

Discovering a common identity: Adults and children as teachers and learners

Following on from the process of individual learning in visual art the teacher researcher team began to analyze data collated from the collection of teaching and learning stories. The project director and research associate undertook initial data analysis using a process of word analysis. Two lists of descriptors were developed, one that described the children's learning and participation and the other the teachers'. These were presented to the teacher researcher team to make sense of. Research interest was in discovering how the teacher and child were being presented through centre documentation. What image was being represented of teachers and learners in this community? Common themes or categories about children within the data were explored and refined by the teacher researcher team at two research meetings. Lively discussion and debate abounded as the team built up a collective image of the child as a teacher and learner in visual art.

Research process 2.5: Document analysis of learning stories

A form of document analysis was applied to the 127 *learning and teaching stories* to determine how children's visual art learning was being described. Descriptors of the teacher role were also drawn from the data to provide insight into how teachers were constructing and describing their participation with children.

Analysis of the data continued as teachers focused on the second list, descriptors of teacher participation. In the learning and teaching stories, descriptors of the adult were predominantly about the teaching role; however, earlier research data had powerfully identified teachers as learners in this domain. It was a poignant moment when the teacher researcher team came to the realization that descriptors of children as teachers and learners matched those of the teacher; the descriptors of adults resonated with those of the children. The following exhibit presents some examples of the commonalities we found.

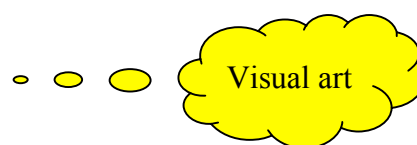
Exhibit 2.6: Commonalities in descriptors of children and adults

| Children | Teachers |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Trying things out, testing, experimenting | Trying out new things, excited |
| Articulates ideas, explains work or actions, describes their story about their art | Explaining the process, discussing problems, sharing their story about the product of their art |
| Watches or listens to others, borrows ideas, learns from others | Observes, uses other peoples ideas, ask for help and critique |
| Continues over time, returns to and revisits prior use of media and techniques | Needing time to continue work, adding to original ideas, using new learning |
| Proud, shares completed work with others, satisfied | Proud, sense of achievement, displays work |

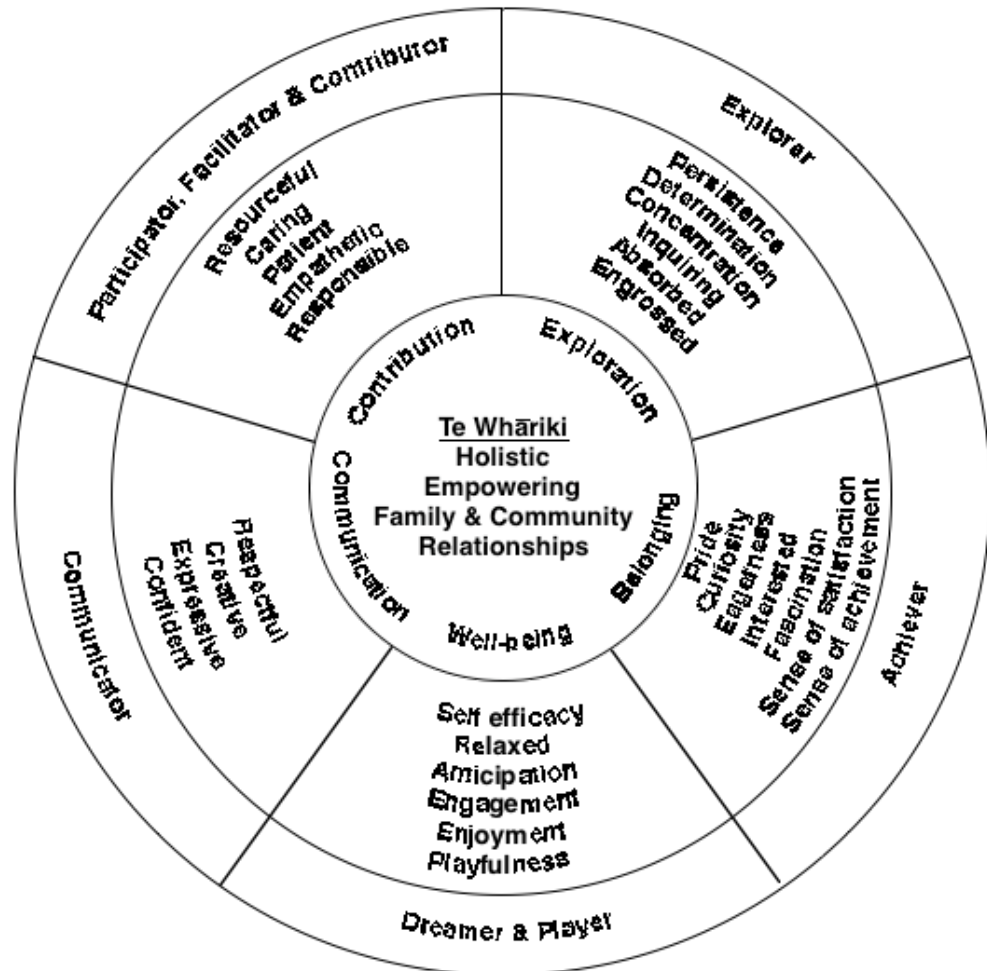
The teacher researcher team came to understand that all participants (adults and children) share both the teaching and learning roles. They had, in fact, uncovered the identity of co-learners in the area of visual art.

Te Whāriki and visual art teaching and learning

To present these findings in an accessible way to the early childhood sector, the teacher researcher team drew on the strands and principles of Te Whāriki as a framework. A comfortable connection was made between the descriptors of identity as a visual art teacher and learner as defined by the research team and the strands of Te Whāriki. Exhibit 2.7 presents the resulting framework.



The identity of the learner and the teacher as co-learners
in the learning domain of visual art.



Placing the principles and strands of Te Whāriki in the centre of the framework represents how the curriculum is viewed as central to visual art learning and teaching. The second circle lists those descriptors that emerged from the data that the research team considered illustrative of learning dispositions. The teacher researcher team made connections with Margaret Carr’s (Carr, 2001) learning and teaching story framework to categorize the dispositions alongside the strands.

Influence 2.5: Carr (2001) Learning dispositions within Te Whāriki

Use of a narrative learning and teaching story approach to assessment involves illustrating domains of learning dispositions in action. Carr (2001) has situated these domains alongside the strands of Te Whāriki, an indication that they are worthwhile outcomes for early childhood. The five domains of learning disposition as they connect to Te Whāriki are: taking an interest (Belonging); being involved (Wellbeing); persisting with difficulty and uncertainty (Exploration); communicating with others (Communication); and taking responsibility (Contribution).

Learning dispositions are described by Carr (2001) as ‘situated learning strategies plus motivation’. She goes on to describe them in terms of ‘being ready, willing and able’ to participate in various ways: a combination of inclination, sensitivity to occasion, and the relevant skill and knowledge” (p. 21).

Influence 2.6: Cowie and Carr (2004) Dispositions as actions

Cowie and Carr (2004) discuss how the concept of ‘dispositions’ has been ‘hard to pin down with the clarity that would be helpful to teachers’. They clarify the situation by suggesting that inclinations or dispositions are centrally associated with identity as a learner, social schema, and a possible self. Cowie and Carr suggest “there is merit in reading ‘disposition’ not as a noun, as a ‘thing’ to be acquired, but as a verb with qualifying adverbs” (p. 88). We have come to understand dispositions more in terms of actions rather than as a verb or a noun. In Cowie and Carr’s description of dispositions they remind us that valued attributes or dispositions will necessarily reflect a particular cultural perspective.

The image of the visual art learner and teacher

The dispositions we describe can be viewed as outcomes of this particular learning environment. The learning environment our teacher researcher team had been attempting to develop is one in which engaging in visual art experiences is a cognitive “activity of the mind, of relationships, as well as of feelings” (Visser, 2003, p. 1). The identity of learner teacher as described by the terms presented in the outer circle of the diagram resonates with this aspiration. This identity is applicable to both adults and children. Each of these terms is further supported by descriptions of observed actions or behaviours indicative of each domain of identity. See appendix 2 (p. 193) for the list of actions and behaviours.

Adults and children share a co-learner identity

Teachers gained confidence in their own dual identities as teachers and learners through exploring their approaches to implementing visual art in the curriculum. Developing an understanding of one’s own identity contributed to an acceptance and view of colleagues as capable and competent members of the teaching team. Prior assumptions and views teachers previously held of themselves became challenged as they individually developed:

- a belief in themselves as teachers and learners in visual art through gaining understandings of their past and present influences, who they are and how they came to be.
- acceptance of difference and diversity. It is not necessary to be the same or to do things in the same way – it’s OK to be different.
- an awareness of how valuing individual knowledge and expertise contributes to a person’s self-esteem and in turn encourages participation in the community
- an understanding of how individuals enter social relationships with unique interests, strengths and abilities. Through social interaction expertise is shared
- a belief that individual contribution enriches learning opportunities for the social group and nurtures community learning.

Teachers came to understand themselves as individuals as opposed to fitting the image they held about being a teacher within a team, or as a member of a group. Individual identity came to mean acceptance of self and others as both a learner and a teacher regardless of the role or label one has in the community. As a result, teacher participation in visual art with children increased and through these experiences the image of children and adults as co-learners who share similar characteristics was formed. Exhibit 2.8 offers an illustration of this view.

Exhibit 2.8: Further evolution – Participants as learners and teachers



Teachers re-defined their view of teachers, parents and children as groups of participants to one that has less differentiation between the groups. All participants in New Beginnings Preschool community hold a position as competent and capable teachers and learners. The teaching and learning roles became entwined as teachers gained understanding of how one does not occur in isolation from the other. Teaching and learning occur through social interaction. The social context involves children and adults in negotiating meanings and understandings, individuals contribute to their own developing knowledge, skills and abilities, as well that of others. Participants within this learning community share the position of co-learners. As co-learners the identity of individuals is honoured, valued and respected.

Who are we? - Concluding reflections

Community learning

The concept of individual identity was not something that this research team set out to explore. Recognition of identity as an influential factor in the learning community emerged through the research processes. The image the teacher researcher team held of participants in the community shifted from one that viewed parents, children and teachers as different groups within the community to one which views all participants, children and adults, as co-learners. Individual identity came to mean acceptance of self and others as both a learner and teacher regardless of the role one has in the community. This view of individual identity nourishes a co-learning relationship. The learning journey of the teacher researcher team challenged previously held assumptions and beliefs in the way children, teachers and parents had been defined as separate groups of community participants. The shift in view contributed to a more equitable relationship in teaching and learning ventures in the centre. Teachers discovered how the perception they hold of themselves and how they define others influences their practice, and in turn influences how people participate in their community. For example, as teachers recognised parents as individuals, practices changed to empower parents to contribute and participate through their own choice and in their own way. Another example is when teachers developed a view of themselves as learners in visual art they also strengthened their view of children as teachers. Teaching and learning became a shared venture where responsibility and expertise is shared. Adults were learning from children, children were learning from adults. In this relationship all participants are respected, valued and empowered in their dual identities: learners and teachers.

Early documentation of project work presented children, parents and teachers participating together within a group-learning context. Teachers discovered that individuals were not always visible in this form of documentation. With an increased awareness of how taking notice of and giving value to the individual contributes to a person's identity, teachers looked to find ways that enabled them to discuss individual participation in project work without disconnecting the individual from the social context. Following use of a tool for analysis (Rogoff's three lenses of analysis of socio-cultural activity, 2003) changes were made to the documentation of children's learning experiences to enable the 'social individual' to come to the fore. The term 'social individual' was adopted as it reflected how teachers strengthened their view of the individual as one who, through social interaction, participates within the dual identities of teacher and learner. Changes to documentation

provided recognition of how individuals contribute to learning as well as how an individual's changing participation is illustrative of learning.

Teacher learning in the area of visual art created an awareness that individuals need not strive to be the same. The art teacher's approach to implementing visual art in the programme became influential on the practice of individual teachers. Visual art took shape in the centre alongside ongoing explorations about the teaching team's beliefs and abilities in art. The process allowed individual teachers to explore personal views and participation; the outcome from exploring individual pathways was one of collective strength within the teaching team. Teachers concluded that participating in visual art with children in a 'considered' way is more valuable than seeking a 'right' way. A considered approach to implementing visual art experiences involves practices embedded in respectful relationships that honour the individual for who they are. In their interactions with children teachers seek to promote a positive self image; sense of satisfaction and achievement; value and respect for others' work; appreciation of aesthetics and beauty; and enhancing a sense of self as competent and capable.

Teachers found it necessary to make changes within the programme to allow more space and time for children to engage with and pursue their art interests. For example, a rolling kai approach replaced a whole group kai time, the layout of the art room was redefined and further space made available in the main playroom, and more care and consideration was given to displaying art in the centre. These changes reflected the respect teachers developed for visual art in the community.

Researcher learning

Understandings of individual identities emerged in this study through the interplay of experience, personal and professional relationships, and reflective processes as supported by research activity. To understand how identity came to be acknowledged as central to this research, we can look at three significant aspects of the research method.

Influences and supporting literature

The research team acknowledged that, at times, theory informed and directly influenced practice in the centre. Research processes took on ideas and theoretical frameworks to support the teacher researcher team in their investigations. Theories that suited the research team's needs were chosen to foster conversation and to find useful explanatory models, while at the same time the theories were not treated as ideologies to be followed slavishly. For example, Visser (2003) had provided

initial insight into underpinning beliefs of co-learning: “*engaging in art experiences is a cognitive activity of the mind, of relationships, as well as feelings*”. Teachers took on and adapted these understandings as they related them to their own experiences and practice. Discussing and interpreting differing perspectives influenced teacher practice and, as a result, practice became grounded in strengthened understandings.

Research tools

Standard tools of educational research underpinned our search for meaning. Data were gathered using surveys, and their contents analyzed: these yielded insights into what was going on in our early childhood environment. The strategy of summarizing raw data into a table enabled the teachers to gain insight into their personal differences. Alongside these, the routine practices of systematic documentation and fostering of reflective thinking provided triangulation to validate the teachers’ trustworthiness as researchers.

Research Processes

Teachers learnt through involvement in processes where they interacted with each other. Teacher learning related to interaction (Rogoff’s interpersonal lens, see pgs. 57-58), experience in the learning environment (cultural/institutional) as well as personal reflection through journaling and writing learning stories (intrapersonal). New knowledge has been shaped by the teachers’ desire to understand their role from a socio-cultural constructivist perspective.

Processes were embedded in meaningful and relevant contexts. Participants involved themselves because the learning was of value to them individually as well as collectively. It enabled them to do things better. Research revealed how tacit knowledge had functioned powerfully in organising and maintaining practice. Through processes of personal and collective practice and reflection, the team confronted those assumptions and co-constructed new improved practices.