

The story of developing the visual arts

The first art teacher

The first art teacher employed by the centre brought to his role a strong belief in the competence of the child, and creativity flourished. At the end of the first six months with an artist on the team, the centre mounted an exhibition of their artwork for the Christmas party. Parents came and admired it; all the adults were very proud of the children's work - it was great to see it valued. This value was especially evident in the way the artwork was displayed beautifully at the centre. The art teacher had offered opportunities for the children to experience 'paint' as a true medium for expression. As the children's work was also displayed at the local mall, children could communicate to friends and family their love for this expressive medium. It became evident that art was becoming a form of communication within the early childhood setting. Some of the art teacher's practices led to discussions at staff meetings. Children's art experiences had become viewed as a separate component of the curriculum. The art teacher's lack of prior knowledge about the early childhood curriculum was making it difficult for him to grasp the holistic nature of children's learning and also the importance of centre home relationships. The teachers discussed possible links between the visual arts programme and Te Whāriki. The influence of these early discussions will become evident in a later section of this chapter where a visual arts framework with strong links to Te Whāriki is presented.

Due to professional and family commitments, the first art teacher was unable to continue at the centre, and resigned. At first, the centre was unsure whether to continue their art programme in the same way, with a new teacher. The teachers and management used the occasion of employing a new art teacher as an opportunity for evaluation. Could this departure become a catalyst for change?

The second art teacher

It was very evident at the interview stage that the new art teacher had a personal love of art and creativity. She had always been involved with visual arts, whether it be with her own children when they were young, i.e. the setting up of an art corner for them at home or her attendance at children's camps providing the art programme, her work in early childhood centres, or her own attendance at art classes as her continued personal/professional development. In a recent reflection she stated her philosophy as:

...Through art/creativity you gain the knowledge, skills and ability to be able to relate to the world around you... In every person there is creativity – it is our gift within. No one needs to be the same or do things the same way. Teachers have differing prior experiences and knowledge to draw from... (September 2005)

Following the employment of this art teacher it took time to define her role within the programme. Under her influence, visual art took shape in the centre, and, through on-going explorations of the teaching team, became influential on the practice of individual teachers. This art teacher made contributions to the regular research meetings and practical art workshops. Her beliefs, practice and image of the competent child are combined in the way she describes the main characteristics of her approach to visual art provision:

- Respect for children's work
- The provision for uninterrupted space and time
- Safe spaces in which to socialise and appreciate others' work
- Children display their confidence through guiding others
- Children build up a large skill base through participating in a wide range of experiences
- These skills can be taken into all other areas of learning within and beyond the centre
- Time to watch and learn from others is a valuable part of the learning process
- Use of 'real' media and resources contribute to a sense of pride and respect
- Early childhood is not a practice run for learning.

The art teacher has no hesitation in saying that she has (and models) certain rules in the art room that children know they should follow, including respect for each other's artwork. She makes it quite clear that she is not happy if a child paints somebody else's artwork while the child is doing it. She says that children can work together on a piece of work but if someone is working on their own and their work is interfered with then she will discuss with the interfering child how she would have felt if someone had marked or damaged their work. Children can choose to work together, or choose to work on their own – this is their choice. She says that the room is not quiet all the time, but she expects a certain level of calmness to prevail.

The community of learners approach embedded in the centre philosophy is also evident within the philosophy of our second art teacher in the way she views expertise as not just being held by the adults. Children can also have expert knowledge in areas where some

adults do not. For example: the art teacher had taught the children over a number of different sessions the technique involved in ‘felting’. When a visiting student teacher showed interest in this process, it was a child who confidently showed her what to do:

The children have built up a large skill base and are able to work with many different resources. One 3 year-old child confidently showed (guided) a trainee teacher through all the stages of wool felting. The trainee teacher was most impressed with her skills. What the children are gaining are skills that can be taken into the community, with the confidence to use them, experiment and try new ideas not just with visual arts but with many situations in life. (September 2005)

The art teacher described another experience where she was teaching the children to use Indian ink. She explained that just because the children are small doesn’t mean that they should not use equipment that is real and authentic.

...So many times you see people just say - oh it doesn’t matter, they’re only little it doesn’t matter! I’m very fussy about it being presented well for them... for them to be able to get the results that are pleasing to them...

It was becoming evident with the visual art approach advocated by the second art teacher that she believed in the ‘competent artist’, whether it be adult or child.

Exploring the difference between the art approaches

As mentioned above, the resignation of the first art teacher created a ‘provocation’ for teachers and parent board members to re-visit the purpose and role of the art teacher in the centre. In line with regular practice in the centre, the teachers read some relevant articles to investigate the topic and then discussed the ideas generated. A paper by Visser (2003) threw into relief the progression of paradigms in visual arts at New Beginnings Pre-school. They recognised they had demonstrated three paradigms in action:

1. The Child study paradigm

Prior to the employment of an art teacher, art resources were displayed on table-tops, and paints were replenished at the easels. If children asked for resources they were either given them, or shown where to get them from. The role of the teacher was to stay slightly removed from the child’s visual art experience. It was believed at the time that the influence of the teacher would be detrimental to the child’s visual art experience. Teachers were not to ask anything about the child’s work, as this might put an ‘adult influence’ on children’s visual art work. This was interpreted as

The child study paradigm: believe that art development happens in stages, and offer experiences perceived to be developmentally appropriate.

2. The progressive education paradigm

The centre then decided to employ what they thought was an ‘art expert’ to introduce their expertise and passion to the children. The plan was to provide children with the medium of art (and other visual mediums) as a means of expressive communication. We found that not all children were attracted to this ‘visual experience’, but those who were became encouraged to use visual art as a language. These children used art as a means of communication with the art teacher, with each other, and with their families. The first teacher had a lot of art experience but no early childhood teaching experience; this meant that he lacked understanding of the holistic learning of young children. This led us to interpret the second paradigm as:

The progressive education paradigm: believe in creative self expression; accept individual differences in creative endeavours with free access to a range of art media.

3. Co-learning paradigm

With the employment of the second art teacher it was evident that the teachers knew much more about what they did and didn’t want as features of the art programme. The teachers wanted to change to a paradigm where the art programme was inclusive of all age groups in the centre, integrated into the curriculum, implemented by all teachers (not solely by the art teacher), and based on sound relationships among the art teacher and parents, teachers and children. This third paradigm was interpreted as:

Co-learning by children and adults: underpinned by the belief that engaging in art experiences is a cognitive “activity of the mind, of relationships, as well as feelings” (Visser, 2003, p.1).

Identity of teachers as co-learners

The concept of a co-learner identity initially emerged during a cycle of research undertaken by three teachers. These teachers held responsibility for project work with the older group of children. Their current project was called ‘above and below the sea’ and involved representing understandings and knowledge through the use of visual art tools and media. Together children and teachers were creating a large pictorial representation on a canvas. The children and teachers came together for a daily group time to participate in discussions and investigations of the project focus. The teachers had developed an interest in exploring how these group times supported co-learning.

Research process 2.2: Reflective writing around the idea of co-learning

Teachers began their research by recording their current understandings of co-learning based on the following questions:

- What does co-learning look like in the group time?
- What does co-learning look like specifically for the children?
- What does co-learning look like between the teachers and the children?
- What does co-learning look like among the teachers?

Following this reflective process teachers videoed a selection of three different group time sessions. The video footage was later viewed by the teachers and research associate to compare it with initial ideas, to identify discrepancies or new understandings and to discover what conditions enable co-learning to occur.

Are we who we think we are?

One segment of the video footage became significant in contributing to teachers' understandings about co-learning. The episode was a group time involving ten children and three teachers. The activity included introducing children to their first artwork on canvas, experimenting with collage ideas and sharing things from home.

Teachers identified 'ways of being' for teachers and children based on the video footage. They identified three approaches to teaching: where the teacher initiates and leads the conversation, where the interactions are shared, and where the child initiates the conversation. These approaches are summarised in exhibit 2.4.

Exhibit 2.4 Ways of being for teachers and children based on teachers' video clips

	Ways of being – teacher	Ways of being – child
Teacher initiated and led (presenting the canvas)	Information giving Focusing discussion Questioning – what do you like about the...?	Sitting, listening Taking responsibility for own participation, responding appropriately Taking turns Asking teacher
Interactive – shared role (collage work)	Scaffolding – actively participating Questioning – I wonder what's happened, do you think..., what do you think that might be, can you see that, what do you think is happening in that? Sharing ideas/theorizing – you think it could be a white....maybe, or it could be ... Listening and responding Sharing ideas & knowledge	Actively participating – touching, exploring Making choices Communicating – asking for resources, questioning, asking for support/help, sharing ideas – I think it's Bruce, someone eats penguins, sharks eat fishy and duckies Recognizing their achievements – I made a spiral, hey it's the same
Child initiated and led (bringing things from home)	Listening to children Scaffolding – building on children's conversations Questioning children's ideas	Sitting, directly communicating with peers – listening & questioning Offering ideas Engaged and relating own experience to the conversations

Co-learning and visual art teaching styles

What became apparent in the data were differences in teaching styles and in how these styles directly influence children's participation. Teachers began to recognize that one particular style restricted children as co-learners. Children had revealed themselves as capable and competent co-learners; however, when the teacher role became more directive, children took a more passive role. This was challenging to the teachers and left them uncomfortable about their identity. The

particular image presented on the video was in conflict with the teaching team’s vision of a community of learners in action. Discussion and debate among the teachers was shared with the whole teaching team. The question “are we who we think we are?” was clearly raised.

The exhibit 2.5 is a photograph of the canvas completed during the ‘above and below the sea’ project. Teachers viewed the contrast between the bottom and top half of the image as representational of the shifts they made in their practice as a result of this exploration. The orderliness of the bottom section represented a time when teacher initiated practice dominated whereas the top section (above the sea) was completed when teachers moved towards using a more interactive co-learning approach with children. Children’s ideas and creativity are more evident.



Exhibit 2.5 Above and below the sea

Participation as researchers of their own practices had a powerful effect in changing teacher expectations and understanding about teaching and learning. The effects of teachers changing their practice in children’s learning became apparent on the canvas. This event engaged teachers in

continued discussion as they reflected on their experience; it challenged views about approaches to visual art teaching and learning. As these were discussed the differing perspectives teachers held became evident. As a team they were provoked to further explore visual art teaching and learning in an attempt to understand the dilemma that had arisen: “Is there a right way to teach visual art?”

Is there a right way to teach visual art?

Teachers came from differing backgrounds and had gained their qualifications from different providers so that establishing a culture within this centre for implementing visual art demanded they engage in reflective discussion about their vision for this in the centre. While team discussions resulted in a clearly articulated vision and expectations, collective practice based on this did not always result. Staff changes during the first eighteen months of the research project meant that continuity of group understandings did not occur. The majority of teachers participating in the final eighteen months of the research had not been involved in the initial phase of the research. As new teachers came on board they inherited the team vision to establish visual art as an integrated part of the curriculum for children and became actively involved in developing practices to achieve this. Through team discussions, teachers found they shared a common unease. They did not all feel very confident in working with children in this learning domain. A range of ability and expertise in visual art within the team was evident, with some teachers acknowledging they had a real passion in this area while others indicated they felt less able and ill-equipped.

Fear of doing the wrong thing

In general, teachers felt their training and preparation for teaching had not provided them with a sound understanding of teaching and learning in visual art from a socio-cultural perspective. They struggled with prior ‘messages’ such as ‘too much interference in children’s creative experiences can be damaging for the child’ that seemed to be in direct conflict with their current understandings of how important teacher/child interactions are in the learning process. While they were able to embrace socio-cultural constructivist views on teaching and learning in other areas of their work, such acceptance was proving problematic in the area of visual art. As a result, some teachers admitted to avoiding participation in visual art with children through fear that they might ‘do the wrong thing’. Perhaps non-participation would have been acceptable if the art teacher had been viewed as providing the expertise necessary for the centre’s programme; however, the vision of the team was to establish visual art as an integrated part of the curriculum for children. To achieve this the teaching team acknowledged that all teachers needed to be active participants in visual art experiences with children

The research exploration involved teachers critiquing knowledge and understandings on a personal level and then revealing insights of themselves to their colleagues. The process resulted in teachers gaining a sense of individual identity as they developed an understanding of themselves in relation to their colleagues. It became apparent that when individual teacher identity in relation to this curriculum area was acknowledged, the collective practice of the team was strengthened.

Research process 2.3: Collective investigation within a community of practice - visual art

This phase of the research involved teachers coming together to explore their practices in more depth, much like the way in which Wenger et al. (1998) describe a community of practice:

“Groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”

Teachers acknowledged that they wanted to improve their knowledge and understandings about teaching and learning practices in visual art. This provided them with a common purpose and a defined ‘domain’ to engage with. Wenger (2005) explains that a community of practice has three key fundamental characteristics – a social system and set of relationships (community), a domain (area of knowledge) and a focus on practice. These elements were clearly evident in this research cycle.

The research design involved three different areas of activity over an eight-month period that contributed to a phase of analysis and interpretation. The teacher/researcher team was interested in how teachers co-constructed visual art in the curriculum, what knowledge and understandings developed and how this impacted on practice.

The activities and approaches used to gather data were:

- 1 Teachers documented a sequence of two individual reflections. The first was written prior to engaging in further research activity and described past influences and views that teachers felt had had an impact on their view of themselves in relation to visual art. The second followed participation in art workshops and team discussions. It focused on how teachers viewed their personal development as teachers of art, how their beliefs and knowledge had changed and what experiences had contributed to this. The key points in individual reflections were summarized and represented in a chart to the team for further reflection.
- 2 Teachers participated in a series of art workshops to experience ‘being an artist.’ Two teachers had recently attended a national art conference and made the suggestion of participating in art workshops where teachers could experience visual art as learners themselves. They had also been introduced to the concept of ‘art as a narrative’ and saw this as an opportunity to explore this concept as a team, based on their own experience. Teachers viewed their participation as a way to develop their own abilities in visual art. Team meetings followed each workshop and involved teachers in reflection and analysis of each experience. Each discussion was tape-recorded.
- 3 Finally, visual art teaching and learning stories (Carr,1998) collected over the course of a year (127 in total) were gathered together and collated according to authorship. Each teacher’s collection of learning and teaching stories was available as data to reflect on, alongside their personal recollections of prior influences and experiences, in support of their second reflective writing.

Data from teachers’ individual reflections was re-presented in table form by the research associate. The first column, ‘prior view/experiences’, drew on data from the teachers’ first reflective writing. A framework of questions had been distributed to teachers to guide their second reflective writing process. Analysis of this data involved drawing out the key words, phrases and ideas each teacher had documented. Presenting this information as a table provided teachers with easy access to each teacher’s journey of learning. The table was distributed to the team prior to a teacher researcher meeting at which time teachers questioned and clarified the detail with each other.

Developing teacher confidence

The framework displayed in appendix 1 (pages 190-92) developed as a result of individual teacher reflection: the analysis of these data contributed to teachers clarifying their understandings of,

indeed, acknowledging and valuing, their individual identities. The majority of teachers acknowledged they had increased confidence in working with children in visual art; there was a general sense of teachers feeling more interested and willing to participate. The view of visual art as a social activity during which teachers and children can engage in reciprocal relationships was strongly evident as an emerging or consolidated belief of teachers.

Differing experiences were contributing factors to individual teacher learning. There was no set recipe for all. Teacher learning was an interplay of experience, relationships and reflection. Participating in art experiences was identified as a major contributor to teacher learning; however, as the data suggests, it would not have been effective in isolation. It is interesting to note that teachers referred to participating as involving both children and adults. There was some recognition here that participating with children was a valuable source of learning; children as teachers? Teachers discussed their learning from an individual perspective. The process had allowed individuals to explore personal views and participation; however, the outcome from exploring individual pathways was one of collective strength.

When this framework was shared within the teaching team, teachers commented on how they were learning about each other in a way that they had not done previously. Presenting the data in a table format made 'shifts' in thinking, understanding and practice of individuals explicit to the team. Personal learning was overtly shared. Teachers had made explicit how previous practice in the centre had been influenced by individuals' prior knowledge and experiences, and how they viewed themselves in relation to 'being an artist'. In summary, individuals' pasts affected participation in art. Acknowledgement of this meant teachers acquired a more positive view of themselves as learners in this domain. Alongside this teachers developed personal connections with colleagues that contributed to improvements in the way the team worked together. This was described in terms of respect for and tolerance of difference and diversity, and recognition and value of individual expertise.

Adopting a considered approach – space, time and relationships

Learning about being an 'artist' and art teacher created an awareness that individuals need not strive to be the same. Initial inquiries may have been motivated by a need to discover the 'right' way to engage with young children in visual art, but an outcome of the action research has been recognition that participating in a 'considered' way is more valuable than seeking a 'right' way. Visual art encourages individuality where individual approach and expression is valued. A considered approach to implementing visual art experiences involves practices embedded in respectful

relationships. The factors teachers identified as necessary to consider are: promoting a positive self image, sense of satisfaction and achievement, value of and respect for others' work, appreciation of aesthetics and beauty, and promoting a sense of self as competent and capable.

As a next step, teachers moved from their own learning experiences to what it might mean for children as learners in the centre. Three areas of the programme were identified as needing consideration: space, time and relationships. Space to spread out or to be alone had been particularly valued during workshops. Teachers considered the layout of the art room and whether other areas of the environment could be utilized. Time to pursue ideas and engage in the activity of art was seen to be particularly important. Teachers began considering how they could make more time available for children by changing existing routines: for example, a whole group kai time could become a rolling time.

Relationships provided the biggest challenge for teachers. They acknowledged that genuine, respectful, and responsive interactions during teacher workshops had a profound impact on how participants came to view themselves. They questioned the negative impact overuse of common phrases with children could have. Phrases such as "I like the way you do ..." or "would you like to tell me about..." can lose their genuineness. Interactions among adults had been predominantly about giving valued feedback, insightful ideas, seeking opinion, and acceptance. Teachers had also become aware of how in their own learning experiences they tended to seek out relationships with others with whom they felt they had an affinity, those who knew them well and in whom they had confidence. They also discussed how overuse of praise could have an effect opposite to that intended, in that children become motivated to receive generalized personal recognition from the adult rather than recognition for their achievements, work and thinking. At a follow-up meeting with the research associate, a month later, the teacher researcher team reflected on changes that had occurred in the centre programme as a result of their investigations. Teacher participation was acknowledged as the most significant area of difference. The research process had enabled teachers to move their practice from an intuitive level to one that is informed and thought about, as evident in appendix 1 (pages 190-92).