010). The legacy of this view was that the visual arts became integrated with other subjects, rather than being recognised as an important part of the curriculum within its own right (Visser, 2005). This has resulted in the dilution of the visual arts in early years' education. A further legacy of this influence was the "age and stage theories" (for example, Piaget's theory of cognitive development) and the influence of the concept of developmentally appropriate practice. Lowenfeld and Brittain (1982) formed a stage theory in the 1960s to outline six stages of a child's artistic development. These were the Scribbling stage (2-4 years), the Pre-schematic stage (4-7 years), the Schematic stage (7-9 years), the Dawning Realist stage (9-12 years), the Pseudo naturalist stage (12-14 years) and

the Adolescent art stage (14-17 years). While recognising that children's art should be seen as contributing to their individual development rather than focusing on prescribed standards that graded children's art, he provided a limited view of children's art by adopting a stage theory to explain it (Saunders, 1983).

Lowenfeld's stages were reinforced in research completed by Kellogg (1970). The legacy of this view of visual art in the early years was the assumption that children followed a set path of developmental stages in the visual arts. This view has been critiqued because it is felt that while visual arts is common throughout humanity, it is not possible to apply strict universal norms for its development (Eisner, 2002). A view of visual art still persists, however, that a child who is able to draw a close representation of reality has a more sophisticated ability in the visual arts than a child who interprets reality in an abstract expressive way. In addition, Lowenfeld's theory is not helpful in capturing the complexity of visual art development as it concentrates on a narrow two-dimensional representation, while ignoring other implicit attributes, such as depth and quality of thought, that offer an insight into children's meaning-making through other forms of representation (Kindler, 2010). It is suggested that when the potential of visual arts experiences are recognised and exposed, the opportunities for children's learning are "significantly enhanced, creating deeper, more complex, and richer sites for learning for both children and teachers" (Pohio, 2006, p.8).

Te Whāriki (Ministry for Education, 2017) advocates for a sociocultural lens that emphasises the importance of culture and

context to learning in general. A socio-cultural approach is recognised as being more culturally inclusive, so the teaching of visual arts within this paradigm is more likely to be culturally responsive, validating and affirming of children's identity (Laird, 2012) and ability to make sense of their world (Smidt, 2009). From this perspective, the visual arts can be seen as a cultural tool that, along with relationships, allows children to extend their Zone of Proximal development (ZPD) by taking on new challenges and by repeating and practicing the skills necessary to complete each task (Clark & Grey, 2013). This shift towards underpinning early years learning with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory created an awareness of the importance of cultural tools (including, importantly, the visual arts) in conjunction with the relationships children form (Smidt, 2009), as a way to enable children to construct meaning. Hence the socio-cultural approach acts as a powerful medium for adults to understand how children express multiple symbolic languages, articulate their relationships and their understanding of the curriculum through the visual arts (Clark & de Lautour, 2009). In other words, young children act as explorers who want to make sense of their world and are able to use the visual arts as a means of explaining their thoughts, feelings and ideas (Kolbe, 2001). For this reason, the process of art, rather than merely the product of the arts, is recognised as an important part of the visual arts experience.

An awareness of the various theoretical lenses that have influenced the teaching of the visual arts is important, to not only gain an understanding of the complexity of theoretical underpinnings, but also because there is evidence that many teachers who lack this awareness may struggle to

improve teaching and learning practice in the visual arts (Laird, 2012). It is further contended that if teachers' pedagogical understandings have only been superficially absorbed and are largely unconscious, it would be difficult to critique and evaluate these understandings in order to re-imagine an alternative possibility. For this reason, it is important to not only examine the past influences on visual arts, but to build on these influences to strengthen pedagogical understanding of the important place that visual arts holds in the curriculum (Pohio, 2006; McLure, 2011)

This article proposes yet another lens be formed for interpreting the role of visual arts in the early years that is more reflective of learning and development in the 21st century. This lens would see learning dispositions gained from participating in meaningful arts experiences considered important outcomes of a visual arts curriculum, not only because these dispositions contribute to academic success, but also for having life-long value (Eisner, 2002). Similarly, the link between children's art making and children's emergent critical thinking has been seen as inseparable (Atkinson & Dash, 2005). The view is taken that the visual arts is an essential area of the early years curriculum, but that the role visual arts plays in the curriculum can be diluted and marginalised in favour of other curriculum areas, such as numeracy and literacy (Robinson, 2011). A case is outlined for why visual art should be positioned as vital for children's learning and development in the future.

21st Century Learning and the Visual Arts.

The rapid change that is taking place globally results in complex problems that require creative solutions. This has provoked

some educators to form a counter argument for the marginalised position that the arts still occupies in education today (Robinson, 2011). This counter argument would see art as a total learning experience that expands knowledge construction, views of the world that enables children to cope with the complexities of society, as well as providing a sense of pleasure and satisfaction (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972; Wilson, 2011). The children of today will need to “deal with specific and 21st century challenges such as sustainability, globalisation and citizenship” (Bolstad, 2011, p. 3). This implies that learning from the past that focussed on the transmission of facts is less relevant than the ability to adapt past learning, skills and abilities to a world that is in a constant state of flux. This view emphasises the importance of the development of learners’ dispositions such as curiosity, creativity and resilience (Claxton, 2008). The visual arts can potentially support the development of these adaptive qualities because it draws on a myriad of skills and techniques, and fosters different ways of thinking such as critical judgement, imagination, intuition as well as visceral feelings. It is considered unfortunate that creative capacities have been ignored in favour of the academic curriculum (Robinson, 2011). The arts curriculum, by offering open-ended learning, prepares children to adapt to a world that is beyond traditional verbal and mathematical reasoning (Roy, Baker & Hamilton, 2015). It is thought that education in the future should be geared towards a curriculum that can extend beyond the schools years, and emphasises encouraging creativity and innovation that can be applied to both professional and social areas of later life (Castells, 2005). If the narrow goals of literacy and numeracy

are pursued at the cost of the unique experience of engagement in the arts, there is a danger that the complex problems that exist in the world may remain unsolved.

The case for visual arts as developing learning dispositions

Viewing visual arts as a pathway for the enhancement of learning dispositions offers the possibility for expanding the repertoire of the artistic realm. Learning dispositions have been explained as habits of mind or patterns of behaviour (Carr, 2006). Both the early childhood education curriculum, Te Whāriki, and the New Zealand curriculum framework for primary education place importance on learning dispositions. Te Whāriki grew from the Maori concept of Mana meaning empowerment (Carr, 2006). This was translated as the strands of Belonging, Well-being, Exploration, Communication and Contribution in the English translation of the curriculum document. The dispositions that were constructed were being involved, persisting with difficulty, expressing an idea or feeling, and taking responsibility. In the primary curriculum document, key competencies were formed that aligned with these dispositions. These were participating and contributing, managing self, thinking, using language, symbols, and relating to others. The learning dispositions have now been recognised as forming a part of the process of engaging in art-making. (Ministry of Education, 2017). Research conducted by Project Zero at Harvard University connects learning dispositions to studio habits of mind, such as engaging and persisting, envisioning and expressing, observing, reflecting, stretching and exploring, all stem through involvement in visual arts.

This research emphasised that habits of mind formed in the studio are transferable to other areas of learning (Winner, Hetland, Veenema, Sheridan, Palmer, & Locher, 2006). In other words, not only is there a close alignment or resonance between art practice and dispositions, but active visual art practice hones dispositions. Rather than viewing development in the visual art as a narrow linear series of developmental stages, recognising the importance of learning dispositions acknowledges other attributes, such as quality of thought which by its nature can be difficult to define or examine, but should nevertheless, be a central focus of education and has connections to the concepts central to critical thinking.

Children's Working Theories and Adult's Roles in the Visual Arts

Working theories are constructed by children engaging in experiences and striving to make sense of their worlds. They are seen to be evolving and strengthened when combined with knowledge, skills and attitudes formed through participation and engagement with others in their communities. (Hedges and Jones, 2012, Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017). A potentially rich site for this to occur is the early childhood setting where children actively construct and co-construct their working theories through all their interactions and actions during engagement through the visual arts. However when teachers emphasise a focus on product and task completion reflecting a linear teacher driven practice, the likelihood of working theories being formed are diminished. Eckhoff, (2013), considered a pedagogy of conversational discourse and identified a relationship between artist researcher and children during an art project that, "was

rich in action, exploration, description, curiosity, and encouragement", (p.370). Similarly Clark & de Lautour, (2011), saw the inherent value of having adults available and truly present during children's visual art making experiences where deep interest, conversation and engagement provided a platform for a deeper level of connection. Further, Richards, (2018), contends that when adults really 'tune in' to children through intentional responses to their requests and motivations around art making, then the possibility for greater recognition of the child as artist and what an effective art pedagogy looks like.

Having adults who act as both audience and provocateur for children's art making processes and products requires a commitment within a teaching team and a curriculum that is open and flexible. When collaborative dialogue, technical support and what Richards, (2018) defines as a 'helping hand' is available then children's creative experiences and endeavours are recognised, affirmed and valued by teachers who strive to capture and understand children's emerging working theories realised and revealed through the visual arts.

The implications for this in the early childhood setting is to have teachers who are tuned into and aware of the inherent power of working theories for children's learning, engaging in intentional teaching practices and a deep sense of knowing related to children in their care. Eckhoff, (2013), researcher artist contends that it takes a 'leap of faith and 'skill' from teachers, and Eckhoff considers this a 'guided-exploration orientation with conversation as the key to extending and enriching children's experiences.

Taking this further through the lens of children's working theories can provide an extension of the guided-exploration concept. When particular working theories are made explicit these can be seen as 'islands of expertise' where children are provoked, encouraged and recognised as competent artists in their own right (Hargraves, 2013). This was demonstrated in Hargraves' research where three and four year old children, who were provoked by the earthquake in Christchurch New Zealand, were able to design, draw and build models of houses that would not fall down in an earthquake. A key strategy that Peters & Davis (2011) identified in their research into children's working theories, was having responsive and attentive adults who can decide which working theories to delve into more deeply and whether these offer possibilities for enduring or fleeting exploration. It is important to ensure teachers do not 'hijack' children's contributions and conversations but use wait time and reflection to allow children's ideas, thinking and creativity to emerge in more diverse and complex ways.

As art researchers Clark and de Lautour, (2011) found themselves moving into the role of interlocutors with children, being gifted with time to wallow in long uninterrupted art experiences with children, where we witnessed these extraordinary moments unfold. Deep thought and consideration at each phase of a project linked to a child's current artistic focus on ships saw stunningly detailed and intricate drawings grow in shape and design over the week. There was evidence of critical thinking, with an engaged, interested, provocative and adult alongside.

The case for visual arts as developing critical thinking

To be able to think critically is considered a fundamental goal of education in the 21st century. Critical thinking has been defined as the ways in which children produce and examine knowledge, ideas and possibilities to synthesise these to find new pathways and answers that can be applied as a tool for life (Lampert, 2006). In terms of children's critical thinking, this involves the use of reason, ingenuity, inventiveness, imagination and innovation in all areas of learning (Roy et al, 2015). Involvement in the visual arts, where and if the learning experiences are open-ended, presents children with challenges that can be explored in various ways and for which there is no clear solution. For instance, such problems necessitate the employment of critical thinking skills (Lampert, 2006) to support the development of problem-solving and analysis which can then be applied to other disciplines (Roy et al, 2015). As art making in the early years can be either an individual or a social experience, opportunities are created for children to articulate their thoughts and ideas. This may take the form of conversation with those around them, or may take the form of self-talk (Smidt, 2009). In either case the combination of art-making and language enable practise of critical thinking skills.

Critical thinking can also be seen as individual thinking at a deeper reflective level. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) has described this as a 'state of flow' where children's deep engagement in the learning is dependent on the balance between challenge and competency in a task, which he termed the golden ratio. He believed that achieving the golden ratio in learning

ensured a feeling of well-being that allowed children to engage in intense critical thinking, accompanied by a deep concentration, a sense of wonder and a joy of learning.

The drawings of children in the two to five age group were studied to explore the concept of schemas, described as repeated patterns of action and thinking in children's art and play (Anning & Ring, 2010). Five schema of children's thinking were identified throughout the five year period of the study. The schemas were "dynamic circular, enclosure, developing and containing space, dynamic vertical, and rotation" (p.21). This art was observed in a nursery and in children's home settings, and both parents and teachers who participated recognised children's fascination with the schemas. The authors contend that there were three developmental stages that emerged from the schema. These were motor level (actions and movements), symbolic representation (awareness that different movements make different marks), and thought level (combining graphic materials and producing a visual narrative to accompany the visual marks). These developmental stages and schema framework contribute an additional framework for teachers to analyse how the visual arts supports children's critical thinking skills. Schema development has been in the realm of a developmental construct of children's learning rather than a socio-cultural one which this article supports. Yet it is impossible to position art as a vehicle for more sophisticated and critical thinking, without considering some parallels and links between the two approaches.

It has been suggested that all mark-making completed by children is intentional, which further indicates that the formation of critical thinking is inherently connected to the visual arts.

Final thoughts

It is timely that in the 21st century the place of visual art in the early years' curriculum is reconceptualised. Just as the role of visual arts has evolved from an adjunct to formal learning in Froebel's time to a mode of self-expression that ensures children's well-being and then to a lens for determining stages of children's learning and development, a further shift should now be formed that views the role of visual art as a pivotal and integrating force within the early years curriculum. Rich visual art experiences offer children new insights into the human world as they navigate the changes and challenges in their life.

The shift in re-conceptualization should not only apply to a greater awareness of the importance of the visual arts for children's learning, but a rigorous provocation needs to be issued to teachers to re-examine their own knowledge, skills and attitudes towards the visual arts, the art making process and how their image of the child is formed in relation to the 'thinking and theorising' child within this context. The visual arts can offer broad open-ended learning experiences that require a variety of critical thinking and problem solving approaches, and support learning dispositions both individually and collaboratively. Intentionally fostering children's working theories would open a space for art to be critically and creatively theorised so that the visual arts move from being instrumental and developmental to benefit children in "truth-seeking, critical thinking, maturity

and open-mindedness" (Lampert, 2006, p. 227). This will surely allow children to more creatively address the complex global challenges of the 21st century than a narrow curriculum that focuses mainly on literacy and numeracy skills. It is hoped that this article will go some way to begin open-to-learning conversations amongst early childhood teachers where new possibilities for the visual arts in the early years' curriculum are re-examined.

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