

Thinking Through Art – A Self-Study That Explored the Use of Visual Art as a Tool to Examine Pedagogy

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Abstract: A wide body of literature reveals that visual arts practices in early childhood continue to be an area of practice that can cause uncertainty and discomfort for teachers. Some teachers experience anxiety surrounding their ability to support the arts in the classroom and often view themselves as lacking creativity and artistic ability. This can directly impact on how teachers plan for and teach the visual arts. Evidence has shown that exploring beliefs and values surrounding the visual arts can help teachers to reconceptualise their visual arts pedagogies. This process can allow teachers to gain new understanding that will enable them to further support the visual arts as a meaningful part of the curriculum. It has also been found that the process of creating art whilst thinking about art itself can be a powerful tool for generating new understanding.

This year, the students enrolled in the expressive arts paper who were studying for the BEd (ECT) at Manukau Institute of Technology, were asked to reflect on their own beliefs and values surrounding the arts, and were given the option of creating a participatory art journal. In order to understand this process better, I conducted my own self-study project. Through the process of making art and looking at existing images, I explored how my past experiences had shaped my beliefs and values in the visual arts. Through this process I was able to see how these experiences had informed my classroom practices. This project endeavoured to provide better understanding about how using art as a tool for inquiry and reflection can allow deep examination of pedagogical beliefs as a means to enable reconceptualisation of visual arts pedagogies.

Key Words: visual art, early childhood teaching, self-study

“Very little research has been directed towards understanding how practitioners can move across educational paradigms.”

(Fleer, 2004, p. 71).

Introduction

Today even the very smallest children are inundated by visual images which are sourced not only from their local community and cultural context but also from all over the world. Twenty-first century technologies have meant that children now have access to multiple symbol systems and images on a daily basis. Despite this growing dominance of the visual as a means to transmit and receive messages, visual arts practices within early childhood continue, in many cases, to be dominated by modernist developmental ideas (McArdle, 2012; Wright, 2003). It was in 1974 that Eisner identified and challenged seven myths that all relate to a developmental perspective of children as art makers. This approach to facilitating the visual arts within a developmental modernist paradigm is known as the *productive approach* (Wright, 2003). What this term refers to is the “stand back and don’t interfere” approach, where teachers believe that through providing a large range of materials and space and time, children will develop their artistic skills naturally as they unfold, somewhat like a fern frond. Since Eisner’s pioneering article in 1974, many researchers and educationalists have continued to contribute to this discourse, arguing that visual art, like any domain,

requires engagement with others and the teaching of skills, and is strongly influenced by collaboration with others and by cultural and social contexts (Pohio, 2013; Richards & Terreni, 2013; Wright, 2003).

Here in New Zealand, in 1993, Dunn identified through her master's thesis the continued dominance of the productive approach as well as some evidence of a reproductive approach (Wright, 2003). The term *reproductive* refers to a highly teacher-directed approach where the teacher plans and implements a product and children follow processes, with little opportunity for creative input, in order to create the teacher's vision (McArdle, 2012). Both the productive and reproductive approaches remain present within some visual arts practices in New Zealand. Indeed, in some settings both these approaches are present within the same educational context. McArdle (2012) argues:

Modernist and postmodernist artists and their deliberate and considered intent to "break the rules" have led to a misreading of art as un-teachable. The idea that children progress "naturally" through developmental stages means that teaching is not necessary. At the same time, teachers look for one hundred and one variations on the bunny tasks. Teachers live, work and negotiate within contradictory spaces every day (p. 368).

In many cases, visual arts pedagogies continue to sit out of kilter with sociocultural practices, which are now deeply entrenched within almost every area of early childhood practice in New Zealand. Understanding visual arts practices within a sociocultural paradigm means teachers will need to consider ways to work with the visual arts that allow them to engage in discussion and critique, to plan for the arts as children use art as a tool for learning, to consider specific cultural knowledge, and to encourage peer interactions and collaboration through the arts (Wright, 2003). Educational researchers have considered why in some cases, the visual arts remain an area of uncertainty and teachers choose not to engage with children's visual arts processes, or conversely, plan prefabricated art activities that leave little room for creativity. Several barriers have been identified, including a lack of confidence in the arts, which can lead to teachers with insufficient content knowledge in the visual arts (McArdle, 2008, 2012; Pohio, 2013; Wright, 2003). Modernist ideas have led to an image of the child as an "innately creative being", and this image has influenced whole communities, not just teachers (McArdle, 2012). Richards and Terreni (2013) also argue that there is a lack of directives within the early childhood curriculum document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) that could help teachers understand *how* to engage with children through the visual arts as they explore ideas and construct knowledge.

These barriers have meant that many teachers feel apprehensive about their ability to support the arts in the classroom and often view themselves as lacking creativity and artistic ability (McArdle, 2012). McArdle (2012) found that many of the pre-service teachers she taught experienced what she described as "art anxiety", and on unpacking this fear, found that students had been profoundly affected by some previous experiences in their arts education.. This was an experience echoed within the discourses of tertiary-level early childhood students here in Auckland prior to this study taking place. Many students recalled moments when they were told they were "no good at art", their works were not deemed good enough to be displayed on the wall, or they had been mocked by their peers for performances in dance or drama. It has been shown that negative experiences such as these can directly impact on how teachers plan for and support the arts (Bae, 2004). Furthermore, these experiences can lead to an undervaluing of the arts in general, the impact of this being that many student

teachers have very little content knowledge of the arts when they enter tertiary-level early childhood education programmes.

Reconceptualising Visual Arts Practices

There is growing evidence that the process of exploring the barriers that have been holding teachers back, as well as exploring the factors that have enabled other teachers to reconceptualise their visual arts pedagogies, could be of value for teachers who desire to move across educational paradigms in the arts (Eisner, 1973; McArdle, 2012; Pohio, 2013). The process of using the visual as a method has been found to be a powerful tool for generating new understanding (Craw, 2011; Kind, 2010; Pohio, 2013). It can provide a pathway through which teachers can understand how their current beliefs regarding the visual arts have developed and it can also be a transformative process as the new understanding provokes a reconceptualisation of practices in the area of the visual arts (Kind, 2010; Pohio, 2013).

For this reason, in 2014 the second-year students studying for a BEd (ECT) at Manukau Institute of Technology were asked to reflect on their own beliefs and values surrounding the arts. They were given the option of creating a reflective art journal where they could engage in making images or reflect on images as a means to explore how their beliefs and values in the arts informed and shaped their pedagogical ideas in the arts. As the current lecturer of this paper, I was interested in understanding the reflective process better and so I decided to conduct my own self-study project. Through this process I explored how my past experiences with the visual had shaped my beliefs and values in the visual arts. I was also able to begin to understand see how these experiences had informed my classroom practices. This project endeavoured to provide better understanding of how using art as a tool for inquiry and reflection can allow deep examination of pedagogical beliefs as a means to enable reconceptualisation of visual arts pedagogies.

Methodology

The focus in this study was to explore how my own visual arts pedagogy had evolved, and this, coupled with my decision to use arts-based methods within the research, meant that the research was underpinned by the theoretical perspectives of *a/r/tography*. *A/r/tography* as a methodological approach can be likened to a rhizome, which grows not in a linear fashion, but instead in a series of interconnected roots systems that build off each other. *A/r/tography* works in a similar way, where theory is negotiated through practice itself and builds on itself. An *a/r/tographic* view, like social-constructionism, understands that knowledge is subjective, and highlights doing as a means of knowing more deeply (Irwin & Springgay, 2008). Kind (2010) and Springgay (2002) helped me understand that visual art could act as a vehicle through which I, the participant, could explore my own relationship with this field.

The idea of exploring how pedagogical ideas in the visual arts have evolved through time has been examined in previous research. Veale (2000), in her study “Art as Development”, explored the early childhood art experiences of three practising artists in Australia, and Craw (2011), within her master’s research, examined teachers’ images of the child through the process of examining existing visual art that portrayed diverse views of childhood.

These ideas informed my decision to conduct an *a/r/tographic* self-study; in essence to test the theory, to see if the process of exploring my own past experiences in the arts would offer some clues to how my own pedagogy in arts education had developed. I wondered what factors had fuelled my passion for the arts and my commitment to valuing and teaching about the possibilities the visual arts offer for children within their learning.

Self-study teacher research allows teachers to explore and critique their own practices in the classroom. Clarke and Erickson (2003) argue that if student learning is the main priority of teaching, then teachers must inquire into their own practice. It was my rationale that through exploring some significant moments in my own life history, I would be able to explore how the experiences I had had within a specific cultural context had shaped my practice. My story was told mainly through images, and highlighted some of the significant visual arts events that were fundamental in shaping my beliefs about myself an image maker and the impact this has had on my pedagogical beliefs about young children and visual art. McArdle (2003) explains the value in exploring layers of experience as she likens visual arts pedagogies to a palimpsest. She states:

The complexity and diversity of influences that have shaped views on the teaching of art can be understood as a palimpsest, a term that describes the way in which the ancient parchments used for writing were written over, but new messages only partially obliterated the original message beneath. Both the new and the original messages still stand, albeit partially erased and interrupted (McArdle, 2003, p. 153).

Findings

I was born in the mid-1970s, the youngest of four children. We grew up in a monocultural middle-class suburb of Auckland. One of four children, none of my other siblings was particularly artistic, and so when I began to draw at a very early age it was something a little out of the ordinary. I think I spent years sitting and drawing at my little orange plastic table creating fantasy worlds out of paper, pencils and scissors. I remember hearing phrases like “Sarah is so good at drawing”, and “She’s so artistic”. I quietly delighted at these labels and they began to shape my identity.

Being a child of the 1970s, I attended a public kindergarten. Although memories of these very early years are fragmented and partial, I am certain my arts experiences there were very much influenced by developmental modernist ideas. McArdle (2012) makes this link in her own work also, as she suggests that many pre-service teachers experienced productive art experiences themselves in early childhood, which means it is these experiences they first draw upon when constructing their own visual arts philosophies.

Perhaps due to my own memories of my plastic drawing table, I made sure that when I had my first child, there was always a drawing table and a range of drawing materials available. Later, as

Figure 1. *The Drawing Table*



Figure 1_The Drawing Table, created by Grace Probine in response to my re-telling of this memory.

an early childhood teacher, supervisor and *atelierista*,¹ I strongly advocated for the accessibility of art materials for children throughout the day, and not just within specific periods.

Figure 2: A Reproductive Art Activity



As a child, my mother, who did not consider herself artistic at all, would arrange craft activities for me to engage in. These activities were always decided by her and she would direct me through the steps I needed to take to create her preconceptualised product.

I loved these experiences, despite the highly controlled, reproductive approach my mother implemented; in a busy family, these moments were cherished by both of us. Reflecting on these childhood experiences confirmed for me the power of core relationships in shaping and teaching

our first values about art, as Veale's research found (2000).

By the time I had my own children, I had finished a design degree, was completing my master's degree in photography, and was immersed in world where I valued my own ideas surrounding what made "good" images. Drawing upon my early cherished experiences as a child, I, too, organised activities for my own children, as seen in Figure 2. These were centred around my conception about what child art should look like – I had not yet learned to view my own child as a powerful maker of images, or even begun to develop my thinking about the role of art in children's lives as a means to construct knowledge and make sense of experience.

Another person who had a big influence on my art making as a child was my grandfather. He, like my mother, did not consider himself artistic, even though he created intricate botanical paintings for most of his life. He gave these away as gifts, and they were much admired by friends and family. Although I admired his skill, I never valued the creativity of these pieces, but through reflecting on these images today, I can see how his love for nature and drawing has certainly influenced my pedagogy in the arts – even today as I teach, I collect natural resources for ephemeral art and talk about the value of observational drawing. Moreover, when I flick through my sketchbook, botanical drawings are a recurring theme, as well as landscapes and natural phenomena.

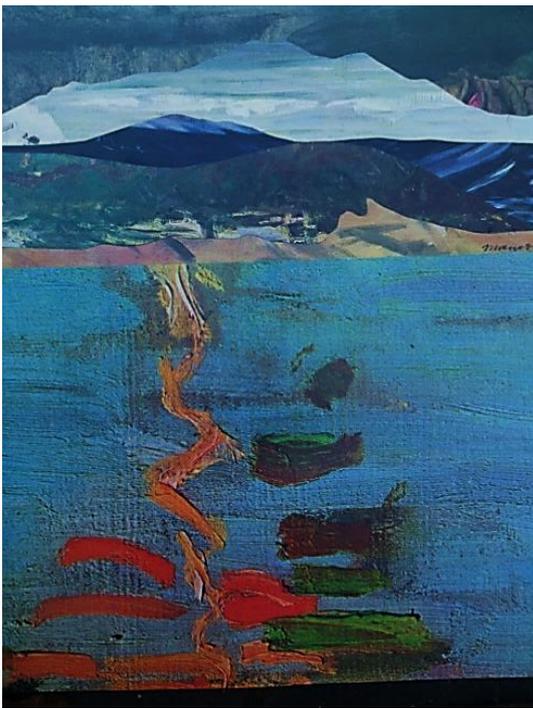
¹ The term *atelierista* comes from Reggio Emilia and refers to the role of arts facilitator, a teacher who works with children and the graphic languages within their projects and investigations.

Figure 3. Botanical Drawings, Landscapes and Natural Phenomena



Figure 3. (From left to right). *Kowhai* by Jack Healey; *Koromiko* by Jack Healey; provocations in the atelier; a lavender flower and a beach scene from my sketchbook.

Figure 4: Response to a Westernised Visual Arts Education



I attended a private girls school in Auckland and the visual arts continued to dominate my education. Here I learnt about the great European masters – through my classical, art history, painting and design studies, I was consistently exposed to the art and literature of the European greats – but there was little focus on exploring diverse cultural perspectives or evidence of bicultural perspectives on visual art. As I reflected on the significance of this highly Westernised perspective of what art making was, I created this image. It is a replica of an image from my sketchbook, and also a collage made from fragments of reproductions of works by Degas, Manet and Monet; these reproductions were taken from a magazine series I subscribed to throughout my high school years entitled *Discovering the Great Paintings*.

Interestingly it was these types of books that I first introduced to my *atelier* when I took on my role as an *atelierista* in an early childhood centre, a role that was influenced

by the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia. One of my first long-term projects with children referred to the work of Kandinsky as a provocation, and we explored the link between classical music and children's painting. It was only later, after I had recognised the importance of representing and sharing a diverse range of cultural perspectives on art making in the *atelier*, that I realised the strong influence my Westernised education had had on the way I facilitated and presented visual art in the classroom.

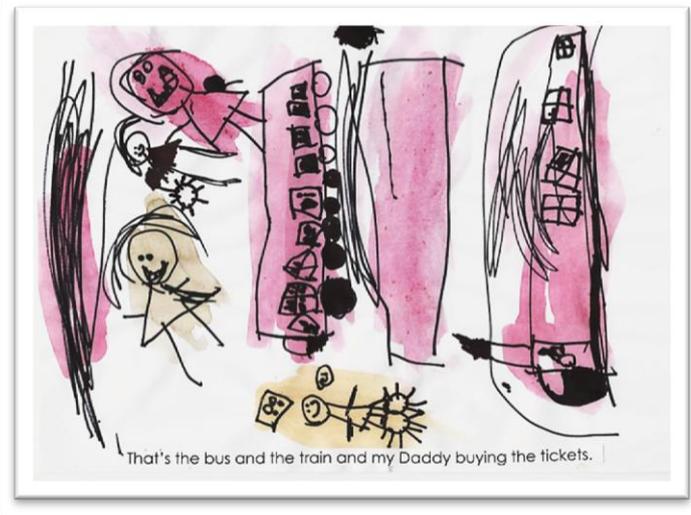
In 1993 I left high school and attended Auckland University of Technology (AUT) to complete a design degree. I was finally exposed to the richness and diversity of multicultural Auckland, to the myriad diverse cultural views and values. It is significant to note that within my own narrative, I have had no particularly negative experiences with art teachers, as my students so often share, and this could be a significant factor as to how my own attitudes regarding visual art education have developed. It was at AUT that I began to engage with educators who helped me to develop my understanding of subjectivity. It was throughout these years that I began to be interested in diverse perspectives and multiple realities. My

Figure 5. *Opium* by Sarah Probine, 1999



final exhibition piece was a series of Hollywood portraits of drag queens. The significance of this visual arts event is that I developed an ability to suspend judgment and to enjoy the challenge of trying to see things from the perspectives of others. I continued on at AUT and studied for my Master of Art and Design. Arts-based research at this time was still very innovative, and I developed an understanding that image making itself can be a way to explore concepts and construct knowledge, and that art is not simply a way to express or communicate a preformed concept or message.

Figure 6. Representation of a Train Trip by Grace Probine, aged 3 years



Through later university studies in early childhood education, I was exposed to the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia, and when I began teaching, I sought out a centre that was influenced by these ideas. Engaging with the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia acted as a catalyst for change for me, most significantly in how I viewed children as learners and constructors of their own knowledge through relationships with people and the environment. I began

to see children differently, and it was this new image of childhood that allowed me to turn around my understanding of the role of art within education. I now understood visual art as a means for children, through collaborative relationships, rich critical dialogue and many different media, to think about their world and their experiences, to develop and communicate their theories about the world to others, and to deepen or develop their thinking in different directions through the process of thinking through art.

Discussion and Conclusions

I found that the act of self-reflection through looking at images and making images allowed me to understand the seemingly contradictory influences that have served to shape my own pedagogical beliefs in the arts. What became clear was that I was influenced strongly by the

adult role models in my life, and by the images I was surrounded by and exposed to. My educational experiences also shaped my pedagogical beliefs. At first I was exposed to a monocultural understanding of visual art, but as I moved into tertiary study, my education allowed me to explore and celebrate subjectivity and diversity. The significance of positive role models throughout my education also influenced my continued interest in the arts as well my perseverance in continuing to build my skills in and understanding of the arts. However, what has this meant for my own pedagogical understanding of the visual arts within early childhood education?

I have come to realise that I have held three very different images of the child throughout my lifetime and this is clearly reflected in the artefacts and visual images I have presented throughout this paper. My own modernist early childhood experiences were the foundation on which I built an image of the child as innately creative, a child who had a right to explore materials freely without adult intervention. Crafting with my mother reminded me of some treasured memories from my childhood, and I am sure this is what informed my practice as I planned prefabricated art activities for my own children. I am, however, grateful that my university education and the provocation of Reggio Emilia served as a catalyst for me to completely reconceptualise my image of the child, and I now understood the possibility and capacity children have to communicate, reflect, and construct knowledge through the arts within collaborative contexts.

A limitation of the research was that, due to time constraints, I was not able to produce as many images as I would have liked. However, the process of thinking about the images that I had made previously and the images I had grown up around, and then thinking about some of the images I might make to communicate and consider important themes that I uncovered within my own life history, allowed me to refine my thinking and to think more deeply about why these influences were significant.

This small self-study project provides an example of how exploration of life history with a specific focus can allow teachers to understand how their beliefs and values in the arts have evolved. Past research has explored this idea as a process by which teachers can reconceptualise their own practice as they unpack their personal negative experiences and barriers in the arts. In contrast, this study endeavoured to examine a conversely different experience and investigated how a deep interest and commitment to the arts within young children's learning has developed.

Richards and Terreni (2013) argue that teachers and students will benefit from further research that offers different pathways through which teachers can reconceptualise their practices in the visual arts. Significant factors uncovered through this study are the recognition of the significance of adult role models, the value of educational experiences that challenge beliefs and provoke new perspectives, and the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia, not as a recipe for best practice but rather as a catalyst, allowing re-examination of the values that inform our work with children. The project has been beneficial for my own teaching practice, also: I am now more aware of the importance of being a positive role model in the classroom, and have a better understanding of the significance of what many students have experienced experience within their own visual arts education. Many students have experienced a productive approach in early childhood, where no critique was offered, and then later, a reproductive approach within the middle school years where suddenly teachers critique with no collaborative discussion. This can be a toxic experience for many students, one from which they sometimes never recover their creativity. I also realise that in my own early teaching practice I turned only to Western examples of visual-art making to act as a

provocation for children, whereas now I appreciate the importance of including diverse cultural values in the arts within my own classroom. This realisation has also highlighted the importance of facilitating discussions that challenge students' assumptions regarding the visual arts, this challenge being a first step in reconceptualising the role of the visual arts within a sociocultural paradigm.

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