



Peer-reviewed Paper

Teaching visual arts: putting theory into practice

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In this paper I argue that New Zealand early childhood teachers need to have a better understanding of the theories underpinning their visual arts practice. This account is based on my recent personal development journey into the current theories and practices in early childhood visual arts teaching. As a result of this personal development, I have come to believe the teaching of visual arts in the early childhood sector in New Zealand is still strongly aligned with child-centred art theories of the last century. I assert that we need professional development for teachers so that there can be a major pedagogical shift towards socio-anthropological, multicultural visual culture education. We need to examine current practice, with regard to the socio-cultural principles that underpin the early childhood curriculum, and determine whether critical reflection on our practice results in a shift in pedagogy.

Early Childhood Visual Arts Theory

The overriding paradigm for visual arts education in the early childhood education sector has been one of developmental appropriateness, with an emphasis on process, child self-direction, and the passive role of the teacher (Visser, 2005). This child-centred art theory approach favoured giving children unbridled freedom to express their ideas, in a climate where creativity and experimentation were emphasised. Teachers adopted non-intervention roles as facilitators, providing a stimulating environment with adequate and varied art materials, and offering praise for the children's efforts. There was no direction or influence on the children's creative processes (Bamford, 2006; Boughton, 1999; Brownlee, 1983; Cox, 2005; Gunn, 1998; Hancock, 2004; Lewis, 1998/99; Lubawy, 2009; Richards, 2003; Visser, 2005). In contrast, children are seen as confident decision makers who use visual arts as a media for demonstrating their knowledge and expressing their ideas (Eisner & Ecker, 1970; Gunn, 1998). This view aligns with the aspirations of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996) for children to become confident and competent learners in control of their own learning.

In the late 1990's there was a very slow paradigm shift towards a more cognitive approach to arts education under the influence of the constructivist early childhood curriculum document, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996), which is influenced by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (MoE, 1996; Visser, 2005). Children were encouraged to observe, plan, create, develop skills, and reflect upon and evaluate their art works or performance. The teacher's role was to scaffold this process by fostering the skills necessary for children to engage in problem solving and arts appreciation; and to expose children to examples of quality art



that could be used as the basis for critiquing their own work (Bamford, 2006; Bracey, 2003; Gunn 1998; Lewis, 1998/99; Project Zero, 2001; Thornton & Brunton, 2005; Visser, 2004, 2005). Visual arts were seen as a means of communication of concepts and ideas, and therefore a reflection of children's thinking (Brownlee, 1983; Cox, 2005; Gunn, 1998; Lubawy, 2009).

The writings of John Dewey influenced the practice of visual arts being taught as part of an integrated curriculum rather than a separate discipline in the early childhood field, and this practice continues today. It was believed that children should be treated as active learners whose creative energies centre on themselves and their world (Chapman, 1978; Gunn 2000; May, 1997; MoE, 1996; Visser, 2005). Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001) also believed that visual arts should be taught contextually and not as an isolated subject, in order to provide a more informed understanding of the concerns and issues that are relevant in children's lives. After researching and reviewing various models of visual arts education, such as child-centred art teaching, creative self-expressive art and cognitive art education, Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001) decided that a social reconstructionist multicultural approach with an integrated curriculum was an appropriate teaching and learning strategy for arts and visual culture education. Education in visual culture involves an awareness of the cultural experiences of the child, as children create art to express things about themselves, their social context, the things that impact upon them and their surroundings (Freedman, 2003). This approach has now overtaken cognitive arts as the dominant prescriptive theory (Bracey, 2003).

Visual culture implies two things: the term *visual* suggests that we are concerned with visual artefacts and the term *culture* suggests an interest in the social conditions in which the artefacts are produced, distributed and used. Duncum (2001, p. 103) quotes Mirzoeff's (1998) concise definition: "In the present intensely visual age, everyday life is visual culture." Visual culture, then, is something we all possess and practice (Duncum, 2001).

We now have a new appreciation of the visual arts as a way of making meaningful connections with the world so as to understand its purpose, meaning, relationship and influence (Freedman, 2001, 2001a). "Conceptualized as visual culture, the visual arts do not only represent culture, they are the physical embodiment of it" (Freedman, 2001a, p. 7). This socio-anthropological and socio-cultural approach to teaching visual culture is particularly relevant to the complex multicultural postmodern society we live in today (Chalmers, 2001; Garber, 2001; Goldberg, 2006; Greenwood & Wilson, 2006; Rose & Kincheloe, 2004). When we realise that visual arts and visual culture are already an important part in the life of every student, we can provide every child with a culturally and socially relevant experience in visual arts (Adejumo, 2002; Chalmers, 2001; Greenwood & Wilson, 2006).

Relationship between Theory and Visual Arts Practice in Early Childhood

Pearson (2001) states that a single theory that will encompass all teaching methodologies in visual arts is unlikely to be offered, and is not needed. Chalmers (2001) declares that, "art education can never be based on only one theory of art" (p. 86). However, Pearson (2001) also argues that teachers need a



better understanding of the theoretical tools they use to be able to use them more skilfully. I agree with Pearson (2001) and believe that New Zealand early childhood teachers need to have a better understanding of the theories underpinning their own visual arts practice. According to Bracey (2003):

If teachers are unclear about the theory that illuminates their practice, they can have little hope of understanding how they might change their practice for the better. More importantly, if they have no grasp of what counts as an epistemology of art, there can be no certainty that what they offer young people is, indeed, knowledge to do with art (Bracey, 2003, p. 186).

This is an enormous challenge in the early childhood field. The percentage of staff in education and childcare centres in New Zealand holding a teaching qualification rose from 39 per cent in 2001 (Mitchell, 2005) to over 60 percent in 2010. However, there is limited current research that indicates how this change will affect the quality of visual arts teaching. Research in visual arts education carried out by Gunn (1998, 2000) and Lewis (1998/99) showed that teachers rarely actively intervened in children's artistic expression unless they were showing the children how to use basic tools (staplers, scissors). Teachers frequently stated that they did not have enough knowledge to be able to discuss art – in relation to aesthetics, history and criticism – with the children, although they did endeavour to make the art area as attractive as possible (Barry & Townsend, 1995; Gunn, 1998, 2000; Lewis, 1998/99).

Te Whāriki (MoE, 1996), *The Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices [DOPs]* (MoE, 1996a) and much early childhood literature now has a socio-cultural focus. An underlying assumption is that the child and educator are both active participants in learning in social contexts. Working together, the child and teacher draw on each other's previous experiences, skills and abilities. Because children learn through interaction with others, the educator must be actively involved with children in ways that will support their learning (O'Connor & Diggins, 2002; Gunn, 1998; MoE, 2003; Schunk, 2008).

It is critically important that teachers have sufficient depth and breadth of subject knowledge in order to meaningfully respond to and extend children's interests and inquiries (Hedges & Cullen, 2005), yet the teaching of art in the early childhood sector in New Zealand is too often still aligned with the child centred art theories of the last century. I assert that we urgently need professional development for teachers so there can be a major pedagogical shift towards current socio-anthropological multicultural visual culture education teaching theories.

Professional Development and Implications for Future Practice

Reflection on current practices relies on critical consideration of personal beliefs, values, and assumptions teachers hold, in order to understand how they impact on teaching practice. Incorporating new knowledge, trying new ideas, changing thinking about different aspects of practice, give teachers the opportunity to scaffold their own learning (O'Connor & Diggins, 2002). Reflection encourages teachers to question their actions and provides valuable insights into how they



can get the best from personal/professional development. (Ramsey, Franklin & Ramsey, 2000).

Before engaging in professional development on visual arts education, I was totally unaware of the disparity between my visual arts teaching and the socio-cultural constructivist theories that underpin my teaching practice. I assumed that the child-centred approach was necessary for children to express themselves creatively and any interruption on the part of the teacher was counterproductive to self-expression. In all other curriculum areas of teaching I actively scaffolded children's learning exceptionally well. I have had to critically examine the values and beliefs that led me to believe that teaching visual arts was different.

As a New Zealand European/ Pākehā woman employed in mainstream early childhood education, I am a representative of a narrow socio-cultural group of teachers compared to the socio-cultural values and beliefs of the cultures in the community in which I am teaching (Smith, 2004). Therefore, I feel it is imperative that I challenge myself to provide every child with a culturally and socially relevant experience in visual arts (Adejumo, 2002; Greenwood & Wilson, 2006). I believe that a socio-anthropological multicultural art education approach is necessary for the teaching and learning of visual culture in early childhood centres. This requires me to be aware of and confront my own cultural and social biases while reflecting on my current practice (Wasson, Stuhr & Petrovich-Mwaniki, 1990).

Bamford's (2006) research showed that the single most important determining factor affecting teaching and learning quality, and ensuring quality arts-rich education, is the vital role played by passionate and committed teachers (Bamford, 2006). Hedges and Cullen (2005) in their research also found that a lack of emphasis on subject content knowledge in early childhood may limit learning and teaching opportunities and children's inquiry-based learning. They contend that early childhood teachers need abundant subject knowledge to teach confidently within holistic, integrated early childhood contexts.

For Hickman (2000) the individual art teacher remains the essential driving force for imaginative, creative and challenging arts education. He argues that the personal belief system of individual art teachers is the single most important factor in determining the nature of schools/centres' art activities. I hope to encourage my colleagues to examine their current visual arts and culture practice, in partnership with me, in relation to the socio-cultural principles that underpin the early childhood curriculum in New Zealand and see if critical reflection on our practice results in a pedagogical shift in teaching. At the same time, I question whether in-service professional development courses currently offered by some providers need to be modified to include current theories, instead of concentrating on expressionist creative child-centred art theories.

Freedman (2001a) states: "if we want students to understand the new world of the visual arts, we will have to teach about what they need to learn, not what we were taught" (p. 11). My professional development journey in the visual arts has been thought provoking and resulted in critical reflection on my teaching practice. The implications for future practice are exciting.



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