

RED & ORANGE HORSES DO THEY MATTER?

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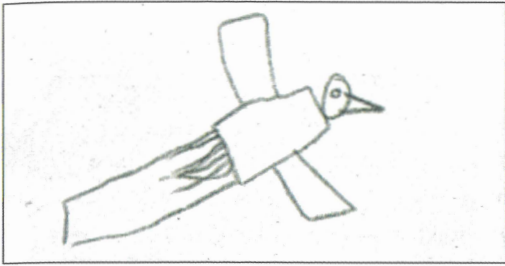
As a cultural event approaches, such as Mothers or Fathers Day, Christmas or Easter or perhaps Valentines Day, many educators and teachers in early childhood settings give children templates or outlines to colour-in so that they have something 'good' to present to their parents. What is the message we are giving children when we offer children such experiences?

For me, we are giving the child a clear message that their own drawings are no longer good enough. In reality, we seek to impress the parents because many adults have expectations and impose their views about what learning is on their children. While well intentioned, such views can easily hijack the child's opportunities for a rich, joyful and more valuable art experience.

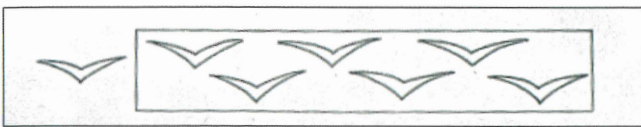
As a young teacher, who trained over 40 years ago, I was deeply committed to art and creativity. This was at a time when trainee teachers had to explore a curriculum area reflecting their main interest. I chose art education as I was then immersed in art educational issues. There was much discussion about the importance of creativity and imagination because we had outstanding artists in our country who were engaged in art education. They lead the way.

One of the international writers and researchers we were reading at the time was Viktor Lowenfeld (1960), who raised issues around creativity. He provoked and challenged our thinking. An example from his research is shown in Figure 1 (next page).

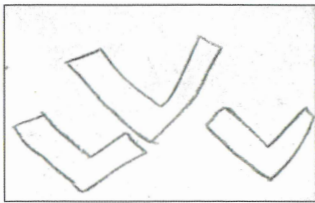
Child's expression before he was exposed to colouring books



Colouring in book experience



After colouring in, the child has lost his sensitivity, as can be seen in this drawing



Lowenfeld's (1960) research concluded that; 'A child once conditioned to colouring books, will have difficulties in enjoying the freedom of creating. The dependency which the colouring book creates is devastating. It has been revealed by experimentation and research that more than half of all children, once exposed to colouring books, lose their creativeness and their independence of expression and become rigid and dependent.' He discussed broadly the impact of activities from colouring-in books to cuts and patterns on children's art and development (Lowenfeld 1960).

As a young teacher I became involved in a campaign to challenge the prevailing ideas about art education in ECE and schools. In a newspaper interview I advocated for creativity in art and challenged the limited adult-based, product-focused art activities in both early childhood settings and schools. As a result, many parents shared their stories of their experiences with such activities with me. One of these stories reflects the experience of many others.

'During his early childhood years, my son, who is now five and attending school, was very keen on painting horses. In fact, he drew and painted virtually nothing else. These horses were the most beautiful drawings you could wish to see - red and orange were his favourite colours and many were painted in these colours, while others were pink, blue, yellow and green and sometimes a combination of all. His kindergarten teacher was most enthusiastic about his paintings and gave him every encouragement. Last Christmas, just before he turned five, his grandmother gave him a giant colouring book which had over 100 horses to 'colour in'. Stephen spent several weeks colouring all the horses and he made a great job of it too. He kept in the lines and the colours he used were black, brown, white and various combinations of these three colours.

We noticed, when he went back to kindergarten that he never drew another one of his beautiful, rich, wild, wonderful horses. We assumed as parents it was a phase that had passed. However, his kindergarten teacher was most upset and asked him why he didn't paint horses anymore. Eventually he told her: "I can't draw good horses like the ones in my book. I don't know how to draw proper legs and heads". Since this Christmas, several months ago, he has not drawn another horse but rather does stick figures and horses like most other children.'

This shows how a little boy's imagination was dashed by the gift of a 'colouring-in' book. You might think this was an exceptional case, but this is not my experience as a teacher. I have often witnessed children fed a diet of such activities respond to art challenges with responses like 'I can't draw', 'please draw it for me' or 'I can't do it'.

One of New Zealand's current and most passionate advocates for fostering the spirit of children's creativity is Pennie Brownlee (2015). She talks about the importance of recognising that 'the act of creating' is the child's process. Ideally, they reflect on their own experiences and gift these to the world through art.

In Brownlee's (2015) words, 'Even with the best of intentions, any time an adult draws or makes for a child it is theft. The adult unwittingly robs the child of the creative process and there are unintended results.' She indicated that the child:

- loses confidence in his or her ability to create
- gets so little practice there is no growth, development or mastery
- prefers to stay with safe fake-creative activities
- takes on the 'I can't' story

There are of course many other books that illuminate similar ideas and challenge the old developmental perspectives on learning that undermine the view of the child as capable and competent. These include, among others: Anning (2002), Mathews (2003), Richards (2005), Terreni (2008), Vecchi (2010), and Clark et al. (2013) to name but a few.

Today, we need to recognise how much we have moved on from the narrow 'developmental theories' that were the main influence on the type and style of art education in preschools as recently as the 1970s. The focus today is firmly on socio-cultural theories as put into practice by many early childhood settings. The work of Reggio Emilia is foremost in many of our eyes as we consider how the processes and products of the deeply reflective work of the teachers at Reggio Emilia engage and develop young children.

Such socio-cultural theories have shifted our views about what the capable and competent child looks like in a good art education programme for an early childhood setting.

This socio-cultural approach is reflected strongly in the development of 'Learning Stories', an assessment and teaching tool focused on building children's strengths and competence (Carr & Lee, 2012). The examples of Learning Stories in Figures 2 and 3 make visible both the teacher's pedagogy and the strengthening of the identity of the child as an artist. These two Learning Stories illustrate a creative environment for children fully focused on challenging the children as artists, with the teacher working collaboratively with the child.

Today we need to consider very carefully how much of our focus is pre-determined by the educators and teachers in our settings and whether we are truly respectful of the child's spirit, passion and interests. How often do we hijack the experiences of children rather than listen deeply to them enabling their imaginations and independent ideas to flourish. Are we seriously listening to their ideas and thoughts in a deeply respectful way so that they can represent and communicate their own ideas as we work alongside them to provide a rich and challenging art programme.

For me, it is extraordinary that the debate around the use of stencils, templates and colouring-in books continues in early childhood education. It now masquerades as '*art activities*' and is still on the agenda of many preschools despite evidence in New Zealand that such activities were banned in schools as early as 1950s.

This is clearly an issue in early childhood throughout the world for I have witnessed this structured, adult-based type of art provision in many, many countries. For me, it has more to do with the educators and teachers image of the child than anything else.

I believe the increasing visibility of such learning activities is also an issue today. Art education is no longer prioritized in teacher education generally. Over many years there has been an erosion of art education within the curriculum of teacher education. Priorities have been focused more on numeracy and literacy with little understanding about the power of the creative arts to encourage dispositions such as close observation and imagination. In reality, art is all about developing and expressing imagination, engagement, new ideas, curiosity, perseverance, and creativity. Art is fundamental to life and every society has used it to express itself. Art is also personal and it is satisfying when the process is valued, thus enabling children to express their ideas, possible fears and joys.

Art should be an opportunity for children to experience their world and for teachers to recognize the opportunity it presents to increase children's sensitivity and awareness of the world around them.

The great educator, Sir Ken Robinson, once stated, 'Imagination is the source of every form of human achievement. And it's the one thing that I believe we are systematically jeopardizing in the way we educate our children and ourselves'. More than ever before, our world needs both creativity and imagination as we move into a more uncertain future.

In reality, this issue is not just about art. It is about our whole view of education. As David Perkins (2009), says about learning, 'It's never just routine. It's about thinking about what you know and pushing further. It involves open-ended or ill-structured problems and novel, puzzling situations. It's never just problem solving. It involves problem finding. It's not just about right answers. It involves explanation and justification. It's not emotionally flat. It involves curiosity, discovery, creativity, camaraderie.' And, as so beautifully stated by Michael Fullen (2013), "We want to provide children with environments that recognize that learning ought to be irresistibly engaging". This means places where children have enough time to pursue in depth art challenges that move beyond the superficial use of 'art activities'.

Lillian Katz (2010), discusses the debate around appropriate early learning curricula believing it is based on a misleading dichotomy of formal instruction versus play. In an effort to engage children, early childhood teachers and educators too often organize 'fun' cut-and-paste type activities that fail to intellectually challenge children.

Often teachers view the alternative to fun activities as rote memorization or academic drills that focus on inculcating specific knowledge and skills. However, Katz (2010) maintains that high-quality ECE programmes can engage children intellectually and can simultaneously help them to

acquire useful skills. This takes an educator or teacher who is deeply interested in working in collaboration with children as they co-construct their curriculum together.

Art is therefore about so much more than adult-structured activities. It is about wonder and discovery, art appreciation, artistic and perceptual awareness, observation and close attention, cognitive and affective growth, and the development of artistic skills. The visual arts involve a wide range of experiences including drawing, painting, clay work, needlecraft and sewing, mosaics, printmaking, construction work and visiting art galleries. We therefore want children to explore art in a way that will engage them in creative experiences in the world of art and in valuable experiences worthy of their energy and engagement.

Recognition of the severe limitations and dangers of colouring-in books and templates is just one very visible manifestation of a narrow and constricted learning opportunity that does not afford valuable, on-going possibilities for children to drive their own creativity and learning.

Let us focus more on children being powerful explorers, who will increasingly set their own goals and build their resilience and resourcefulness to grow their learning and creative abilities. As a teacher, I want to witness cultures of learning that will strengthen opportunities for children to grow and learn. And, I want to see places that will strengthen the child's creativity and artistic appreciation. The early years are far too important to waste on narrow and meaningless activities that do not challenge children's minds and expand their identity as life-long learners.

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