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There’s more to it! The visual art realm of three-year-old children

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There is more to the visual art processes of young children than meets the eye. Early childhood education research has revealed the depth of art experiences for young children. This discussion traces my study of three-year-old children in which the complexity of the children’s engagement with resources, their earnest creative processes and the absolute delight they expressed at the panorama of life around them was astounding (Plows, 2013). Predominantly focused on the children, this article explores selected aspects of the five participants’ visual art experiences. Documented during the study, these elements were the young children’s light-hearted narration of events, their intense creativity and their gestural representation of concepts. An outline of the research methods used and relevant theoretical perspectives is provided. This article brings pertinent content knowledge, teaching strategies and implications for practice into consideration. The following discussion advocates that responsive educators support children’s sense of wonder and know the difference between open and closed art experiences, consolidate professional learning and practice and endeavour to document children’s visual art making.

Research methods and the analysis of children’s visual art experiences

This article details aspects from the findings of an investigation into how three-year-old artists expressed themselves, communicated and explored resources during visual art making in an early childhood setting. The design of the study was based on an interpretative, qualitative paradigm. To achieve authenticity, multiple data collection methods were incorporated and these included gathering voices from the children, the teachers, the parents and the researcher (Plows, 2013). Digital photography, video and audio recordings were used to document children’s voices and actions during visual art making. Field notes, a digitally audio recorded one-hour focus group interview with teachers, a concise electronic mail (e-mail) questionnaire with parents of the five children and a researcher’s reflective video diary were also utilised. Thematic analysis and emergent coding (Eckhoff, 2011) were used to group findings from data into three categories based on the three-part research question, which investigated intrapersonal occurrences, interpersonal dialogue and interaction with resources. A significant dimension of this study was the process of gaining ethics approval, and this reflects the importance of respecting the rights of young children (Loveridge, 2010). In accord with recent research, value for the empowerment of children in this discussion is shown by acknowledging their processes and perspectives (Carr, 2001; Dalli & Stephenson, 2010; Hedges,
Following the discussion on pedagogy, I will bring attention to the way that children’s natural humour was expressed during visual art learning. The second element brings the profound creative processes to the fore and, thirdly, the lens will zoom in on the way children used action representation during art making.

**Pedagogy and theoretical perspectives**

Pedagogical dichotomies about the teacher’s role in early childhood visual art education are common (Hill, 2011; Katz, 1998; McArdle, 2003; Plows, 2013; Probine, 2014; Richards & Terreni, 2013; Visser, 2005; Wrightson & Heta-Lensen, 2013). Constructivist viewpoints differ from sociocultural and social constructivist approaches. Furthermore, Richards and Terreni (2013) believe that a fusion of developmental theories and art world attitudes have caused mixed messages about what constitutes visual art learning for young children. Applying sociocultural perspectives to visual art education means that the child’s context must be considered. Learning occurs via social, cultural and historical influences (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore vocabulary used in early childhood professional discourse and the communication between educators and children have the potential to enhance children’s visual art education. The sociocultural paradigm highlights the quality of educators’ interactions with learners during visual art making experiences. Vygotsky (1978) stated that “every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on, on the individual level” (p. 57). Academics such as Rogoff have followed social constructivist theory that is informed by Vygotsky’s cultural-historical ideas (Hill, 2011). Guided participation fosters the realisation of children’s artistic potential. When implemented with knowledge and awareness, this effective teaching technique brings scaffolding and guided participation together to benefit the learning process (Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu, & Mosier, 1993).

**A natural sense of humour during art-making processes**

Mulcahey (2009) emphasises the role of imagination in making life enjoyable. Both imagination and amusement featured during the children’s art making in my research. Children demonstrated a sense of fun and this added to the complexity and holistic nature of the documentation (Plows, 2013). Figure 1 captures a moment part way through drawing on paper with pastels, when Nessa laughed, put her hand into the sleeve of the pastels box, and transformed it imaginatively into a crocodile (a character featured in popular children’s games and activities). Nessa announced “Ta daah!” dramatically. She followed this with sound effects “snap, snap, snap”. Nessa

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*Figure 1. “Ta daah” announced Nessa (Plows, 2013).*
explained it’s “...a snap thing ... a crocodile ... when the crocodiles (are) in the water... snap, snap, snap”. As the participant researcher nearby, I listened, joined the conversation and enjoyed the moment. Nessa continued her art making in a playful way and her extensive vocabulary was expressed conjointly.

Although a playful attitude towards visual art making was, at times, evident, the word play was not used by children, teachers or myself, as the participant observer, in association with visual art learning. Interestingly, only the parents of the participant three-year-olds uttered the word play to describe children’s art-making at home. For example, one parent explained that she and her three-year-old son often sit down together at home for art time and play around with the different materials (Plows, 2013). While it is accepted that young children learn through play (White, Ellis, O’Malley, Rockel, Stover, & Toso, 2008), the discourse of visual art education research tends to place more emphasis on art media and technique than on the role of play.

**Fully engrossed in the creative zone**

Indeed, young children are perhaps more sophisticated than adults realise (Mulcahey, 2009; Papandreou, 2014). Young artists expend intellectual effort as they portray thought processes through visual art media (Papandreou, 2014). The way that three-year-old children engaged deeply with the art materials and the process to achieve their self-set goals was impressive (Plows, 2013). Clay and other three-dimensional materials increase children’s skills as they explore, sculpt and construct (MoE, 1996). In figure 2, Sam explores the properties of the clay in several ways. He rolled it flat, cut through it with a clay utensil and, at times, enjoyed competently manipulating the material with his hands.

**Fostering dispositions of curiosity and wonder**

Curiosity and openness to different possibilities are known artistic dispositions (Mulcahey, 2009). Three-year-old Lucia (see figure 3) demonstrated these elements when she decided to create a different creature (Plows, 2013). Lucia’s delight shone through as she contemplated the composition of her drawing. From her prior knowledge, she sketched an animal that was an amalgam of three creatures. It had elephant’s feet, the head of a hamster and a porcupine’s tail.
Similarly, the youngest child in Nevanen, Juvonen, and Ruismäki’s (2014) art education research was three-years-old. Their study focused on narratives consisting of historic facts and imagination. An example of one of these consisted of environment and visual art topics. The techniques included photography, graphics, water-colour painting, pottery and felting. Young children bring their unique story to the early childhood setting with them: each of the five children in my investigation carried prior knowledge and their narratives revealed the richness and diversity of their lives (Plows, 2013). Binder and Kotsopoulos (2011) were interested in the way young children created “visual narratives through the use of personal artifacts” (p. 339). The authors stated that personal artifacts are representative of the items that children feel are significant. Indeed, their verbal narratives and their visual stories are both indicative of their personal thought processes.

According to Wright (2010), aesthetic appreciation is one of a range of creative processes. Children benefit from teachers’ support of their developing faculties of aesthetic appreciation and openness to new ideas. During my study, one child, Ethan, explored the overhead projector with delight, looking at the reflections in the front surface mirror and at the condenser lens. With a sense of wonder, he was fascinated by the reflective quality of the projector (see Figure 4). Attributes such as curiosity and reflection are “extremely difficult to measure but are often observable in children’s responses and behaviours” (MoE, 1996, p. 30). A curious, contemplative nature was evident as three-year-old Ethan demonstrated appreciation of the visual world around him.

The role of educators is to respond positively and reflect on ways to scaffold the visual learning. Viewing the world around them and showing curiosity about what they discover are aspects of children’s visual realm. Children benefit from teachers who appreciate subtle visual effects because these adults will often recognise items of interest and bring these objects into the learning environment. In the Reggio Emilia settings, the teachers’ value for the visual experiences of children is evident in the layout of the visual arts studio or atelier (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). Imagination, experimentation, creativity and expression interweave in the learning process, according to Vecchi (2010).

**Action representation in art-making**

When children use gestural or action representation the process of making art is foregrounded and the product becomes secondary (Cox, 2005; Ring, 2006; Wright, 2010). Consideration of movement during visual art is important because it assists the observer to appreciate the meaning behind children’s art making, according to Ring (2006). A paintbrush may become the speeding car as the child races it across the page, symbolising the action of the subject. Ring (2006) states that the marks children make on paper may represent the movements and sounds of themselves or objects. In this way, children invest drawing materials with the capacity to embody themselves (Wright, 2010). While creating
a three-dimensional artefact with found objects, Ethan emulated the racing car he was making by zooming the cardboard tube through the air (Plows, 2013). Excerpt from transcript: Ethan moved the cardboard tube through the air, saying, “It goes… vroosh.”

Gestural expressiveness highlights the process of art making. However, value for the art product can be seen when permanent artefacts serve as a means for children to use their faculty of recall and to express their developing working theories (MoE, 1996; Papandreou, 2014).

**Visual art in society**

Infants, toddlers and young children benefit from an introduction to visual art history through appropriate learning experiences (Kolbe, 2004; Mulcahey, 2009). European art education examples are often referred to in international literature. In one example, Mulcahey (2009) explains how she showed young children one of Jean Arp’s abstract paintings and one child’s interpretation was that it looked like an octopus. When early childhood teachers are knowledgeable about the history of visual art, they will feel more confident about discussing artefacts with children. For example, a teacher could support young children’s interest in drawing animals by bringing in a digital print of an artist’s work, such as Franz Marc’s Blue Horses. Kolbe (2004) suggests that Durer’s Young Hare watercolour may be of interest to children. Local culture should be considered and early childhood teachers could source appropriate carved, painted or three-dimensional artefacts that are valued by the local community. For example, Tongan designs on tapa (ngatu) might include the image of a turtle and such images might be sourced in books on Tongan art traditions, photographs or from artefacts made by people in the local community. Local museums are excellent places for local urban early childhood educators to further research visual art history. In my experience, there are many ways that thoughtful educators can bring visual art artefacts of cultural and historical interest into an early childhood setting.

**Innovation versus imitation**

In the same way that letter awareness enables word formation and eventually creative writing, visual art techniques and media are part of the ‘alphabet’ of visual art learning. For example, paint is a medium and there are multiple variations of how paint can be applied to a surface. Charcoal is another art medium and Figure 5 illustrates the way that Joshua smudged the charcoal onto the page, a technique learnt from his observation of peers and educators. As with every other child’s drawing in that context, Joshua’s was unique. In addition to knowing about a range of techniques and media, teachers with an
awareness of closed and open-ended approaches can purposefully initiate or respond to art experiences. An example of a closed approach to art is a colouring-in template. Although children may enjoy colouring-in, the template is fixed, which limits the imagination. The template concept is the antithesis of uniqueness and innovation. This is in stark contrast to the rich, open-ended art experiences that Mulcahey (2009) and Thompson (2005) describe.

Closed template-like experiences are limiting due to the lack of range and possibility. As a youngster, I attended guitar lessons and I will never forget the folksong titled Little Boxes (Reynolds, 1962). Reynolds sang “Little boxes, little boxes, little boxes all the same.” In the lyrics of that song, there was a disdain for things being identical. As a child of that era, I was influenced by the popular views of the 1960’s and 1970’s. Like many other educators, I saw templates as representations of imitation and a lack of freedom. Conversely, an open-ended approach to art brings creative variation and promotes imaginative thinking.

Mulcahey (2009) believes that early childhood professionals with some visual art content knowledge will have more confidence in guiding children towards rich art experiences. A recent research by Probine (2014) sought an understanding of how teacher knowledge and practice affects children’s learning in the visual arts. It is time for experienced visual artists, early childhood teachers and researchers to share their visual art knowledge with colleagues for the purpose of improving responsiveness to the art realm of children and to increase the depth of professional discussion. This will also enable complex analysis of children’s art learning and widen the scope of planning.

**Concluding thoughts about implications for practice**

This discussion highlighted the impressive artistic capabilities, intellectual competence, observation skills and enthusiasm of young children (Mulcahey, 2009; Papandreou, 2014; Plows, 2013). The sense of playfulness, depth of creative process and communication through movement were indicative of children’s range of abilities. My investigation involving five participant children, their teachers and their parents revealed that the careful observation and documentation of young children’s art making is the first step for early childhood professionals in the sector. This includes empowering children by listening to their ideas and recording their voices to understand the prior knowledge they bring from their home setting. Aesthetic appreciation and artistic processes are important and early childhood teachers have a role in mindfully supporting and guiding children’s visual art experiences. When analysing children’s learning and conducting self-review, educators will benefit from collaborative discussions with colleagues and parents. Visual art content knowledge can be extended through professional development or consolidated within the teaching team through sharing effective visual art ideas, techniques and experiences. Additionally, teachers will benefit from taking time to extend their knowledge of visual art in society by researching visual artefacts from their context. There is space for both delight and earnest artistic endeavour in rich early childhood visual art education experiences. Educators are encouraged to stop and look anew at children’s visual art making with a sense of wonder and openness to seek to appreciate children’s outlook on the panorama of the world around them. Finally, it is important to wait and listen to children’s voices, in case they choose to
share an accompanying narrative – there is more to young children’s artistic processes than first meets the eye.

References


